CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

"The rhetorician, Cicero tells us, obeys three imperatives: what he writes or says must (1) be truthful, (2) be pleasing, (3) move us to action." *(The Idea of a University*, Newman, 1852/1999, p.xii)

Ten years after South Africa embraced democracy, the higher education landscape is beginning to show signs of transformation. The wheels of change that seemed slow to get moving are by now acquiring momentum and direction. But all is not well. The year is 2004 and six academic staff members, working on a campus in a dusty South African township are concerned that not all change is for the better, and that the way things are changing will negate the original purpose for change. Will their campus be closed down because it is too African? Will it only stay open if there is no trace of its African identity left?

Everywhere the staff members hear and read of mergers and incorporations of black universities into white universities with the aim of removing inequalities. This seems absurd to them. Based on their experience of the unique learning needs of their students brought on by decades of apartheid, suddenly placing their students in the same lecture halls and social spheres as wealthy and previously advantaged students might mean their needs are further disregarded. But what can six people do? And who will listen to them?

On this campus is a university psychology clinic with an African name. It is visited by African people who live in the communities surrounding the campus – people who are uniformly poor, underprivileged, and unable to access psychological services elsewhere as a result. They are seen by postgraduate students (African and other) who offer assessment and counselling services (Phala, 2008). The clinic has so much promise and potential, but it is not without its frustrations and challenges. For the six staff members, who supervise and oversee the clinic, the challenges sometimes feel too overwhelming to address. Besides, they have courses to teach, exams to set, scripts to mark, and a host of other pressing concerns to attend to. What will become of the clinic?

There is a further concern. The incorporation of their campus into a historically white university, with its western models and philosophy, threatens not only the teaching programmes and the continued existence of the clinic, but also demands that the six staff members prove their worth. They must claim legitimacy and authority in the new organisation or lose their agency, voice and the unique perspectives offered by their dedication to an African psychology. The only way to do this in an academic context is to publish. And how will the staff members find the time for research on top of all that they already have to juggle?

This document is a story of how we, the six colleagues, lived, worked and faced some of the challenges we experienced as South African academics during the period of higher education transformation following the end of apartheid. In another way it is my personal story of finding and co-creating my identity as an academic in living through and responding to this event-shape in time-space (Auerswald, 1985). It is also a story of my learning in the context of our learning as a response to our changing campus, where the rich, red township dust was beginning to make way to sculpted, irrigated lawns, the spreading acacia trees were being clipped and manicured, and the ever-present speckled African chickens were disappearing.

To tell this story in a scholarly way, I present it in the form of a thesis. This thesis is my living theory (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006; Whitehead, 1989; 2008b) of how I improved my practice as an academic staff member initially in the Psychology Department at Vista

University, South Africa (Mamelodi Campus), and then following its incorporation, in the Psychology Department of the University of Pretoria. In line with the three tasks of universities (Brulin, 2001; Krücken, 2003), I saw my academic duties as including teaching, research and community engagement.

Mamelodi is a township outside Pretoria almost exclusively inhabited by previously disadvantaged African people representing socioeconomic levels ranging from extreme poverty to lower income. During the apartheid era, a branch of a nationwide university called Vista University was established here for the tertiary education of black students. In 2004 the Mamelodi campus of Vista University was incorporated into the larger, wealthier, and historically white University of Pretoria. The incorporation process brought with it much uncertainty and change; and prompted us to examine our practices and *raison d'être*. It is against this backdrop that in the period May 2004 to March 2006, I facilitated a collaborative action research project aimed at establishing a research centre[1] on what was now the Mamelodi campus of the University of Pretoria. We named the research centre *Research@Itsoseng* (R@I) after our university psychology clinic (Itsoseng Clinic) and we referred to the collaborative action research project as the R@I project. I explain the meaning and significance of the name Itsoseng in chapter two, where I also introduce the geographical and sociopolitical context of Mamelodi and describe the incorporation process in greater detail.

The establishment of the research forum was an attempt to facilitate a peer support structure that would enable my colleagues and me to critically engage with the three academic tasks of the university, namely, research, teaching and community

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[1] The word *centre* in the use of the term "research centre" requires clarification as a *centre* in some university contexts is generally understood to be a particular entity that needs to conform to specific requirements. My original aim was not to establish such an entity, but rather to create a semi-formal hub of research activities. As the project evolved we did consider registering the R@I initiative as a "centre of excellence" – but this never realised. The term "research forum" is therefore a better description of the structure that we eventually co-created. In this thesis the words *centre* and *forum* are used interchangeably. Although I have attempted to mostly use the word *forum*, I have not changed the text in the original records for the sake of authenticity and consequently the word *centre* appears frequently in these records (Appendix E).

engagement (Brulin, 2001). It would also enable us to address practical concerns in our everyday professional lives. These concerns initially related to the functioning of our university psychology clinic and our productivity in conducting locally relevant research. Consequently the core aims we set ourselves in the R@I project were (1) to improve the functioning (and by extension service delivery) of the psychology clinic; and (2) to increase our output of locally relevant psychological research. Our hope was that by striving towards our second aim we would indirectly improve the relevance of our psychological service to the local communities we served through the clinic. Hence, the two important elements contained in the name of the R@I project are *research* and *psychology clinic*.

Four of the five colleagues who participated with me in the R@I project gave their consent for me to use their real names in this thesis and I introduce them in chapter two. One of my colleagues requested to remain anonymous and I refer to this colleague as Member 6.

Philosophical commitments and conceptual frameworks

I situate this thesis within the qualitative field of practitioner research. I justify this position in chapter three, where I also provide a description of my ontological (holistic, relativistic), epistemological (action research or AR) and methodological (living theory) commitments. In chapter three I further discuss the relationship between universities and surrounding communities as a conceptual framework to define our university psychology clinic as an important interface between university and surrounding community, and an ideal site for community engagement (Brulin, 2001; Krücken, 2003).

A collaborative action research project and a self-study

In addition to facilitating the R@I project, I also inquired into how I can improve my own academic practice as a result of my facilitation of the project. I explain in chapter four how I conducted two research processes that were intertwined and developed in parallel. The first was the R@I project (a collaborative action research project) in which I was both a participant and facilitator. This is also known in the literature as complete-member research (Adler & Adler, 1987) where researchers "are fully committed to and immersed

in the group that they study...[and] where the emphasis is on the research process and the group being studied" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p.741). Two research aims revealed themselves in this first process:

- How can we improve the functioning of Itsoseng Psychology Clinic?
- How can we increase our research output?

The second research process was a self-study action research project in which I attempted to improve my academic practice by inquiring into my practice of facilitating the collaborative action research project. In the self-study AR project I utilised a living theory action research methodology (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006; Whitehead, 2008b). In this thesis, which encompasses both the collaborative and the self-study AR projects, I inquire into my educational influence (McNiff, Lomax & Whitehead, 2003; Whitehead & McNiff, 2005) on my colleagues' and my own learning; and highlight the reciprocal nature of educational influence in the context of complete-member collaborative action research with colleagues. Towards the aims of this second process, the following research questions emerged:

- How can I facilitate a peer support research initiative?
- How can I improve my academic practice through facilitating such an initiative?

Living theory action research

My research design is based on Whitehead and McNiff's (2006) living theory action research. Living theory action research is different from more traditional and mainstream AR approaches in the sense that the standards of judgements by which the claims of knowledge are evaluated are provided by researchers themselves in addition to normative criteria from the awarding institution (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). These standards of judgements are articulated in terms of the unique values of the researcher as they are relevant to the research project. Researchers of living theory AR projects make certain claims that they were successful in living in accordance with their values, and provide reasonable evidence to this effect. This claim is submitted to a critical audience (e.g., peer review, examiner, etc.) to judge whether this claim is valid based on the declared standards of judgement. I explain in chapter four how I employed this

approach in inquiring into how I can improve my academic practice by facilitating the collaborative action research project.

Experiencing myself as a living contradiction

To give an account of my living theory, I share my personal experiences of my academic existence as a living contradiction which is described by McNiff et al. (2003, p.59) as "feeling dissonance when we are not acting in accordance with our values and beliefs." Whitehead (1989) refers to the "I" of the researcher existing as a living contradiction in the sense that the "'I' contained two mutually exclusive opposites, the experience of holding educational values and the experience of their negation" (p.43). My own living contradiction manifested in the sense that what I believed was possible to achieve (synergistic action in collaboration with committed colleagues to create locally relevant knowledge in a context of socioeconomic deprivation) and what I lived (an academic practice that consisted almost entirely of lecturing and supervising therapeutic practice) contradicted each other. I explain this contradiction by describing the values that provide purpose and meaning to my life in chapters two and three. I contextualise these values in terms of my psychotherapeutic identity and my worldview in chapter three. My experience of myself as a living contradiction acted as a catalyst for the establishment of the R@I initiative. In chapter two I provide more detail on the contextual factors that I believed were influential in the establishment and continuation of the R@I project.

Prior experience with self-study research

I initiated the R@I project with some knowledge of action research that I acquired in conducting a self-study AR project into my developing practice as psychotherapist during the period 1998 to 2000. I submitted a report on that research as a dissertation in partial fulfilment of my Master's degree in clinical psychology (Louw, 2000). In this current research, which I submit for a doctoral degree, I expanded the self-study method to a living theory action research method, which included a collaborative AR project in which I facilitated 17 discussion meetings (of about three hours each) over a two-year period (May 2004 to March 2006). In these meetings we reflected on various ways to improve both our individual practices as academics as well as the service delivery and functioning of our university psychology clinic.

Turning resources into assets

One of the major themes present throughout this thesis, and which emerged from my inquiry into my facilitation of the R@I project, is the concept of *turning resources into assets.* I explain in chapter three the origin of this phrase from the work of Brulin (2001). In the context of this thesis, *resources* refer to any people, relationships, information or material goods that are deemed valuable and which could contribute towards reaching a desired goal, but which have not been utilised or engaged for this purpose. I use the word *assets* to refer to resources which have been utilised or engaged towards a desired goal. I argue in this thesis that as individual academics we remained resources (potential assets) to each other until an opportunity was created in which we were transformed into assets for each other in order to reach our goals. These goals were defined as improving the service delivery of our university psychology clinic and increasing our output of locally relevant research. I argue that the R@I project provided regular and consistent opportunities for nurturing these goals and for generating creative and critical thought; and therefore enabled us to transform from resources into assets both for ourselves and for each other.

Living in the direction of my values

With regards to the place of the researcher's values in action research, McNiff et al. (2003) state that

> action researchers...use their values as the basis for their action. Because this is such a massive responsibility they always need to check whether theirs are justifiable values, whether they are living in the direction of their values, and whether their influence is benefitting other people in ways that those other people also feel are good. This involves highly rigorous evaluation checks and restraints, to make sure that action researchers can justify, and do not abuse, their potential influence. (p.15)

In this thesis I provide evidence of how I have lived in the direction of certain core values (self-determination, synergistic action and creating locally relevant knowledge) as well as the evaluation checks and restraints I put in place to guard against the potential abuse of

my influence as facilitator of the R@I project, including how I ensured transparency in my record keeping (chapter four).

In chapters five to seven I show the progression of the new knowledge that my colleagues and I created, and track how this was influenced by my enactments of these core values. In chapter five I present the results of the R@I project in the form of answers to the questions: "How can we improve the functioning of Itsoseng Psychology Clinic?" and "How can we increase our research output?"

In chapter six I present the results of the self-study project in two sections. In the first section I deal with the progression of my own learning in facilitating the R@I project as a response to the question: "How can I facilitate a peer support research initiative?" In the second section I discuss my team members' evaluation of my facilitation and the value of the R@I project to each of them. In chapter seven I present a meta-analysis of both the collaborative and self-study projects that culminates in my living theory of the transformation of my academic practice as a result of my facilitation and participation in the R@I project. I also discuss in chapter seven the potential significance of this study to the fields of action research, higher education, psychology in general and university psychology clinics in particular.

Conclusion

In this chapter I introduce the study and briefly sketch the context within the transformation of higher education in South Africa in the early to mid 2000s. I situate the study in terms of my role, values and approach, and provide an outline of the seven chapters in this document. Specifically, I present my thesis as being concerned with my living theory of how I improved my academic practice in the context of a collaborative action research project with five of my colleagues on a South African university campus. In the following chapter, chapter two, I describe the contexts and evolution of the research questions within the larger context of higher education transformation in South Africa ten years after democracy.

CHAPTER 2

CONTEXTS AND EVOLUTION OF THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

> There are no objective observations, only observations socially situated in the worlds of—and between—the observer and the observed. Subjects, or individuals, are seldom able to give full explanations of their actions or intentions; all they can offer are accounts, or stories, about what they have done and why.
> (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p.19)

This chapter provides an overview of the sociopolitical, educational, geographical and interpersonal contexts in and from which this study evolved. This is followed by a more comprehensive distinction between the two research projects and a description of the research aims and questions. Towards the end of the chapter, I briefly locate the two projects within my value set as a researcher.

Mamelodi is a large urban settlement east of Pretoria in South Africa, and is populated predominantly by people of African ethnicity. The psychology training clinic, Itsoseng clinic, is also located on the Mamelodi campus and serves both students and members of the communities around the campus. The core action research project took place during the first two years (2004-2006) of significant transformation in the South African higher education landscape[2]. As part of this transformation process, the Mamelodi campus of Vista University was incorporated into the University of Pretoria. To situate the study in context, a brief description of the psychology clinic and the township of Mamelodi follows in the next section.

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[2] Even though the principles and architecture of this transformation process had already been decided in a government white paper in 1997, its implementation by means of mergers and incorporations only formally took place from the year 2004 onwards.

The context of the research projects

The South African sociopolitical landscape in 2004

In 2004, ten years after the country's first democratic elections in 1994, the South African sociopolitical landscape was dominated by uneven and complex transformations, with developments largely characterised by the introduction of multiparty politics and regular elections (Institute for Democracy in South African [Idasa], 2004). A new political arena made new socioeconomic developmental agendas possible and provided hope. Some of the challenges that South Africa faced during this time included living up to the ideals of the newly written constitution, constant reinterpretations of human rights, dealing with the ever-growing HIV/AIDS pandemic, and addressing educational and socioeconomic inequalities created by the previous apartheid regime (Alternative Information and development [AIDC], n.d.; Idasa, 2004). Regular public debates and political promises without real changes to the lives of people in desperate poverty-stricken situations sometimes led to despair and loss of confidence in governance (AIDC, n.d.).

The impact of globalisation was felt in the increasingly assertive role that South Africa was expected to play in the region of Africa known as the Southern African Development Community (SADC). South Africa had started to accept and redefine itself as an African country, with developmental goals and responsibilities shared with its African neighbours; and the ideal of an *African renaissance* (renewal in cultural, economic, scientific and other arenas) was popularised by the then South African President, Thabo Mbeki (Vale & Maseko, 1998). Global conditions and relations between developing and developed countries were undergoing a rapid change, often to the disadvantage of poorer countries (Idasa, 2004). There also existed an expectation among the majority of South Africans that the transition should not only be smooth but also swift (Gourley, 1999).

On a national level, the ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC), was beginning to be criticised for failing to deliver the post-apartheid South Africa (popularly referred to as the "new South Africa") from an historical racial divide in terms of class and wealth. It was instead accused of reproducing a form of apartheid:

One of the most serious consequences of the nature of the transition to a liberal democracy in South Africa is that the ANC ironically has to preside over a period that is reproducing inequality along racial lines as effectively as apartheid legislation and institutional apparatus did. (AIDC, n.d.)

What was evident in 2004 was that ten years after the end of apartheid, "race" was still a present, central and controversial signifier in public discourse, which elicited either a defensive or antagonistic response. As the then Principal and Vice chancellor of the University of South Africa pointed out,

In truth, the fault line created by a history of racial discrimination and prejudice has sunk very deeply into the South African consciousness... the reason that it is important that this situation be adjusted is that it bears the seed of revolution. It causes despair and alienation. It is evident that South Africa has not changed. It is a white country. But it goes deeper than that. It says that the identity of South Africa as an African nation, its self-understanding, its consciousness, remains determined by a world-view and culture with very shallow roots in the continent. (Pityana, 2004, p.2)

There was pressure to compete and survive in a global market, and to live up to the ideal of a peaceful and miraculous transition to democracy (AIDC, n.d.). This, together with the growing dissent expressed by neo-liberal intellectuals and academics, provided the political background for transformations planned and executed in the higher education landscape of South Africa.

The changing landscape of higher education in South Africa in 2004

The higher education system in South Africa needed to reflect the recent political changes. Consequently, a transformation process was initiated to "overcome the fragmentation, inequality and inefficiency which are the legacy of the past, and create a learning society which releases the creative and intellectual energies of all our people towards meeting the goals of reconstruction and development" (South Africa, 1997, p.3).

Prior to 2004, higher education institutions in South Africa reflected the history of segregation (Barnard, 2007). This was visible in terms of the different purposes for which they had been established and the ethnic groups they served (Barnard, 2007; Council on Higher Education, 2003). On 24 June 2002, the Minister of Education, Professor Kader Asmal, announced his intention to incorporate the eight campuses of the historically black Vista University into various historically white universities (HWUs), also known as historically advantaged universities (HAUs) (Bakker, 2004; Barnard, 2007; South Africa, 2003). This incorporation process was in accordance with the transformation of the higher education landscape in South Africa as outlined in the *Education White Paper 3: A framework for the transformation of higher education* (South Africa, 1997). In brief, the objectives of the transformation related to the need to:

a) redress social and structural inequalities that have resulted in a fragmented higher education in which some institutions are better resourced than others and in which race and ethnicity continue to define and limit access into some institutions;

b) address challenges associated with globalisation, which include the role and capacity of the higher education system in the long-term to meet the human resource and knowledge needs of the country; and

c) ensure that limited resources are utilised effectively and efficiently (Mangena, 2002, p.1)

Vista University prior to 2004

Vista University was established in the early 1980s, during the apartheid era (1948-1994), to provide university education to urban black African students (Bakker, 2004). It was one of several historically black universities (HBUs), also known as historically disadvantaged universities (HDUs). Vista University comprised a central campus, a distance education campus and seven contact campuses situated in urban black townships throughout South Africa (Bloemfontein, Daveyton, Mamelodi, Sebokeng, Soweto, Port Elizabeth and Welkom). These townships originated under the rule of the apartheid government when African people were evicted from designated "whites only" areas and subjected to forced relocation outside established cities and towns (Bakker,

2009). Housing in these townships ranged from medium and low-cost brick houses to shacks constructed from recycled wooden planks, odd pieces of iron and corrugated iron sheets, plastic bags and any other recycled material that could function as a roof or wall. Mamelodi became established as a black township during the early 1960s (Bakker, 2009; Walker, Van der Waal, Chiloane, Wentzel & Moraloki, 1991). The photographs of Mamelodi presented below provide an idea of the type of housing, the density of living in some parts, as well as the general socioeconomic status of the residents.

Figure 1 Mamelodi indicated as a blue square in the province of Gauteng (indicated in red in the inset). Adjusted from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mamelodi,_Gauteng.

Figure 2 Aerial view of a section of Mamelodi. From http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mamelodi, Gauteng.

Figure 3 A school in Mamelodi. Used with permission from Linda Blokland.

Figure 5 Hair salon operating from a residential outbuilding in Mamelodi. Used with permission from Linda Blokland.

Figure 4 Mamelodi informal settlement. Photographed by the author on 27 May 2005.

The University of Pretoria

The University of Pretoria is regarded as an historically white or historically advantaged university (Mabokela & Wei, 2007). It originated in 1908 as the Pretoria branch of the Transvaal[3] University College, with English as the medium of instruction (History of the University of Pretoria, n.d.). By 1930 the institution had 900 students, making it the largest tertiary institution in South Africa at the time, and its name was changed to the University of Pretoria. In 1932 the University Council decided that Afrikaans[4] would be the only medium of instruction (University of Pretoria historical overview, n.d.). During most of the twentieth century, only white students were admitted, in keeping with the University Act of 1916 that provided for separate universities for "non-whites" (Mabokela, 1997). In 1989 the University of Pretoria changed its segregation policy to admit all races (History of the University of Pretoria, n.d.). However, Afrikaans remained the only medium of instruction until 1994, after which English was reintroduced as a second medium of instruction. The University of Pretoria is one of the largest tertiary institutions in Africa and currently enrols in excess of 50 000 students each year (Introduction to University of Pretoria, n.d.).

The incorporation of Vista (Mamelodi) into the University of Pretoria

On 2 January 2004 the Mamelodi campus of Vista University was incorporated into the University of Pretoria. The reasons stated for the incorporation were (De Beer, 2005, p.3):

a) to bridge the gap that apartheid caused between historically white and historically black institutions
b) to promote equity with regard to students and staff
c) to ensure effective and efficient use of resources through eliminating overlaps and duplication of academic programmes

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[3] Transvaal is the name of a former province of South Africa that corresponds to the current provinces of Gauteng, Limpopo, North West Province and Mpumalanga. The literal meaning of the name Transvaal refers to the crossing (trans) of the Vaal (Afrikaans for "grey") river that separated it from the Orange Free State province to the south.

[4] Afrikaans is a daughter language of Dutch, also referred to as "kitchen Dutch" or "Cape Dutch". It originated from 17th century Dutch dialects. It is mostly spoken in South Africa and Namibia. Afrikaans was also generally considered to be the language of the apartheid regime (Giliomee, 2003; Vice, 2010).

d) to consolidate existing academic programmes in order to present a wider range of academic programmes in response to regional and national needs

By the end of 2004 all eight campuses of Vista University had either been incorporated into different historically advantaged universities or had merged to create new institutions (Bakker, 2004). The psychological effects of this process on staff and students are documented in Fourie (2008), and reflect the struggle to conserve a coherent sense of self when familiar professional contextual markers are absent or devalued.

The Psychology Department of Vista University, Mamelodi campus

The Psychology Department of Vista University had a common curriculum for seven contact campuses and an adjusted curriculum for a distance education campus. Each campus contained a sub-department for psychology, and in the period just prior to the incorporation (2002 to 2004), the Mamelodi campus employed six staff members. These staff members (five of my colleagues and myself) formed the research workgroup of the core action research project (Research@Itsoseng or R@I) described below. I provide a short introduction to each of the participants later in this chapter.

At the time of the incorporation in 2004, the six positions of the Mamelodi campus psychology sub-department were all filled by white South Africans, although previously there had been a mix of staff representing many groups and races; and the Vista University staff as a whole was represented by most ethnic groups (T.M. Bakker, personal communication, March 25, 2011). For a variety of reasons (e.g., language barriers, limited educational resources and scarce basic living resources), many of the students presented with significant learning needs that required a sensitive responsive and dedicated teaching approach (Bakker, Eskell-Blokland, May, Pauw, & Van Breda, 1999; Bakker et al., 2000). Vista University appeared to attract and retain staff members of all ethnic groups that were committed to meeting the challenges of providing tertiary education to mostly black students from South Africa and other African countries (Bakker, 2007; Fourie, 2008).

The Vista Mamelodi psychology sub-department offered an undergraduate curriculum, directed Honours and Master's degrees as well as research supervision of doctoral students. Unlike the undergraduate student population who were almost exclusively of black African ethnicity, the Vista Mamelodi psychology sub-department was one of the few academic departments with postgraduate (Honours and Master's level) students of mixed ethnicity.

In addition to being lecturers, all six staff members were registered psychologists, four holding registration as clinical psychologists and two registered in the counselling psychology scope of practice. All of us were involved in the Master's counselling psychology training programme (that led to professional registration as a counselling psychologist) as well as the BPsych (Honours level) programme (that led to professional registration as a counsellor). These two postgraduate training programmes used the Itsoseng Psychology Clinic on the Mamelodi campus as an important practical training site.

Some effects of the incorporation process

The differences in the institutional cultures of Vista University and the University of Pretoria, as perceived by the members of the core action research project, are particularly relevant to the core action research project. From my own perspective, prior to the incorporation I experienced autonomy and self-determination in contributing to strategic decisions for how psychology was taught and practised on the Mamelodi campus. As a satellite campus, we were part of the larger Psychology Department of Vista University, but because we were also separate, the formation and maintenance of a group identity for the psychology staff on all of the campuses was encouraged (Bakker et al., 1999). As mentioned above, each of the various Vista campuses hosted a psychology sub-department, and the Vista Psychology Department comprised these various sub-departments. Once a year, all the sub-departments would meet for two days to discuss strategic issues relevant to all sub-departments.

My most enduring memory of working for Vista University prior to the incorporation was the feeling (and narrative) of *abundance* in terms of resources and opportunities for

curriculum development, innovative teaching and research. In contrast, after the incorporation into the University of Pretoria, the six faculty members on the Mamelodi campus suddenly became members of one large psychology department with no separate but equal sub-departments – even though we had not physically changed our location and continued to work in our Mamelodi offices. As a group, we still worked on the same campus, but received no recognition from the larger department of our autonomy or any commitment to maintaining this. As a consequence of the incorporation, we lost our right to self-determination and were expected to act as representatives of the University of Pretoria offering lectures in psychology on the Mamelodi campus. Over time, the Vista University psychology curricula were phased out and replaced with the University of Pretoria curricula. My experience of the institutional culture of the University of Pretoria was an overwhelming sense of *scarcity* of resources, and numerous bureaucratic processes that curtailed autonomy.

Immediately after the incorporation in January 2004, our physical work environments remained virtually unchanged. We were all working from our original offices on the Mamelodi campus, offering the same modules as before to the same student population as before. Yet, change was inevitable. We were in a transition period and wanted to preserve those things we considered valuable into our new roles as University of Pretoria staff members. One of the achievements that we wanted to preserve and further develop was Itsoseng Psychology Clinic.

Itsoseng Psychology Clinic

Itsoseng is a Tswana[5] word that is used as a call to proactivity in improving your own circumstances. Its literal meaning translates to something like "uplift yourself" or "get up and do it". Itsoseng clinic on the Mamelodi campus has been in operation since 1995, and originally offered a free psychometry service, providing intelligence, personality and aptitude testing to aid in career guidance decisions. As such, it served as a practical training site for psychology Honours students working towards professional registration as psychometrists. When the Vista Mamelodi psychology sub-department initiated a

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[5] Tswana is one of the indigenous African languages spoken in the Gauteng province of South Africa.

directed Master's programme in counselling psychology, the clinic broadened its services to include supervised individual, couples and group psychotherapy. By 2004, in addition to these forms of psychotherapy, the services offered included psychoeducation sessions; pre-and post-test HIV counselling; liaison and consultation with schools and NGOs; as well as opportunities for collaborative research with other agencies.

Itsoseng has become a phrase that encapsulates a philosophy of commitment to service and care for the community it serves. This community comprises both students on the Mamelodi campus as well as members of the wider Mamelodi community. The clinic can be regarded as one interface or relationship between the university (academia) and the surrounding local community, who benefitted from the services provided by supervised trainee therapists. Itsoseng Psychology Clinic further represented a potential hub in which teaching, research and community engagement activities could be integrated. Offering a psychological service to the communities surrounding the campus was envisaged as a form of community engagement. We were also able to conduct research on issues directly relevant to the functioning of the clinic and its community of stakeholders; and our experience in both research and community engagement practices could inform our lecturing and professional training content. All of the psychology faculty members on the Mamelodi campus lectured on the various programmes, supervised students working in the clinic, and participated in operational decisions pertaining to the day-to-day running of the clinic. These six members formed the workgroup of the core action research project and are more fully introduced in the following section.

Introducing the participants of the core action research project (R@I)

I invited each member of the workgroup to provide me with a written autobiographical introduction and photo of their choice. As a member of this group, I also include my own photo and introduction. These short autobiographical sketches provide some indication of the mix of experience, interest, and expertise that was present in this group of people. Four members of this group gave their consent to be presented by me in this chapter in this way and their photos to be used in this manuscript. One member of the team requested to remain anonymous, as explained in chapter one. I refer to this member

throughout this document as *Member 6*. I furthermore provide a short description of my experience of our collective values and aims in the R@I group – a personal view of the R@I group identity.

Mr Willem Louw

Apart from authoring this thesis, I acted as the facilitator and team member of the collaborative action research project. Among others, my academic interests include the creation of locally relevant knowledge, critical community psychology, systemic family therapy, cognitive behavioural therapy and the training of psychologists and psychotherapists. By the year 2004, life had afforded me many opportunities: I was married to Penny (a clinical psychologist and language editor), I was parent to my fast-growing three-year-old girl Maya, practised Zen Buddhism and tai chi, and worked in academic and psychotherapeutic contexts. Towards the end of 2005 my son Max was born, and my life felt abundant in many ways. During this time action research always presented me with a profound dilemma. It appeared in texts almost always too good to be true, and I felt somewhat like a traitor to humanity merely for entertaining this thought. The availability of a small and cohesive group of like-minded and eager colleagues, and the presence of significant and practical work life issues during a transformational period and in a context that cried out for socially responsible engagement, similarly appeared to be an opportunity too good to be true. An action research project seemed the obvious response, even if only to finally discover its shadow side. As a psychotherapist and a toastmaster, I have always felt that conversational spaces need to be carefully prepared and actively nurtured – the presence of people in roughly the same spot is necessary but not sufficient. In this respect, the R@I meetings were no different; and as a consequence this thesis could as equally be titled "The Importance of Coffee, Muffins and Undisturbed Conversation".

Dr Gerhard Viljoen

Gerhard Viljoen was closely involved in this project, not only as a workgroup member of the core action research project, but also as the promoter of this study. Gerhard was committed to egalitarian and social justice issues, displayed a passion for action research and favoured emergent and open-ended research designs.

Gerhard was also an artist (painted and sketched) and musician (guitar and singing) with an appreciation for the classics and a leaning towards the bohemian. He was a registered clinical psychologist for 21 years and had worked in the South African Defence Force and various universities (Vista, University of Pretoria, and Girne American University in North Cyprus). Gerhard's doctoral thesis (Viljoen, 2004) explored from a social constructionist position the well-being of young psychotherapists. Gerhard was diagnosed with cancer in 2008 and finally succumbed to it in April 2011. He desperately wished to see the completion of this project and worked tirelessly on the various drafts of this manuscript until his passing in March 2011. Gerhard handed over his role as promoter for this PhD to Terri Bakker shortly before his passing.

Professor Terri Bakker
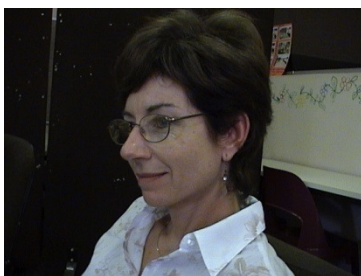
Terri Bakker has worked for many years on the Vista Mamelodi campus, and became involved in the incorporation process through representing the campus in various incorporation negotiations, which coincided with the time that the Research@Itsoseng project was running. She was working on a research project on the incorporation process at the time. She is interested in research at the margins of established methodologies and research traditions, within a postmodern paradigm, and is committed to values of social justice. Her professional and academic background and interests have evolved through the fields of family and ecosystemic therapy, social constructionism, narrative therapy, qualitative research, discourse analysis, and African perspectives in psychology. Her doctorate was concerned with the issue of the relevance

of psychology in African contexts and involved a Foucauldian archaeology of the power of various discourses in African contexts. She is registered as a counselling psychologist. Terri Bakker took over as promoter for this PhD from Gerhard Viljoen in March 2011.

Dr Linda Blokland

Being born into a nomadic family, moving between cultures became a survival technique for Linda. It also taught her the ephemeral value of stability and confirmed the trite adage that the only real constancy is change. The wonderful illusion that the grass is greener on the other side serves only to distract from the treasure buried at one's feet. True to these life revelations she stays committed to the rich context of Mamelodi and indeed finds that her working life there is filled with a continuous stream of new ideas, inspirations and valuable discoveries. This makes her own life meaningful and her work and research of enormous personal worth.

Ms Ilse Ruane

Ilse Ruane is passionately committed to issues of social justice and community mental welfare, and is enthusiastic about change. She is a self-proclaimed social activist and community psychologist. As a registered counselling psychologist since 2003 and lecturer at Vista University, Mamelodi campus and the University of Pretoria, Mamelodi campus has made her develop a keen empathy for township communities. Ilse is involved in postgraduate training and the supervision of trainee psychologists. In research she is currently exploring how the profession of psychology is responding to the diverse multicultural nature of the SA context in the training of postgraduate students. Other research interests include the praxis of community psychology, obstacles to the utilisation of mental health resources in township communities, traditional versus western knowledge systems, local knowlegdes, challenging the frontiers of community psychology, and multiculturalism.

Member 6

This team member has been a part of the core action research workgroup from the start of this project, has attended most of the R@I meetings and other connected events and has made many valuable contributions to the process and outcomes of the project. This member expressed a wish to remain anonymous.

The R@I working group

The R@I working group comprised the six members introduced above. As a member and facilitator of this group, I experienced a strong group identity defined by our quests. These included a striving for relevance to the communities we served; a need for recognition from the academic fraternity (including the university into which we were being incorporated); and a drive for excellence. We wanted to be recognised for successfully conducting and publishing locally relevant research, and for providing an accessible and competent psychological service to clients at the Itsoseng clinic. We also wanted to offer potent learning and training opportunities for students enrolled in our programmes. I experienced a strong camaraderie and sense of belonging, especially during and after the incorporation of the Mamelodi campus of Vista University into the University of Pretoria. I remember many humorous and entertaining interjections threading through serious discussions.

Distinguishing the core action research project from the thesis project

The core action research project: Research@Itsoseng

Prior to working in an academic institution, I worked in the clinical settings of a South African military hospital, a community mental health clinic and in a part-time private practice. None of these contexts required me to conduct and publish research. The sum total of my research experience was the completion of a dissertation of limited scope

submitted for the research component of my Master's degree. As a result, by the time I was appointed as university lecturer, I had no publication record and no experience in producing articles. My professional identity centred mainly on my role as a clinician and psychotherapist.

In my practice as an academic faculty member at Vista University and then the University of Pretoria, I experienced the familiar pressure to publish and the conflict of too little time to do both teaching and research. This is not an unfamiliar struggle for academics, judging by the frequent and regular laments on this topic in the literature (e.g., Blaxter, Hughes & Tight, 1998; Colbeck, 2004; Felder, 1994). The "publish or perish" culture of academia was daunting as I had no prior experience in the practice of writing or publishing. The further challenge of independently producing publications as a result of the higher value placed on sole authorship led to an increase in anxiety and decrease in confidence.

Working in close collaboration with my colleagues on the Mamelodi campus, through informal and often animated conversations I gradually discovered that we shared a commitment to innovative teaching practices, the generation of locally relevant research and community engagement initiatives. We would spend hours trying to rewrite study guides to make them more accessible to our student population; we brainstormed creative ways of examining students who came from impoverished educational backgrounds and were second- or third-language English speakers; and in designing and facilitating psychotherapy skills training modules we constructed progressive skills matrices that we thought we might publish, given the right opportunity. Some of the members published research in this regard (e.g., Bakker, 2004). We also constantly invited or visited community organisations to foster better working relationships between the clinic and the community. These commitments likely developed as a result of the unique context in which we worked, but did not lead to flourishing. I noticed that my colleagues shared my frustration at this inability to translate our values and commitments into our everyday practices, and to fit research into our daily schedules of training and teaching.

The impetus for the core action research project came from a personal recognition that I was not alone in my desire to flourish in my academic position. From several conversations with my colleagues, I furthermore realised that we all yearned for a structure of some kind that would make it easier for us to thrive as academics. During this time I was reading in the fields of action research (e.g., McNiff et al., 2003; Reason & Bradbury, 2001) and emancipatory research (Boog, 2003; Robberts & Dick, 2003), and started to imagine the possibilities of a peer support workgroup that might meet regularly to research issues relevant to our daily practice.

I invited my five colleagues to establish an action research project to work towards resolving everyday practical work life problems. From this the Research@Itsoseng (R@I) project was born. The daily operation of Itsoseng clinic presented us with many challenges (discussed in more detail in chapter five) and as the clinic was central to our postgraduate training programmes, internship positions and community engagement efforts, we deemed it a practical and relevant collection of "work life problems" to focus on in a collaborative action research project. Two research questions emerged in line with these goals: (1) how can we improve the functioning of the Itsoseng Psychology clinic?; and (2) how can we increase our research output? In chapter five I discuss our collective learning process, a raised awareness of resources and the co-creation of identities as researchers as we progressed through our collaborative attempts to continually find answers to these two research questions.

The thesis project: My living theory of how I aimed to improved my practice as an academic

The thesis project consists of descriptions and explanations of my facilitation of the Research@Itsoseng (core action research) project (described in depth in chapter seven). I used a living theory action research approach (more fully explored in chapters three and four) to reflect on how I developed my academic practice, both in the R@I conversational spaces and relationships and as a result of being both facilitator and collaborator of the R@I project. In chapter seven I describe my evolving academic practice as it emerged from the interrelation between my professional identity, the members of the workgroup, the core action research project, as well as the sociopolitical,

historical, geographical and educational contexts in which I worked. From the outset of the R@I project, I indicated to my colleagues that I intended to submit a thesis based on the work we did (Appendix E, Record of the 1st R@I meeting held 2004/05/26):

> I see this project as varying in size for each participant. I myself am interested in the project as a whole (establishing an action research forum at the Mamelodi Campus that is able to do research on various focus areas [or practical problems] with the aim of producing research products that are relevant and useful to the participants of each of the research projects.) This I plan to document in the format of a PhD research report.

It is important to mention that I did not draw a distinction between the Research@Itsoseng venture and my thesis project until after it was completed (the project took place between May 2004 and April 2006). Initially most of my energy and focus went into the facilitation of the core action research project. This entailed a great deal of logistical preparation and many motivational conversations outside of the actual meetings, practical activities such as recording and transcribing our discussions and decisions during meetings, and critical reflection on the content and directions of the discussions. Without a distinction between the thesis and core project, I was plagued by the question of authorship of new knowledge and the distinction between research and problem solving (Zuber-Skerrit & Perry, 2002). To progress with the thesis, it seemed imperative to define a clear relationship between the core research project (R@I) and the thesis project.

The relationship between the core action research project and the thesis project

As the R@I project came to an end in April 2006, I started to critically engage with the records of our reflections and actions and started writing multiple drafts of my thesis manuscript, with each subsequent draft representing a new or different understanding. During this period Whitehead and McNiff (2006) published *Action research: Living theory,* which provided me with a first frame to distinguish the R@I project from my thesis research – my own learning as a result of facilitating the core action research project. The distinctions provided by McKay and Marshall (2001) on problem solving interest and research interest (more fully described in chapter four) and Zuber-Skerrit and Perry (2002) (on distinctions between a core action research project and a thesis project)

further usefully augmented my ability to analyse my own learning as discernable from the collective results of the core action research project. When an action research project is undertaken in collaboration with work colleagues to solve practical work life problems for the purposes of a dissertation or thesis, Zuber-Skerrit and Perry (2002) note that it is not unusual for a dilemma of ownership of the theory building to arise: "Most students find it difficult to distinguish between the collaborative project work with their colleagues, and their thesis work which has to constitute their individual, original contribution to knowledge in the field" (p.171). As a solution to this dilemma they propose a clear distinction between the core action research project and the thesis project, with the relationship between them visually represented in Figure 6 below.

Core action research project   **Thesis action research project**

                                                                Plan and design of the thesis

                                                                Defining the research problem
                                                                Thesis design and rationale
                                                                Literature survey
                                                                Internet search
                                                                Justification and methodology

Action = field work

Identifying workgroup's thematic
concern
Planning/acting/observing/reflecting on
  professional and organisational
  practices and learning
Report verified by participants

                                                                Observation in the thesis

                                                                Description of research process and
                                                                  procedure
                                                                Analysis and evaluation of results of
                                                                  action (content and process) in the
                                                                  light of the literature review

                                                                Reflection in the thesis

                                                                Analysis of reflections by the
                                                                practitioners
                                                                Reflections by the candidate
                                                                Conclusions from the research
                                                                Knowledge claims and limitations
                                                                Suggestions for further research

Figure 6 The relationship between core and thesis action research (Zuber-Skerrit & Perry, 2002, p.176).

The relationship between the R@I project and my living theory action research project follows a similar pattern to Zuber-Skerrit and Perry's (2002) diagram above. The R@I project is represented by the core action research project and my living theory action research project forms part of the thesis action research project. However, during the *observation phase* of my project, I did more planning for the thesis design, which was not originally a living theory project. The following diagram adapts Zuber-Skerrit and Perry's (2002) version to reflect the place of the various research processes in this study.

R@I project   **Thesis AR project: R@I + living theory**

Plan and design for the R@I project

> Defining the research problem
> Thesis design and rationale
> Justification and methodology

Action = field work

> Identifying workgroup's thematic concern
> Planning/acting/observing/reflecting on professional and organisational practices and learning
> Facilitation & participation as complete member

Observation in the thesis

> Planning for the R@I project analysis
> Planning for the living theory analysis
> Description of two research processes and procedures

Reflection in the thesis

> Analysis of reflections by the practitioners
> Reflections by the candidate
> Formulation of tenets of living theory
> Analysis and evaluation of results of action (content and process) in the light of the literature review
> Conclusions from the research
> Knowledge claims and limitations
> Suggestions for further research

Figure 7 The relationship between the R@I project and my thesis project (adapted from Zuber-Skerrit & Perry, 2002, p.176).

The relationship between the core action research project and the thesis project can therefore be summarised as follows. In the thesis project I explore my actions, reflections and changes in academic practice as a result of my participation in and facilitation of the core action research project. The thesis project contains the R@I project, but focuses on my professional development as a result of my dual role of facilitator and member of the R@I project within the particular sociopolitical, geographical, educational and chronological contexts mentioned above.

The research questions within the larger contexts

The impetus for initiating the action research (R@I) project was rooted in certain values I held. These values are the co-creation of locally relevant knowledge; self-determination; and synergistic action. These personal values became more visible to me in the relationships, contexts and maturing of the R@I project. In chapter three I describe these values in more detail. I discuss how my values found expression in my academic practice, and how, as a result, they informed the thesis project and eventually my living theory of how I improved my academic practice in collaboration with the other members of the R@I project.

The R@I project took place during a period of higher education transformation in South Africa in which our department was incorporated into the University of Pretoria. The R@I project partly came about in reaction to this process. The incorporation threatened our experience of agency as well as our identity as academics who were dedicated to providing quality tertiary education to a segment of the South African population that had unique learning needs rooted in disadvantage under the apartheid system. Although the government's goal with the incorporation process was to improve educational opportunities for previously disadvantaged South Africans, our fear was that the opposite would happen. Our fear was that with incorporation, the specific learning needs of our students would be ignored, their local campus closed and their physical access to higher education facilities hampered, and their classes relocated to a distant (and deeply Eurocentric) setting where they felt out of place and inferior in terms of socioeconomic status, social privilege and educational background. We feared, too, that the Vista modules would be summarily discarded and replaced with UP modules without

consideration for the potential value and relevance to Africa of the Vista curricula, and without concern for the students who might struggle to adapt to a strongly Eurocentric focus and style of learning.

The future of the Mamelodi campus after the incorporation was uncertain. Consequently, the functioning and continued existence of our psychology clinic was at stake. As the R@I workgroup, we were convinced that our campus, curriculum and clinic were adding value to our local community. We were furthermore convinced that the incorporation provided the University of Pretoria with the potential of becoming more socially relevant to the broader South African public and its needs. In addition, there was an increased incentive for us to "prove" our value to the incorporating institution in a bid to keep the campus from being closed and all staff moved to the main campus in Pretoria (Bakker, 2007; 2009).

It was during our discussions at the time of the incorporation that the idea emerged of a research forum at the psychology clinic; one that could produce research reports about the needs of the local community (students, stakeholders, members of society living around the campus), and how we were endeavouring to serve those needs. We envisioned such a research forum as our best possible response to the threat to our collective identity and autonomy (see Appendix E for the records of the monthly meetings). We pictured such an action research forum as forming a backbone to the Itsoseng Psychology Clinic, where staff members and students could conduct research (as practitioner-researchers), and where the research questions arose from the training issues and unique service delivery requirements. In this way, teaching/training, community service and research outputs could be integrated rather than being performed as three separate activities, a goal strongly advocated by researchers such as Brulin (2001). The integration of these three university tasks had been a general principle of our academic philosophy, but became a much more prominent operational goal after the establishment of the R@I project. We believed that the knowledge created through these integrated activities would be automatically locally relevant, valid and valuable (Greenwood & Levin, 2000) since it was created by the very people who longed

for this kind of knowledge – indigenous knowledge (Eskell-Blokland, Bakker, Louw, Ruane & Viljoen, 2007) in the making, as it were.

Thus the Research@Itsoseng project came into being as a means for us to overcome some of the negative effects of the incorporation. It acted as a forum for us to increase our awareness of hidden and untapped resources, to synergise and integrate the three core tasks that made up our academic practices, and to preserve and co-create locally relevant knowledge to serve the communities in which we were embedded.

My additional involvement as facilitator allowed me an additional level of reflection: how did my academic practice improve as a result of my participation and facilitation of the Research@Itsoseng project? The thesis project contains my answers to this question in the form of my living theory (Whitehead, 1993; 2008b) of how my academic practice improved in the many interrelated contexts of the R@I project.

A discussion of my research within the context of similar research projects is presented in chapter seven, together with an overview of the contexts of relevant and related academic debates. In the latter chapter I also address the potential significance of my research outside of the boundaries of the R@I project, and explore the contribution of my research to the field of psychology.

Conclusion

In this chapter I distinguished between the core action research project (the Research@Itsoseng project) and the thesis project (living theory action research project). I explained how the thesis project contains the core action research project. I situated the research projects and corresponding research questions within the sociopolitical and geographical context of South Africa at the time and briefly described how the transformation in higher education influenced the research projects.

In chapter three I discuss the philosophical underpinnings of this research and provide a reflexive account of how my values and other biographical factors likely influenced and informed the nature and directions I took in this research. I also provide a framework for

a discussion of my academic practice by looking at the three tasks of universities (Brulin, 2001).