

## VII - Letter of reflections

### The pantry door re-opened...

Dear reader

Like Strause (2001), I had no idea at the start of my thesis what would be created in the research process. As author I have lived the experience of never being able to be separate from that which I was observing. My research also became a part of my daily life. Sometimes it did amount to re-searching for things I had lost or gained during my training as therapist, researcher and role of woman with my own relationship with food in excess. Upon reflection, notwithstanding the different literary voices, in the different participant voices that we have heard, new meanings have been created. Griffith and Griffith (1994) reflect:

The use of the reflecting position...is in essence a political act whose function is to distribute power among all the different voices in the discourse, dominant and non-dominant (p.166).

The notion that there are multiple ways to describe a particular event or relationship comes to life in the practice of reflecting from different perspectives (Freedman & Combs, 1996). Davis and Lax (1991) state:

The power of the reflecting idea is not in the switching of rooms, but in the switching of perspectives (p.1).

Acknowledgement is given that there could be shortcomings concerning the possibility that from other theoretical frameworks or paradigms different discoveries could have emerged. Although the relationship framework within the narrative context from which content analysis within a narrative inquiry research design was done, is a valid way of answering the research question. Therefore the research question emphasises an exploration of meaning that women make of their experiences of their relationships with food in excess, with regards to discourses and alternative stories within a narrative context. In the narrative context unique outcomes can be translated as sparkling moments or in this study a co-constructed term could be meaningful discoveries, where there was movement from a discourse to alternative story in the meaning-making process. Within a narrative setting of this thesis and the qualitative methods used, a description of the reflected possibilities in research follows.

## Reflected possibilities

As stated by Wiggins et al. (2001) psychological research into eating practices has focused mainly on attitudes and behaviour towards food, and disorders of eating. Using experimental and questionnaire-based designs, these studies place an emphasis on individual consumption and cognitive appraisal, *overlooking the interactive context in which food is eaten*. Furthermore, Rodin et al. (1984) suggested that while daily conversations and popular press clearly indicate the importance of weight in women's lives, psychological research has largely neglected the issue.

Upon reflection, re-visiting the main discoveries of this study sheds light on the valuable contributions this study makes to the field of research. As stated, the integrated discourse discoveries from the text of therapeutic conversations and reflexive diary of researcher-participant; as well as an existing literature on obesity; are used as the first two steps in the data triangulation process. As stated, the psychological aspects of obesity in existing literature comprise mainly self-esteem issues, psychological disturbance, intrapsychic- and interpersonal factors. Linking literature with the integrated discourses and alternative stories discoveries, contribute to the trustworthiness of this study. Although there were several similarities from literature and these discoveries, specifically on psychological, environmental and developmental functioning of obese women; each similarity had deeper and fuller descriptions within the narrative context. The main similarities were found in the constructs such as body-image constructed as body perceptions; inner beliefs constructed as internalised beliefs; overeating in action and socio-cultural voices and power. The main differences between literature and discoveries were focussed more on the emotional functioning of participants in terms of constructs such as anger, frustration, fear, loneliness, rejection, love / hate, comfort, sadness, hurt, guilt, inferiority and mistrust. There is a gap in literature on these areas of psychological functioning, which highlights this study's valuable contribution to the field of research. Another gap found in literature and presented by these discoveries is the references to traumatic experiences such as the experience of sexual abuse and loss being a trigger for overeating. As reported, one of the main nuances was the emphasis on discussion of sexuality being a taboo subject in families. Also another area of difference and a gap in literature is the integrated discovery of communication in action, whereas the main focus is on the participants having difficulty to communicate in a constructive manner with significant others. Finally as stated, one of the interesting phenomenon's that emerged from data was the participants having an overweight identity as if they are born and bred to be overweight without the possibility of change.

Furthermore as stated, the integrated alternative stories discoveries from the text of therapeutic conversations and reflexive diary of researcher-participant; as well as an existing literature on obesity; are also used as the first two steps in the data triangulation process. As stated, the main alternative story in literature emphasises weight loss as a cure for obesity seen as an illness according to the medical model. Weight loss is seen as a direct result for magically making the obese women healthy and to psychologically feel better about herself in so doing she is declared a healthy person. This study's alternative stories highlighted psychological functioning within the narrative therapeutic context. As stated, specific themes seen as unique outcomes for individual participants were as follows; participating in creative arts and handiwork, taking initiative in business, story before marriage when she was fit and thin. Several participants had these similar alternative stories, such as personal abilities in action, participating in alternative ways of taking care of themselves. Some themes emerged as prospective alternative stories (meaning a decision that could be practiced in the future), such as specific externalised decisions, experiencing self-love and self-worth more often, having a prospective healthy lifestyle and the prospect of taking care of their physical appearance.

As reported, the integrated discoveries from the text of therapeutic conversations and reflexive diary of researcher-participant; existing literature on obesity; as well as drawings are used as complete steps in the data triangulation process. As stated, 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. Contributing to filling the gap in literature is a combination of themes from the data through drawings, as depicted in terms of the participants' bodily experience of themselves with sexual undertones. A further contribution to the research field is the theme highlighting women's hopelessness and vulnerability in the stature of the self-portrait. Furthermore, two other themes highlighted that there where discrimination from thin people towards fat people forcing them to stay in the fat group where they find acceptance but also to experience group anger towards society or thin people. Therefore more research in the social psychological field could be done.

Upon reflection this thesis reflects my understanding of the immensely practical application of the post-modern, social constructionist and specifically the narrative therapeutic approach to psychology. The possible implication could be that the narrative therapeutic input in this study opened up space to study psychological functioning of the obese at grass roots level. In the final analysis, the discoveries in this thesis could lead to endless research possibilities specifically in

terms of psychological, environmental and developmental, as well as spiritual functioning of the obese person. Furthermore, a description of the reflected limitations in research follows.

### **Reflected limitations**

At this point of reflection it is important to note Neuman's (2000) argument that in qualitative research the emphasis has been on finding patterns and analysing events to present what is found in data. In this study the emphasis on narrative and content analysis within a post-modern, social constructionist and specifically the narrative therapeutic approach, have been evident. Neuman (2000) describes how things or discoveries that are not in the data can be important for analysis.

### **Negative evidence**

Neuman (2000) states that when re-reading notes and coding data, it is easy to forget about things that do not appear, and it is hard to learn how to think about things that are not in the data but are important. For example, I use comparison as a technique in this reflection upon my study; many women are in a relationship with obesity as defined by professionals and society and defined as having relationships with food in excess in this study. Does this mean that men, adolescents and children do not engage with obesity or have relationships with food in excess? If not, why not?

Lewis and Lewis (in Neuman, 2000) provide seven kinds of negative evidence to consider as more reflections on the limitations of this study, as follows:

- *Events that do not occur:* Some events are expected to occur on the basis of past experience, but do not. A wide range of research shows that there is a possible positive effect weight-loss has on an obese persons' self-esteem. In this study the importance or non-importance of weight-loss is viewed in different ways, but not necessarily as the outcome of a higher self-esteem in women.
- *Events of which the population is unaware:* The fact that members or participants in a setting are unaware of an issue does not mean that a researcher should ignore it or fail to look for its influence. For example, in reflection, two issues like these come to mind; the unexplored territory of obese people's or women's experience of their sexuality in relation to a significant other person, especially with reference to using having intercourse or not as a power tool within an intimate relationship and the possible role self-pity could play in keeping people or women in justifying their need to overeat.

- *Events the population wants to hide:* People may misrepresent events to protect themselves or others. For example, adult obese people often refuse to talk about taboo subjects like sexual molestation or incest during childhood, because what does this have to do with them being overweight? Likewise, in an overview of literature the subject of loss of a significant other at a young age seen as a taboo subject in relation to possible reasons for explaining overweight in part, has not been discussed or researched.
- *Overlooked commonplace events:* Everyday, routine events set expectations and create a taken-for-granted attitude. For example, many self-help books on how to lose weight are available in popular literature, which do describe certain areas of people's psychological experiences of their relationship with food in excess, only someone who likes reading popular literature (one participant in this study insisted that I read two books on this subject in popular literature) becomes aware of different ways of making meaning of their experiences of obesity.
- *Effects of a researcher having preconceived notions:* Strong prior notions of where to look and what data is relevant may inhibit a researcher from noticing other relevant or disconfirming evidence. For example, in this study I expected to find discourses that related to women experiencing anger in their relationship with food in excess towards others and I noticed this immediately, but I possibly failed to see the anger they feel towards themselves for overeating, by justifying that overeating is OK, because I comfort myself with food.
- *Unconscious non-reporting:* Some events appear to be insignificant and not worthy of being reported in the mind of the researcher. Yet, if detailed observations are recorded, a critical re-reading of notes looking for negative cases may overlook events. For example, at first I did not consider the essence of overweight making a person very visible to others to be important. However, after re-reading data notes and careful consideration, I realised that the visibility of overweight women could possibly be a symbolic sign of their attention seeking from others or the heavy emotional burdens they carry. Another limitation of the data analysis is that the researcher did not specifically search for discourses or alternative stories that pertain to spiritual meaning. After re-reading the data again the researcher did come across some participants specifically describing spiritual meaning associated with their experiences in relationship with food in excess.
- *Conscious non-reporting:* Researchers may omit aspects of the setting or events to protect individuals or relations in the setting. To my knowledge I have adhered to ethical research procedures in this study and did not consciously not report any discoveries to protect individuals.

## **Final reflection**

On reflecting upon the meaning of this thesis, the meaning ascribed to this thesis would depend on the questions asked to determine this meaning (Watzlawick, 1990). If you have already decided that this thesis does not contain the meaning you wish it to, your questions are aimed at eliciting just that (Van Rooyen, 1995). Perhaps, were we to regard this thesis as meaningless to start with, there can be no frustration at this thesis withholding that which it doesn't inherently contain (Watzlawick, 1990). Straus (2001) comments that the thesis itself does not contain meaning; this can only be created in relationship with the reader. In agreement, this thesis will have as many meanings as there are readers.

Greetings

Co-author and researcher