

# **In conversation with a gay man: A deconstruction of autobiographical documents**

**By**

**SHANE WOLSON**

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**Master of Arts (Counselling Psychology)**

**Faculty of Humanities**

**Department of Psychology**

**University of Pretoria**

**Supervisor: Dr Linda M Eskill-Blokland**

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## Declaration

“I declare that **In conversation with a gay man: A deconstruction of autobiographical documents** is my own work and that all the sources I have quoted or used have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.”

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Shane Wolson

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I dedicate this dissertation to a very special 14-year-old who has finally been acknowledged.

## **Abstract**

This study offers the reader an opportunity to glimpse the world and narrative of a gay man recently come out of the closet and to be invited to participate in his search for improved understanding of his sense of identity. It is a study of autobiographical works in order to gain insight into the changes occurring in the author's sense of identity but is also in itself an autobiographical work. It is a reflection on the author's story and an interpretation of aspects of that story, using selected documents written by him over a period of time, in order to highlight specific changes that occur in his sense of identity. The aim of this study is to generate some insight into the sense of identity of a gay man, and optimistically other marginalised groups of people, with specific focus on the changes that have occurred over. This study will be approached from a social constructionist paradigm using qualitative and interpretative methods to analyse the various autobiographical works. This will provide information on the changes that occur over time in a gay man's sense of identity.

## **Key Terms**

Story/ Narrative, change, coming out, closet, sense of identity, autobiographical works, marginalised groups, social constructionist, qualitative, interpretative.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

In this introduction I imagine that I offer the reader an opportunity to glimpse my world and my story and for a short time to be invited into my perception of my sense of identity. This chapter is an attempt to introduce the body of this study but more accurately, I feel it is an introduction into the processes and difficulties I experienced in putting this study down on paper. I ask the reader to bear with me during this first chapter though at times it may seem disjointed and even puzzling. Bear with me as my confusion and struggle to engage with this study may become evident, as well as my despondency at having to explore my sense of identity and the overwhelming fear of exposing myself to the reader. This introduction is surely then a reflection of the struggle that I am trying to convey and also the topic of my dissertation.

In the old South Africa many minority groups of people were marginalized and disadvantaged due to race, sexual orientation, language, political and religious beliefs. In the last ten years the climate of South African society has changed dramatically. We have become a more tolerant and democratic land filled with a variety of different cultures and beliefs with each different group of people being seen as enriching and enhancing to the uniqueness of our country. In the past minority groups like homosexuals were ostracised and their sense of identity was greatly influenced by the intolerant attitude of society. Having lived in this intolerant and marginalizing era myself and having suffered the implications of the prejudiced dominant narratives of the cultural context I grew up in, my story is likely a reflection of many stories of people from various minority groups but particularly homosexuals, who have endured political, religious and other prejudiced persecutions. Since 1994 the rights and privileges of minority groups have become the focus of our constitution and as a result my own sense of identity and optimistically many other groups of people has changed, hopefully for the better.

This study will attempt to generate some data with the intent to increase the knowledge of gay persons and their sense of identity and also how they experience the influence of our past and new society on the development of these identities.

With this chapter I hope to convey to you the reader some sense of the nature of this dissertation. To begin with I feel I need to focus on the title. The process of arriving at this title was in itself an ordeal for me. Displaying my sexual orientation in the title was a hurdle that created no small amount of trepidation for me. Constructing this suitable title took vast amounts of introspection and courage as it involved me facing my fears of rejection and societal disapproval head on. My hope is that this brief background may assist the reader in understanding how I hope to approach this study and also the challenges it has posed for me.

The title of this study includes concepts like conversation and autobiographical. It is important to explain that this study will analyse and interpret autobiographical documents written by me but equally importantly, it is an autobiographical work in itself. It is a reflection on my story and an interpretation of aspects of my story using specifically selected documents I have written over a period of time. It could be said that it is a conversation that different voices of my sense of identity have with each other namely, the researcher Shane and the private Shane. During the process of writing this dissertation I discovered that these different voices seemed to create confusion in me. I therefore created the distinction between these two voices in an attempt to obtain a meta-stance of the process. The use of the researcher Shane voice in the following chapters allowed me to do this.

My life and story did, of course, not occur in isolation and as such need to be scrutinised as having taken place within a social context. The interpretation of aspects of my sense of identity through the selected documents also occurs within a social context as well as a self-reflexive context. As Kotze and Kotze explain it, we live and understand our lives through socially constructed narrative realities (Myburg, 2000). This citation encompasses the epistemological basis of this study, which implies that our realities and



sense of identity are understood and interpreted through socially constructed narratives. I could go on to say that my life and the various narratives I have about myself occur within a landscape of social discourses about identity and the self. Ortega y Gasset as cited in Jordaan and Jordaan (1989) explains this concept of looking outside yourself to see the inside as follows: “Tell me the landscape in which you live, and I will tell you who you are” (p. 707).

To me, the various concepts such as self, identity, selves, personhood and ‘selfdom’ which can be found in the literature (Myburg, 2000), although concepts denoting specific emphases in themselves, generally carry a common thread of meaning which I call a *sense of identity*. This common thread of meaning will hopefully become more evident as this study continues and the literature concerning a sense of identity is explored. For me a sense of identity encompasses numerous and intricate aspects of the self all intertwined and linked to form the whole, which is Shane. My sense of identity includes my sexual identity, my social identity, my occupational identity and so many others. However, not only does it include all these ‘identities’ but it is evolving and changing and growing. This study is an attempt to highlight and perhaps explain the changes that have taken place in my sense of identity. Myburg (2000) continues by citing Anderson and his concept of the *narrative self*, explaining that the self is an ongoing process not a permanent structure. This concept has special meaning for me because this study is a part of my ongoing journey of self discovery and understanding and as it is in itself an autobiographical work of my story it can thus also be interpreted as a narrative of my sense of self.

At this time I would like to introduce a time-line of my life with some brief but significant periods which hold special meaning for me. This time-line is in no way all-encompassing of my life experiences or my reflections on these experiences but it optimistically provides the reader with an opportunity to orientate themselves to my development and narrative.

## Timeline

**1988**

Standard 7- In this year I experienced severe difficulties at school. Relationship issues became evident with my family and friends. During this time I felt confused and unhappy but here already suppression of my feelings and thoughts began.

**1989-1991**

During this time some sexual experimentation occurred even though I was still in total denial of any homosexual tendencies to the extent that my sexual identity and, as I later realised, numerous other identities were completely suppressed.

**1992**

I began my first year of university in 1992. My relationships with friends and family were consistently difficult and unfulfilling. I remember excitement at being involved in psychology but also worry about my discontent with relationships.

**1993-1995**

My first serious heterosexual relationship began in 1993. My relationships with my partner and family continued to be very unstable. At this time I remained in total denial of any homosexual tendencies.

**1996**

In 1996 I took a six month trip overseas. At this time I believed running away may assist me in finding myself but this did not happen.

**1997-1998**

I began my honour's degree in 1997. In 1998 I had my first unsuccessful application for a master's degree in psychology. This was a very frustrating time because I realised that there was something I was unable to grasp or share about myself but I was unaware what this was.

**1999-2003**

In this period I had numerous unsuccessful master's degree applications. My first homosexual relationship began in 2003. I finally achieved acceptance for my master's degree at the end of 2003. During this period I was a very angry and frustrated person.

2004

My first year of my master's degree training in psychology began. I endured the difficult process of **coming out** of the closet<sup>1</sup> to my family and friends.

2005

I began my master's internship year at a military hospital.

In this chapter and throughout this study I will introduce various autobiographical works written over a space of time in my life. In order to distinguish these works from the main body of the study I shall portray them in *bold italics*. These works will not form part of the analysis chapter and as such are included simply to provide the reader with a richer and perhaps more personal glimpse into my sense of identity. Preceding or following each work I will provide a short reflective context and attempt to give an indication of the time it was written relative to my time-line.

*Oh sadness encircles me, torturing my tender mind. Disappointment rules my meaningless existence. I cry out to the cruel universe: What of luck and what of fate, these things I see all around? Why can they for one brief moment not stop to consider my plight? All alone I endure this though some try to care and some pretend to share. But I know that I am walking along a blade of shame which threatens, at any moment, to cut me to the quick. I know I alone can drag myself out of this pain and into the light. Have I always known?*

This prose was written at a time when I felt an overwhelming amount of hurt and shame at my plight. During the years 1999 to 2003 I had endured many unsuccessful psychology masters' interviews and I felt a deep sense of unworthiness and helplessness. I was also struggling enormously to contain and manage one particular aspect of my sense of identity, that of my homosexual identity. I was still unable to admit being gay to myself but these denied homosexual desires and emotions were extremely difficult to control.

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<sup>1</sup> Being in the 'closet' is a term used in the homosexual community to denote the time when a homosexual person has not admitted his or her sexual orientation to themselves or to their family and friends. The term 'coming out' refers to the process of informing friends and family about your sexual orientation.

The shame and guilt I felt at this time was crippling but even then I felt that I could improve my circumstances by dragging myself out of the depression I experienced.

### **What is your favourite colour?**

To many the above question may seem inconsequential and obvious but to me it is one that sparked a transformation in my sense of self that persists to this day. To grasp the impact that this ostensibly insignificant question had on my very being entails taking the reader on a journey, my journey. Through despair and trepidation, intrigue and ambiguity this dissertation will attempt to conduct the reader through my journey of re-discovery and understanding, all the while trying to answer, for me, the revolutionary question: What is your favourite colour?

In any attempt to convey the narrative of a journey it is important to introduce the main character/s around which the narrative revolves. My first concern then, before I attempt a meaningful explanation of my journey, is for me to reflect on my sense of identity, as I understand it at present. For this purpose I will attempt to introduce myself. To assist the reader in gaining some insight into who I am now, I feel it is important to answer the question: Who was I before I began this journey? Once I have provided some background I shall attempt to respond to the question: Who am I now? As questions these too may appear insignificant but to a gay man recently out of the closet, they hold vast emotional and cognitive implications. They imply re-evaluating his existing constructs or views of himself in relation to his world or it could be said they involve deconstructing his sense of identity. So, with this introduction I hope to begin the process of deconstructing my sense of identity with the aim of producing valuable knowledge, not only to the scientific world but also more specifically to any person wishing to gain insight into their sense of self.

## Who was I?

I come from an average stable middle class family. I have a mother and father who are still married. I have three brothers and two sister-in-laws. We are a close family who generally get along very well. Like most white families in South Africa, my family embraced the marginalisation of ‘minority’ groups according to race or sexual orientation. It was not an uncommon occurrence to hear a joke or amusing story about homosexuals. I was educated in affluent middle class schools where marginalised groups were once again ostracised and often ridiculed. I grew up with the belief that being different from ‘normal’ meant being lonely, misunderstood and scorned and that this was acceptable.

During my schooling I experienced a profound sense of loneliness and dissatisfaction. I felt unable to express my inner self and had a constant feeling of hollowness and frustration within myself because ‘normality’ seemed so difficult for me to achieve. My schoolwork took a back seat and my peer relationships were frustrating for me. I had begun to experience homosexual desires and thoughts but quickly dispelled or ignored them. It was at this time that I discovered an outlet for my isolation and discontent in music. Singing and playing the guitar became my refuge from depressive moments and frustrated hopes. All my powerful and overwhelming emotions were funnelled into my music and so became endurable. Rigg as cited in Savin-Williams (1990) notes the negative repercussions of the homosexual acceptance experience:

As time passes and the realization comes that the homosexual drive is not being dispelled, but is becoming stronger, an identity crisis may occur which may be handled in a variety of ways, and therefore may be associated with varied new symptoms. The most obvious one is depression, which may be manifested by withdrawal, lack of interest in schoolwork, lack of interest in activities associating with peers, irritability and moodiness. Loss of peer relationships naturally produces a

sense of isolation, which heightens the fear of abandonment already present and increases depression. (p.177)

As time elapsed I found my music to be somewhat restrictive in my need to express myself and so I began to write songs which enabled me to express my tumultuous emotions and thoughts. This process of writing down how I felt and what I thought bestowed on me a sense of liberation and at the same time accomplishment. I felt able to convey my deepest fears and desires without ostensibly allowing others (and even myself) to see the person I hid so well. Stewart, Franz and Layton (1988) explain that aspects of inner experience recorded on paper (letters, diaries and autobiographies) are extremely difficult to simulate and recreate in artificial testing ways. “These naturally generated personal documents [are] often derived from deeply felt internal needs (e.g., to confess or communicate)” (p. 42). This writing down what I thought and felt was the process that led to my becoming a writer but more importantly to my coming out the closet. Coleman, Lee and MacDonald as cited in Savin-Williams (1990) explain that:

This process of ‘slowly surrendering’ to the deviant identity [narrative] entails weighing the costs to one’s psychic self and one’s relations with others, especially with family members and friends. (p. 38)

Throughout my schooling I experienced relationships with family and friends as deeply frustrating. I did not understand the reason for this dissatisfaction but experienced it none the less. I found that to make myself available and willing to help or comfort others was a means of endearing myself to them. Although this was never a conscious choice, by making myself indispensable to others I obtained some sense of worth and being understood. Although this process had negative connotations for me and my sense of identity it did spark my development as a helper.

**Am I allowing myself to be seen? I am unsure of the answer.**

This question and various others, which follow in this chapter, represent the conversation between Shane the researcher and private Shane. They are questions I put to myself in my attempt to organise and make sense of the confusion I experienced in writing this chapter and they may also provide the reader with some insight into my struggle which is the topic of this study. I have portrayed these questions in *italics* to make them more identifiable and distinct from the rest of the study.

The above question also holds such depth and frustration for me. This dissertation is an attempt to expose myself not only to the reader but also to me. This may seem strange to say but I feel I have been in the dark about my sense of self and my sense of identity for a long time. Through the years I became aware of differences within me, differences from my friends and even my family. I seemed to think and feel differently from them. I also experienced one particularly important aspect of my sense of identity, my sexual identity (such as it was), as wholly inappropriate and unacceptable. I slowly began to suppress any thoughts, emotions and sexual attractions which were identifiable to me as unacceptable or abnormal. This process of suppression was absolute. Not only was I concealing these ‘abnormal’ thoughts, emotions and attractions from others, I was concealing them from myself. Suppression worked remarkably well for me and I was able to function relatively well despite it. Wilkerson (2000) explains this denial and suppression in his own autobiographical account of his experiences:

Thus I denied feelings even as I felt them, and claimed that I had homosexual desires but that these desires were not the desires of a homosexual, because my understanding was that homosexuals were abnormal and practiced all sorts of degenerate behaviours that I had not the slightest desire to practice. Conversely, I continued to assume that whatever meagre feelings I had for women were the feelings that I was supposed to have. I thus adopted a heterosexual institution into my everyday existence, and it existed in a vaguely felt tension with other elements of my own experience. (p. 263)

After completing high school I began my studies in psychology. I had realised during my final years at school that helping people was the career to fulfil my need to feel needed. During this time my relationships remained difficult and for me, complicated, especially with those from the opposite sex. I encountered constant frustration and doubt because of my inability to identify and engage entirely with my role in a heterosexual relationship.

As my studies progressed, however, I began to realise that something was absent. I completed my honour's degree in psychology and applied for my master's degree. During the abundant selection interviews for my master's degree I found that I was incapable of being completely open and truthful and this appeared to affect the interview process. It would be six years of applications and numerous interviews before I was finally selected for my master's degree.

I finally became involved in a homosexual relationship three and a half years ago. This relationship gave me a profound sense of understanding and fulfilment which I had not achieved before. I was still unable to admit to anyone except my partner that I was homosexual and slowly this need to be uninhibited or closeted began to fester within me. I was in a homosexual relationship and I was aware of suppressed emotions and thoughts but could not express or discuss any aspect of it with my family or friends (something which I was sorely in need of doing). During this time I spent many hours writing simple extracts from my views of the world and myself, as I understood them. In writing these understandings of my world and my self I found some sense of release from my frustrations. The following is an extract:

***Bound by past restraints they struggle to express, reaching in for suppressed emotions but fearing tomorrow's pain. Two lovers traverse along unknown paths and have but each other when times get tough.***

After intensive psychotherapy and introspection I eventually achieved what had become for me an obsession, selection to my master's degree. It was an ironic situation because



throughout the therapy sessions the only advice I received was that I should try to approach my selection interviews in a completely different way than I had previously. The ironic part was that when I arrived for the selections which finally allowed me to continue my studies, I had decided that I didn't want to get selected anymore. I had realised that I had become obsessed with getting into my master's degree and also that I had one enormous issue, that of my homosexuality, needing to be resolved before I should apply again.

I began my studies the following year but during that year my suppressed emotions and thoughts slowly emerged and could no longer be denied. During this time I kept a reflection journal of my development as a therapist and as an individual. I found that I was uncomfortable any time I was expected to communicate about myself or even if I was expecting a client to communicate about themselves. This discomfort was to a degree debilitating but I was still able to function acceptably. It was only when my partner asked me the simple question 'What is your favourite colour?' that I finally realised that I could not continue suppressing my thoughts or emotions any more. I felt completely unequipped to discover this and many other simple questions about my sense of identity and myself.

At this stage my family and friends were still unaware of my sexuality- although in all truthfulness many of them suspected I was gay. This ordinary question finally convinced me that I had to let go. Realising that I was partially responsible for keeping myself in the closet was part of the process I had to confront in order to let go. I had to begin the process of releasing suppressed thoughts and emotions and behaviour if I was to ever truly be happy and also if I was ever to be effective as a psychologist. The process began with me coming out to my family and friends but still I did not feel released from my self-imposed prison. This continued frustration led to my embarking on this dissertation, the culmination of which will optimistically be my emancipation from the dark.

## **Who am I?**

I am a gay man!

I am a son

I am a brother

I am a boyfriend

I am a lover

I am an uncle

I am a friend

I am a student

I am a reader

I am a listener

I am a musician

I am a helper

I am a writer

I am a South African

I am loyal

I am determined

I have a sense of humour

I have strong moral values

I have a very strong sense of fairness

I am a work in progress

Oh yes, and my favourite colour is blue!

## **So what is this journey I am on?**

I think I need to be honest at this point and admit that there is much of my sense of identity and sense of self that I battle to understand. I comprehend so little about some aspects of myself that at times this journey seems daunting and impossible. However, it is this lack of understanding that drove me to begin this study and it is this that drives me to

persevere with my journey of expanding and deepening my knowledge of my sense of self and my sense of identity.

In my quest to gather literature and information regarding understanding my sense of identity I found little that could assist me. Savin-Williams (1990) explain this absence of literature as follows:

Needed are in-depth, longitudinal studies that trace the qualitatively evolving sense of self as a gay or lesbian person from the moments of cognition in infancy and childhood to its full recognition and acceptance during maturity. The perceptual and cognitive aspects of a gay and lesbian identity are little understood. (p. 177)

Isaacs and Mckendrick (1992) explain further "... little attention is directed towards the internal needs and responses of gay people in respect of their identity priorities" (p.3). Yes, there are many hundreds of works written about homosexual identities, how they may be formed and even concerning the coming out process. There is also abundant literature about understanding the self. What I cannot find is specific information able to assist me in deepening my understanding of my sense of self and my sense of identity as it is today. The idea of a homosexual identity or voice emerges here and I would like to explain my understanding of this. I see my homosexual identity as simply another voice in my sense of identity. My experience of being in the closet was that this voice was being told by societal and cultural pressures to be silenced. And that is exactly what I did. I silenced this voice which I perceived to be inappropriate and unacceptable. However, even though my past and its affect on my life cannot be denied or ignored, it is now that I battle to grasp my sense of identity, it is now that I cannot answer simple questions about my likes and dislikes and it is now that I need to come out of the dark. The coming out process has allowed the homosexual voice of my sense of identity to slowly emerge but I still battle to integrate this voice with the many others that make up my sense of identity. This study may therefore also be seen as an attempt to discover how well integrated my homosexual voice has become in my sense of identity.

## **So where does that leave me?**

My hope is that from the above I have given the reader some sense of who I am and where I come from. This then is the first stage of my journey of discovery where I have attempted to introduce myself as the main character in the narrative of my sense of identity.

The next phase of my journey is an exploration as to the purpose of my journey. To even explain what I am attempting to do with this dissertation is exceedingly difficult for me to do. I find that I cannot put into intelligible words the reason and aim of this research. Never the less, I shall make the attempt.

From my narrative thus far it may be evident that my purpose is to gain some understanding of my sense of self and my sense of identity by analysing my writings. As mentioned earlier in this introduction, my writings may optimistically be viewed as a reflection of gay people who have endured being marginalized and limited by the dominant narratives of a culture. As such, this research may be useful to the field of psychology in gaining understanding of the sense of identity of gay people in South Africa today. I hope to extract themes concerning my sense of identity from the works I have written and identify the changes these themes undergo through their analysis. I plan to use deconstruction as the tool with which I will analyse the works so that I can not only extract themes of my sense of identity but also show how these themes may be related or directed by social constructs and narratives/discourses within the society in which I live. These aims and methods of enquiry will be expanded on in the literature chapter and furthermore, the themes of a sense of identity and their relation to the dominant narratives of the cultural context I live in, will be explored in more detail in the analysis, discussion and especially in the conclusion chapters. In these chapters I shall attempt to extract and highlight pieces of the puzzle that is my sense of self and put them into some semblance of order that will reveal more about my sense of self and my sense of identity (and also optimistically the sense of self of other gay people or marginalized groups) to myself and hopefully to the reader as well.

With this chapter I have written something about my life's journey up to the present time. The following chapters are an attempt to give some understanding to aspects of this journey that have to do with my sense of identity. It could be said that my journey stops at this point to reflect and understand what has happened up to now. However my journey is not over and in the final chapter of this study I will attempt to narrate how my journey has continued through writing this dissertation.

## Chapter 2

### Literature review

This chapter will explain and consider the various key concepts that form the foundation of this dissertation. This will provide a background from which the analysis and interpretation of my autobiographical documents can afford valuable and insightful information pertaining into the changes that may occur in an individual's sense of identity. With this chapter I shall also endeavour to ground this research within the field of psychology, giving focus to qualitative and interpretive methods of inquiry. I shall begin this literature review by delving into the literature relevant to the specific paradigm from which I hope to approach this exploration and following this, an exploration of the various key concepts.

#### **Social Constructionism and Qualitative research**

The main frame of reference around which this dissertation evolves is that of social constructionism. The purpose for selecting this particular paradigm will hopefully become clearer as the chapter progresses but to begin with I shall attempt an introduction of the social constructionist perspective. Social constructionist research wants to show how understandings and experiences originate from larger discourses and also feed into them. Social constructionism also concerns itself with deconstruction and discourse analysis which makes the use of my autobiographical documents and the narratives within them appropriate. Social constructionist methods “are qualitative, interpretive and concerned with meaning” (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999, p. 148). This chapter continues to explore the above and other concepts which are relevant to this paradigm and this study.

This study will extract from my autobiographical writings, those aspects relevant to my sense of identity and attempt to interpret how these aspects originated from the larger discourses of the society I grew up in as well as how they may have contributed to the discourses of that society. Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999) explain that

“constructionism is concerned with broader patterns of social meaning encoded in language” (p.149). Social constructionism “holds that the human life-world is fundamentally constituted *in* language and that language itself should therefore be the object of study” (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999, p. 149). Interpreting and analysing my autobiographical documents and the manner in which I have utilised language will also allow information regarding the ways in which social constructs have influenced my sense of identity to emerge. Additionally, this dissertation is in and of itself a ‘meta-languaging’ that also needs to be considered and this will be done in the final chapter in the form a coda. In order to explain the term ‘meta-languaging’ I refer to what Josselson as cited in Roberts (2002) describes as the process of the process. The final chapter will be a reflection on the process of writing the dissertation. Furthermore, the analysis of my autobiographical documents will provide information regarding my own constructions of my sense of identity within the larger discourses (and language) and constructs of society.

The choice of using qualitative research came about because this field of research concerns itself with “such matters as the accessibility of other (sub) cultures, the relativity of actor’s accounts of their social worlds, and the relation between sociological descriptions and actors’ conceptions of their actions” Halfpenny as cited in Neuman (1997, p.328). Qualitative research will optimistically highlight the differences or similarities between my own understanding of my thoughts and actions and the dominant narratives surrounding appropriate or acceptable thoughts and actions. The focus of qualitative research is on subjective meanings, definitions, symbols and descriptions of specific occurrences. The aim of this research is to capture aspects of the social world that are difficult to measure in terms of numbers (Neuman, 1997). In giving attention to the social world, qualitative research notes what came before or what may surround the focus of the study and also that the same events or behaviours can have different meanings in different cultures or societies (Neuman, 1997). I would like to utilize Nelson et al’s definition of qualitative research as cited in Denzin and Lincoln (2000):

Qualitative research is an interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and sometimes counterdisciplinary field. It crosscuts the humanities and the social and physical sciences. Qualitative research is many things at the same time. It is

multiparadigmatic in focus. Its practitioners are sensitive to the value of the multimethod approach. They are committed to the naturalistic perspective and to the interpretative understanding of human experience. At the same time, the field is inherently political and shaped by multiple ethical and political positions.

Qualitative research embraces two tensions at the same time. On the one hand, it is drawn to a broad, interpretative, postexperimental, postmodern, feminist, and critical sensibility. On the other hand, it is drawn to more narrowly defined positivist, postpositivist, humanistic, and naturalistic conceptions of human experience and its analysis. Further, these tensions can be combined in the same project, bringing both postmodern and naturalistic or both critical and humanistic perspectives to bear. (p. 7)

The autobiographical documents used in this study will be interpreted or analysed in the fourth chapter. As interpretation forms a large part of qualitative research I would like to introduce some information regarding interpretation. Neuman (1997) describes the concept “interpretation” as “the assignment of significance or coherent meaning” (p. 335). Neuman (1997) goes on to explain:

The qualitative researcher interprets data by giving them meaning, translating them, or making them understandable. However, the meaning he or she gives begins with the point of view of the people being studied. He or she interprets data by finding out how the people being studied see the world, how they define the situation, or what it means for them (p. 335).

In this study interpreting my autobiographical documents will provide meaning and understanding about my view of the world but more specifically about my sense of identity and how I define or perceive myself in relation to my world. The challenge in this study is for me to interpret my own documents with regard to changes in my sense of identity while still attempting to minimise the effect my sense of identity has on the interpretation. It is during this interpretation and analysis that the two voices, private Shane and researcher Shane, as discussed earlier, will become differentiated.



At this stage I would like to introduce two concepts namely: insider and outsider perspectives. In the insider perspective, how the experience is lived from the viewpoint of how the subject is experiencing it is the focus. Here there is a description of the subjects understanding. This I could call the voice of private Shane. The outsider perspective involves the interpretation of understanding in its context and could be called the voice of researcher Shane. The goal of interpretation is to maintain a balance between these two voices; interpreted accounts should never discard context and details should never be presented without some positioning in relation to the overall structure of understanding (Kelly, 1999). The notion of a hermeneutical circle becomes relevant here.

Kelly (1999) explains it as follows:

The idea of the hermeneutical circle prescribes that, in the interpretation of a text, the meaning of the parts should be considered in relation to the meaning of the whole, which itself can only be understood in respect of its constituent parts. This is usually conceived as a circular movement between part and whole. (p. 406)

In the title of this study I speak about a conversation and here I would like to explain my understanding of a conversation. The conversations between the various voices mentioned earlier and which make up my sense of identity also inform part of the above concept 'conversation'. Hermans and Kempen (1993) explain that "In the course of a conversation, the meaning of earlier items changes and is continually reframed by what is currently expressed" (p. 35). For me this explanation encompasses the methods of this study. Extracting the meanings contained within my autobiographical documents and then discussing them and reaching some insight into my sense of identity, changes those meanings somewhat and assists me in reframing them in my ever continuing journey of self understanding and discovery. These changing meanings assist me in adapting and changing the narratives I use in understanding my sense of identity and also in the process of accepting, rejecting or integrating the dominant narratives of the social context in which I find myself.

The final concept to be explored in this chapter is identity or a sense of identity. Social constructionists regard the concept ‘identity’ as only being able to exist within a social context. Identity is not seen as a stable or fixed entity but rather as something that flows and changes and shifts over time and in different contexts. As this chapter continues the concept identity will be explored in more detail specifically from a social constructionist perspective. What follows are some explanations of the various other important key concepts relevant to this study.

### **Autobiographical documents**

This dissertation is an investigation of my sense of self, my sense of identity. It is an analysis of autobiographical documents to uncover and highlight the changes in my sense of identity. As such, autobiographical documents form the backbone of this dissertation. I shall begin this chapter by accentuating what the literature has to say on the matter of autobiographical documents and their relevance to investigating a sense of identity.

The contribution and value of information extracted from autobiographical documents is widely acknowledged in the literature. I refer again to the explanation by Stewart, Franz and Layton (1988) that aspects of inner experience recorded on paper (letters, diaries and autobiographies) are extremely difficult to simulate and recreate in artificial testing ways. “These naturally generated personal documents [are] often derived from deeply felt internal needs (e.g., to confess or communicate)” (p. 42). It is precisely these ‘deeply felt internal needs’ that I hope to explore in this dissertation in order to gain greater insight into the changes my sense of identity undergoes. The importance of the ‘deeply felt internal needs’ of marginalized groups like the gay community is, for the field of psychology, paramount for successful understanding and insight into this poorly researched area and is therefore also fundamental aim of this study. The information gathered in this study will optimistically expand the literature and understanding of marginalized groups and their sense of identity, particularly given the improving tolerance of marginalized groups in South Africa.

The value of autobiographical documents is further expounded by Terre Blanche & Durrheim (1999) who state the following:

Documentary sources such as letters, newspaper articles, official documents and books... are also particularly suitable for constructionist analysis, as they have an obviously ‘constructed’ nature and are a means by which ideas and discourses are circulated in our society. (p. 153)

During the course of my training as a psychologist, and for many years prior to this, I found that expressing myself in written form assisted me in alleviating the intense emotions I was experiencing. Through this method of expression, my suppressed thoughts and emotions as well as their relevance to my sense of identity, were conveyed on to paper and this process supplied me with the autobiographical documents, which now form the backbone of this study.

### **Narratives**

It is important to note that the use of autobiographical documents in this study allows the reader the opportunity to catch a glimpse (however limited) into the story or narrative of my life. This narrative provides the reader with some insight into how I comprehend my sense of identity and also the world around me. Lieblich as cited in Roberts (2002) explains that “the ‘narrative study of lives’ has become a substantial area for analyses of life experience and identity as connected to social groupings, situations and events” (p. 115). White and Epston (1990) further explain the use of narratives of the self as follows:

In striving to make sense of life, persons face the task of arranging their experiences of events in sequences across time in such a way as to arrive at a coherent account of themselves and the world around them.... This account can be referred to as a story or self-narrative. The success of storying of experiences provides persons with a sense of continuity and meaning in their lives, and this is relied upon for the ordering of daily lives and for the interpretation of further experiences. (p. 10)

For the purpose of this study various extracts of my self-narrative, selected from critical moments in my life, will be investigated to limit the scope of exploration to those aspects of my self-narrative that are overtly relevant to my sense of identity. Due to the fact that I wanted to work specifically with extracts of my autobiographical documents that related overtly to aspects of my sense of identity, I selected only those which contained strong reference to my sense of identity within their lines. As this study is an attempt for me to use the information for my continued growth as a person, the above quote is entirely relevant. It may even provide a possible example of how people from marginalised groups may conceive of their sense of identity within a social context.

It is important to mention here a distinction between dominant narratives and alternative narratives or unique outcomes. Dominant narratives often specify the preferred and customary ways of believing and behaving within a specific culture or by an individual (Freedman and Combs, 1996; White, 1993; White & Epston, 1990). Freedman and Combs (1996) write “we tend to internalize the ‘dominant narratives’ of our culture, easily believing that they speak the truth of our identities” (p. 39). For me this quote is very relevant because by internalising the dominant cultural narratives regarding acceptable sexual desires and behaviours, I became extremely unhappy and afraid of the consequences of the desires I felt that contradicted these dominant narratives and this led to my denial and suppression of these desires.

White (1993) explains alternative narratives or unique outcomes as follows:

As persons separate from the dominant or “totalizing” stories that are constitutive of their lives, it becomes more possible for them to orient themselves to aspects of their experience that contradict these knowledges. Such contradictions are ever present, and, as well, they are many and varied... I have referred to these contradictions as “unique outcomes” and it is these that provide a gateway to what we might consider to be alternative territories of a person’s life. (p. 40)

With this dissertation, my journey involves searching out these alternative territories so that I may allow my sense of identity to change and adapt and bring into recognition the

desires and behaviours which previously I thought of as unacceptable and inappropriate. This dissertation could therefore also be seen as a search for the alternative narratives in the story of my life that may support a homosexual lifestyle. Laird as cited in Freedman and Combs (1996) explains that "... sociocultural narratives... construct the contextual realms of possibility from which individuals and families can select the ingredients and forms for their own narratives" (p.36).

The final section of this study will be a reflection on the process of writing it. It will be a personal reflection on the process that I endured in writing and researching this study. As such the coda chapter can be seen as the process of the process of writing this study. Josselson as cited in Roberts (2002) refers to this as a narrative model that can be valuable to research in the social sciences:

Narrative models of knowing are models of process *in process*. When we record people's narratives over time, we can observe the evolution of the life story rather than see it as a text in a fixed and temporal state. As a novel leads inevitably to its end, personal narrative describes the road to the present and points the way to the future (p. 120).

By reflecting on the process of writing this study I can provide information about how my life story has evolved and speculate on how it may continue to develop in future.

I would like to end this portion of my literature study concerning narratives with a quotation about the potential use of this research. Muller, Van Deventer and Human (2004) explain the research process as follows:

The research process equals the writing of a story, the creating of a book. It involves many of the stories of those involved: the clients; the families; the researchers; the patients; the church members. But the research process is not only a mere reflection on those stories; it is always a new writing. Research creates its own story with new possibilities. Therefore, narrative research doesn't end with a conclusion, but with an open ending, which hopefully would

stimulate a new story and new research. To speak of a beginning and an end is in a sense ironic and an embarrassment. Nothing is original and nothing has a beginning, only an origin or history. In the same way there is no ending. Each text is the preface to next. (p.1)

## **Deconstruction**

As mentioned above this will be a qualitative study which will allow the researcher to study selected issues (self-narratives, beliefs, thoughts and feelings) in depth and thereby “identify and attempt to understand the categories of information that emerge from the data” (Durrheim, 1999, p. 42). These themes or categories will be used to generate understanding concerning my sense of identity and the possible changes that occur. The central theme in this qualitative study will be an interpretative one. It will study themes of a sense of identity that emerge from my autobiographical documents and the changes these themes undergo. This study will therefore be non- manipulative and remain open to whatever emerges (Durrheim, 1999).

I refer to this tool for extracting information about my sense of identity from my autobiographical documents as deconstruction. Deconstruction as elucidated by Michael White (1993) is as follows:

Deconstruction has to do with the procedures that subvert taken-for-granted realities and practices: those so-called “truths” that are split off from the conditions and the context of their production; those disembodied ways of speaking that hide their biases and prejudices; and those familiar practices of the self and of relationship that are subjugating of persons’ lives. (p. 34)

In the deconstruction of my autobiographical documents I shall seek out the influence and effects of social constructs on my sense of identity. I shall also search for the alternative or ‘subjugated’ narratives that may have influenced my sense of identity in different ways and may have affected the changes in my sense of identity, had they been more prominent. Laird (1998) explains this as follows:

Deconstructing the cultural self-narrative also means listening and questioning, but not based on prior assumptions. It means exploring how client cultural meanings and cultural premises (whether linked to race, ethnicity, social class, gender, sexuality, work, religion or mourning, etc.) are being performed, and how they are influencing both the self-story and the problem... It means listening [or interpreting] radically... [In] a way that searches for the unsaid as well as the said, the invisible as well as the visible. (p. 31)

Deconstruction will be employed in a narrative therapy understanding of the term to refer to the narratives or discourses influencing my sense of identity and breaking these down to discover the presence of unique outcomes and changes in these narratives when space is created to explore new or unique outcomes (White, 1993). Deconstructing the various autobiographical texts will also be executed but in a more ‘Derridaian’ manner, searching for gaps and concealed meanings in the texts (Agger, 1991). There is a tendency in autobiographical texts to be historically or culturally specific (Griffiths, 1995). By following a Derridaian approach to deconstructing the texts written by myself, this cultural specificity may at least be acknowledged. My desire with this method of analysis is that the dominant narratives of the culture in which I have grown up and of my family can be highlighted and their influence on my own self-narratives can optimistically be discovered. This analysis will potentially also provide information on the process or progress of my own story giving information on how my self-narratives have changed over time. This manner of analysis may hold within it the potential to gain superior insight into the process of changing narratives of other homosexuals or marginalized groups and therefore be valuable to the field of psychology.

White (1993) carries on explaining that deconstruction is based on various principles:

...Persons’ lives [and their sense of identity] are shaped by the meaning that they ascribe to their experiences, by their situation in social structures, and by the language practices and cultural practices of self and of relationship that these lives are recruited into. (p. 35)

In the above quote the importance of social structures and cultural practices become even more evident. In the analysis chapter, the deconstruction of my autobiographical documents will give special attention to the social structures and practices that may have influenced my sense of identity.

## **Identity**

Of special importance in this study is the concept of identity. There are an overwhelming number of definitions and debates concerning the nature and formation of identity. For the purpose of this study, I prefer to use the term ‘sense of identity’ because this term, for me, is able to encompass more of the diversity with which the social constructionist paradigm views the meta-concept ‘identity’. I refer to Drewery and Winslade (1997) and their explanation of identity which states:

Our theory is that who we are is a constantly changing reality- a dynamic process of being rather than something essential or hidden somewhere inside us. Our potential is infinite, our developmental paths are not set. What we do in our lives makes a difference to where we will end up, but this process is also subject to constant change, to known and unknown influences. As we have said before, what we do matters, but we do not have full control over our circumstances. We have a major part to play in our own becoming, but we cannot simply decide who we will be. (p. 47)

“In ...modern psychology... identity is seen as a fixed entity. This perception reflects a modernist approach to understanding- that final knowledge is possible through systematic observation and that identity can be labelled, categorised and diagnosed” (Myburg, 2000, p. 1). This modernist explanation of the concept of identity is further clarified by Geerts as cited in Shotter and Gergen (1989):



The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment and action, organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively against other such wholes and against a social and natural background is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures. (p. 1)

There is an alternative view of identity where an individual's identity is seen as evolving from the social context in which that individual finds himself. Wolfreys (1998) explains that "...Identity is always being formed in countless ways, dependant on what is blithely called 'context'. Identity is never known until perceived in a particular form" (p. 61). In this view identity is seen as unfixed and changing. "...The question of identity is always shown to be fraught with paradoxes, contradictions and other disjointing movements which make the unity of identity impossible" (Wolfreys, 1998, p. 61). This postmodern view of a sense of identity sees the individual as 'fragmented' and 'contradictory', leaving no controversy with the fact that all people see themselves as different from each other (Moya 2000, p. 68). Wolfreys (1998) explains this by writing that "there can be no concept of identity which we can put in place ahead of our encounter with a specific identity. Identity is never identical with itself" (p. 61). This view provides "a kind of universalising sameness" to all people, which is actually contradictory to the postmodernist outlook (Moya 2000, p. 68). In writing that no identity is the same as any other and that all identities are unique, Wolfreys implies that no two people can be similar. The fact that each person is different from each other person implies that they are universally the same in their differences. All people are different and because of this they are all similar.

The above modernist and postmodernist understandings of identity seem in strict contrast to each other and yet each seem to have some redeeming features. Mohanty (as cited in Wilkerson, 2000) introduces another approach to identity in which he accepts some of the truth contained in each of these views. "He claims that experience is not self-evidently meaningful but is rather partly constituted by social forces and by the very act of

understanding it...there can be more or less accurate interpretations of one's identity and social position based on one's interpretation of experience" (p. 251).

These various interpretations of a sense of identity create a sense of confusion and contradiction for me. For this study, therefore, I remain steadfast in my use of the social constructionist view:

[A sense of identity] cannot be seen outside social context. Furthermore, identity is not something stable and fixed for life, but may shift and change over time and within different contexts. Nor is this person seen as a unitary self, but rather as fragmented, made up of many different identities. This allows us to understand how we feel and act differently in different environments, and that we may have contradictory and conflictual desires and feelings inside ourselves. (Shefer, 1997, p. 83)

For me this definition or understanding of a sense of identity makes the most sense. In my understanding, a sense of identity contains within it a vast number of 'identities' with each 'identity' intersecting, merging and blending into a person. If I take my own sense of identity, it encompasses my homosexual identity, my social identity, my political identity, my racial identity and a multitude of other identities as well. To take this further, for me, these 'identities' may all include within them other important 'identities'. For example my homosexual identity holds within it my identity as a gay male, a lover, a friend and a son. My social identity may include my identity with regards to my occupation or my sport club. These multitudes of 'identities' that shape my sense of identity are referred to as the 'multiplicity' of identity by Hames-Garcia (2000). Even though this study focuses on my sense of identity as a concept representing the entirety of who I am, I feel it is especially relevant to give particular attention to *homosexual identity* as a concept at this point, because my homosexual identity plays such an integral role in my sense of identity. I refer above to my homosexual identity as a concept but to be more accurate I perceive it as a voice which forms part of many voices which together make up my sense of identity.

## **Homosexual Identity**

This study is written by me and about me and, as a male homosexual, the importance of investigating the term ‘homosexual identity’ cannot be ignored. In my experience, a homosexual identity is shaped and understood only after the coming out process. If I consider Shefer’s quote above, it is only in acknowledging and accepting the homosexual part or voice of your sense of identity that you can understand the conflicting desires inside yourself and the impact of the social context on your sense of identity. I feel it is important to for the reader to understand that the following section may imply that a somewhat modernist view of homosexual identity is taken. This section is simply to explore the concept ‘homosexual identity’ and should not be understood as anything but this. My interpretation of homosexual identity, and also that of the social constructionist paradigm, is that it is simply a voice amongst many voices which form part of my sense of identity.

Wilkerson (2000) refers to coming out as a process of ‘transformation’ where the development of a new sense of identity is based on the reinterpretation of experiences. “This new identity reflects a new and more accurate understanding of who one is in the world and how one can act in the world” (p. 266). He goes on to explain that “coming out is neither the recognition of one’s self-evident and immutable essence nor an arbitrary and fragmented reinterpretation but instead a simultaneous recognition and reordering of experiences along the line of a new identity that is simultaneously discovered and constructed” (p. 266). In this definition homosexual identity is seen as a voice that is constructed but not at random and that we can strive for a better and more accurate knowledge of our world and ourselves (Wilkerson, 2000).

Isaacs and McKendrick (1992) feel that the development of a homosexual identity “is an ongoing process which begins in the early formative years, and continues throughout adulthood. This process involves key stages of growth and the person’s recognition of his homosexual identity, the timing and achievement of which may vary with each individual.

The process is a series of transitions which may entail the loss of conditioned identity and the gain of a new self” (p. 36). Isaacs and McKendrick (1992) continue to explain the unfolding of a homosexual identity as a “tripartite process” (p. 7). Firstly the person has to come to terms with their gender and biological inheritance and this acceptance is largely determined by the family system. In the second part of the process, the person’s internal dialogue with him/herself occurs. Identity fantasies and expectations become a private matter but occur within the parameters of their culture or social environment. The third part of the process is the development of a sub-culture identity that occurs later on in the psychosocial development (usually from late adolescence onwards) and is dependent on the successful negotiation of the previous two stages (p. 7). Isaacs and McKendrick (1992) also provide a model with six stages of homosexual identity but stress that this model is of a heuristic nature and does not conform to a definable reality. In this model of homosexual identity they carry on to say that stages three to six “are not necessarily in age-linear progression” and that stages five and six “are dependent upon levels of commitment to the identity as well as significant support from others” (p. 11). Vivienne Cass (1984) provides an explanation why the stages in homosexual development are not in age-linear progression and why they could be seen to overlap: ‘Homosexual identity must be seen to be fluid. An individual is seen to be in a state of continuous being. Therefore, identity can never be “what is”, only “what is becoming”’ (p. 120). These stages do not have a definite start or ending but flow into each other. I would also like to stress again that a homosexual identity is in my opinion only an aspect of a sense of identity, a voice which together with other voices makes up a sense of identity. Some aspects of each stage may be achieved while others may still be unrealised. **Table 1.** Gives a brief breakdown of their stages of homosexual identity development:

**Table 1. The Stages of homosexual identity development**

<b>Stage</b>	<b>Description + age</b>	<b>Fantasies</b>	<b>Sexual Behaviour</b>	<b>Reality base</b>	<b>Self-esteem/ congruency</b>
ONE	IDENTITY DIFFUSION 0-9	Primitive	Spontaneous play	Internal only	Latent but undeveloped
TWO	IDENTITY CHALLENGE 10-15	Evolving due to puberty	Experimental, auto-erotic	Internal-external dichotomy, diffuse boundaries	Confused and non-manifest
THREE	IDENTITY EXPLORATION 16-19	Ambivalent	Testing out, bisexual phase	Indirect or direct exposure to sub-culture	Anxiety, turmoil, self-esteem jeopardized
FOUR	BEGINNING IDENTITY ACHIEVEMENT 19-25	Homosexual focus, idealized	Exploratory searching behaviour	Participates in 'coming out' crisis	Chaotic, fluctuating with socially narcissistic components
FIVE	IDENTITY COMMITMENT 19-65	Homosexual object (s), homo-erotic bias	Searching + co-habiting	Participates in sub-culture	Self-acceptance
SIX	IDENTITY CONSOLIDATION 19-65	Ownership of fantasies	Bonding, confirmed + secure	Lifestyle synthesis	Self-actualised

(Isaacs and McKendrick, 2000, p. 11)

Again here there are discrepancies and contradictions regarding the understanding and definition of a homosexual identity. In my experience, my homosexual identity or voice was always present within my sense of identity but the coming out process allowed me the opportunity to understand and re-evaluated my sense of identity and to accept my homosexual voice as a large and inseparable part of who I am in process at this point in time and space.

The above concepts are all important to this study and the analysis of my autobiographical documents. The following chapter introduces these autobiographical documents which will then be analysed and interpreted in the fourth chapter.

## Chapter 3

### Autobiographical Documents

This chapter is an introduction of the various autobiographical documents I have written over a space of time. Being aware of the fact that this dissertation had a limited scope and that I wanted to explore changes in my sense of identity over time, I selected those autobiographical documents which contained voices or aspects relating to my sense of identity. The documents which follow were therefore chosen with a particular purpose in mind and because they specifically contain issues pertaining to my sense of identity. These autobiographical documents will be analysed and interpreted in the following chapter in order to extract themes concerning my sense of identity from them. I have provided a short reflection with each document to give the reader some semblance of understanding about my frame of mind as well as the context and place in time during which each was written.

#### Document 1: A song for the struggle

There's a feeling coming over me  
I'm battling to explain.  
I thought I understood about these things  
But now it seems so strange.  
It must have hid below the surface  
Just beyond my grasp.  
But now it's come to show its face  
And my heart beats so fast.

I sit at night and wonder  
If I should let it out  
This feeling I've bottled up so long,  
This feeling that wants to shout.

To shout and cry all at once  
Because I locked it out... because I've locked it out.

Last night it almost had control  
Before I could make it stop.  
I wondered if I should just let go  
But then I start to think.  
Maybe I don't need to let it out  
Maybe it's better left alone.  
Below the surface, locked away  
Too far to influence my life.

If I let it out, there's one thing that I know,  
I'll never be the same again,  
I'll never feel the way I did before it came.  
I've got to think this through for me  
And know I want it bad.  
Before I change my life for good  
I've got to be sure.  
Is this what I want to do...I just don't know!

### **Reflection on writing this song**

What inspired the writing of this song was that this night, as with many other nights, I was experiencing overwhelming feelings of loneliness and dissatisfaction with life and myself in general. It often seemed to me that nighttime was the hardest time to deal with my powerful and disturbing emotions. They seemed to flood over me and I could not contain them without expressing them in some way. In getting up and allowing the emotions to flow out of me and onto the paper, I found some release and easing of the anxiety that I was experiencing. I remember feeling a sense of relief despite writing about issues surrounding my sense of identity which I found totally unacceptable and anxiety



provoking. At this stage I think my denial of my sexuality, as well as other aspects of my sense of identity, was such that I could not acknowledge that I was even in denial because that would have entailed exploring aspects of my sense of identity , which caused me enormous amounts of fear and distress.

## **Document 2: Journal entry 11 Feb 2004**

I think I tend to try to restrict my thoughts, as if I am scared in some way to allow myself the freedom to experience them. I wonder why I do this. I think it has to do with my being gay and having spent so much of my life and my time regulating and controlling how I acted and how I thought. It has become a habit that has affected my entire life and functioning and I have to become more aware of the restrictions I place on myself and try to reduce them, for the sake of my own development.

I have found that I am quite scared to form an opinion about therapy or a client's needs. The idea that there is a final outcome or solution to a client's problem is hard for me to grasp. I relate this to my struggle to discover my own existing opinions and decisions. I believe that because of being a "closet homosexual" I learnt to restrict and deny my thoughts and opinions because I could not admit them to myself. Now I find this has spread to all parts of my life- this restrictive behaviour. I feel a need to focus on how I think and what I feel and to allow myself to think and feel these things. I need to know myself better.

### **Reflection on journal entry**

This entry and those that follow was written in my Reflection Journal where I started to reflect on the processes and experiences I had during my master's in psychology training. This journal provided me with the means to express the issues I was dealing with in my development and processes I underwent. Of course, this method of expressing myself was one with which I felt comfortable and familiar having used writing previously to express aspects of my sense of self or my sense of identity.

During my training as a psychologist I began to realise that I was unable to access or know many of my feelings and thoughts. This led to extreme frustration for me but also an almost inability to venture or explore them. I found the mere act of thinking about how I felt terrifying, as if by doing so I might fall apart. At this time I was able to relate these suppressed feelings and thoughts to my being in the closet about my sexuality. Of course this aspect of my sense of identity was only one small aspect and it was at this time I realised that it was more than just my sexual identity that had been suppressed. I discovered that my opinions and feelings regarding almost every aspect of my life were also restricted or suppressed. It was like discovering that there was a whole new person buried under all the fear and this was daunting as well as challenging.

### **Document 3: Journal entry 16 Feb 2004**

I realised as I was speaking about when therapy ends and knowing if it had worked or not, that I am at a stage where I feel I am in an emotional whirlpool. I feel that everything is affecting me because I am aware of changes and pressures but I cannot put my finger on what is causing them. I feel as if something is happening to me that I cannot understand or “Verwerk” (the process of trying to make sense) and this leaves me feeling bit frustrated and lost. I discussed my intellectualising situations before I can arrive at how I am feeling and this is somehow important for me. I’m becoming more and more aware that I’m not really in touch with my feelings and this coupled with the whirlpool process taking place inside me is something I can’t explain and this is scary and difficult to go through.

### **Reflection on journal entry**

At this time, my feeling as if I was in a whirlpool almost began to make some kind of sense for me. Not being able to access my feelings and thoughts was overwhelming. I realised that I was undergoing changes but I could not understand or grasp their impact because I was so unaware of myself. I also realised that I had a coping or even defensive technique in place, which I used to manage this, and similar situations. I intellectualised

or rationalised each situation, using my head to figure out what my ‘heart’ (for want of a better description) was saying.

#### **Document 4: Journal entry 17 June 2004**

Today I began the hardest and most important journey of my life. As is evident from my journal thus far, I am gay. This aspect of my life has been entirely withheld from my immediate family and my close friends. I decided over the last weekend that I need to escape from this self imposed prison of secrecy and inform them all of my sexuality. Why I feel this is relevant to my development as a therapist is that I am lately discovering an ever-present limit to my abilities as a therapist. I feel that I am blocked from true effectiveness by my own suppressed emotions and thoughts. I feel that by coming out of the closet to my closest family and friends, I will be allowing myself to come out of the thought and feeling ‘closets’ I have been in for so long. These thoughts and feelings are integral, for me, in understanding and identifying my clients ‘problems’ and also the stories they tell themselves. I am only beginning to realise the effect of my self-narratives on my relationships and my role as therapist and also in many other aspects of my life. I feel that for me to discover these self-narratives, to understand where they come from and why I have them and then to begin to change them is for me the greatest development I can make in becoming a therapist.

#### **Reflection on journal entry**

Here I feel I finally began to realise my own responsibility in creating the difficulties I was experiencing in expressing my feelings and thoughts. I began to realise that I alone could begin the process of understanding my sense of identity by exploring and getting to know myself better. I also realised that coming out was the first of many steps. This time was very difficult for me as it entailed exploring the effect my revelation may have on those closest to me. This was the time when I was forced to face my most dreaded fear head on- the possibility that I may be rejected by my family and friends.

## Document 5: Journal entry 21 June 2004

During the last weeks I have been deciding on the best way, for me, to come out to my family and friends. My decision was to write each of my significant others a letter in which I try to explain myself. These letters are by far the most difficult things I have ever had to write and each time I sit down to write I realise the advantage of this type of communication. It provides me with the opportunity to express myself more clearly and calmly and also to reflect on what I am writing. I feel this method can be used in therapy with great success because it allows a client to communicate heartfelt and perhaps even hurtful things to their significant others without the pressure of face-to-face confrontation and arguing. I actually feel that the ‘therapeutic’ part for me is in the writing of the letters and not so much what is done with them afterwards- though this can also be a very important and difficult decision. I decided to give these letters to my family and my best friend on the day I leave for the Phelophepa Train. It was extremely stressful and frightening thing to decide this but I feel it was a very necessary step to take. This has convinced me of the support and courage that is needed for a client to do something similar and I feel my experience has taught me not only the value of writing but also the important role I can play in assisting a client with a related process.

One of my favourite sayings made by actress Winona Ryder in the role of ‘Finn Dodd’ from the motion picture “How to make an American Quilt” (Steven Spielberg [producer] and Moorhouse [director], 1995), seems so relevant here:

“There are no rules to follow! You have to go by instinct and you have to be brave!”

No one can tell you how to express your deepest, most difficult emotions and thoughts because there is no right or wrong way. All that I did was to try to be myself and to express those things that mean so much to me and to finally tell these to those I love. That meant going by my instincts and being brave- although, that is not what I felt. I simply felt relieved that I had done it!

## **Reflection on journal entry**

This time was for me the hardest time in my life. It involved confronting my fears and stepping off into the unknown where no one could guide me and I had to rely on myself. At this time I had become involved in the gay sub-culture and having this supportive network in some way eased the fears of this experience. Here I began to understand the influence and support that the culture of which I was a part had on my life thus far and how having confronted the constructs of that society concerning homosexuality, and rejected many of them, I was able to adopt and accept others that allowed me to be me.

### **Document 6: Journal entry 02 July 2004**

Today I had an argument with John. The content is not as important as the lesson I have learned. John can be extremely positive and each time I bring up something that makes me worry or that is negative, he immediately tries to get me to focus on positive, optimistic thoughts or outcomes. I became very upset today because I felt that he would not allow me to experience my feelings- negative though they were. I realised how important it is for a therapist to allow a person to experience what they feel or think. To prevent or avoid or down play these strong emotions is depriving them of the opportunity to work through and learn from them. For me, I feel that I need to deal with and understand my emotions even though they might seem negative. To focus on the positive and ignore or avoid the negative is simply dangerous. I feel I need to be upset or angry if that is what I'm feeling, even if I'm angry with myself. I wonder how often positivism is used as an escape from facing up to feelings that are too difficult to confront (for example: anger or disappointment at yourself). To me it is a red light when someone who experiences a difficulty in life can only see the positive side. Perhaps I'm simply more of a pessimist but I believe a healthy balance of positivism and negativity is far better.

Another thing that bothered me about this tiff was that I somehow felt the need to get John's approval for feeling negative. I find that I depend on other people to guide my actions and feelings, as if I am incapable of doing this myself. To me this points to my

lack of self-knowledge and also to my doubt of my abilities to cope with and to trust my feelings. This is something that ties in with my search for my sense of identity. There is still a long road ahead of me but I feel that slowly I am realising that what I feel or experience may not be the best way to feel but it is MY way and no one needs to approve it! I can be more aware of what I experience, feel and think and I have surely got a far way to go in my development but I believe that I have the right to these feelings, thoughts and experiences. Sometimes I just need to remind myself of this and be aware of it when I notice myself seeking external endorsement.

*To know yourself completely is impossible. All you can do is strive to know yourself a little more each day.*

### **Reflection on this journal entry**

I was very frustrated by the argument I had had with a good friend and found that I needed some way of releasing this frustration. Intellectualising my experience of it and trying to understand my reaction and emotions was how I dealt with this frustration. I used intellectualising often when I found an experience or situation very emotionally provoking. Intellectualising was my weapon against feeling any intense emotions and because this argument was upsetting, I tried to intellectualise it away. It could be said that intellectualisation facilitates an avoidance of confronting my emotions and therefore also those societal constructions which invoke the emotions. Perhaps if intellectualisation decreases and I am able to confront my emotions better I may be able to reject those societal constructions which I experience as subjugating.

## Chapter 4

### Analysis and discussion

Before this chapter begins I would like to explain why I have chosen to proceed as I have. In order for the analysis and discussion that follows to be more consistent with the voice of researcher Shane, I have chosen to write them in the third person, speaking about myself as ‘the author’. In order to distinguish between the voices of private Shane and researcher Shane as well as to allow researcher Shane to speak from a meta-level, I have chosen this method of analysis. I discovered that attempting to do it in any other manner made the process of analysis too overwhelming and personal and also too difficult to extract themes. The notion of insider and outsider perspectives mentioned earlier is relevant here. My immediate experience of analysing the texts seemed to become tangled up with my experiences held within the language of the texts. This led to confusion and a feeling of being stuck. On these grounds I decided to separate the two voices of my sense of identity. In the third chapter I reflect on each text with the voice of private Shane (the writer of the texts) and so these reflections are simply my thoughts on what I wrote in the past. In this chapter each text is analysed or interpreted using the voice of researcher Shane and optimistically a meta-stance will be the result. Of course this is not to say that this analysis is not still influenced by the voice of private Shane. I believe that any researcher analysing any texts cannot but in some way be influenced by the various voices of his sense of identity irrespective of his or her attempt for this not to happen. In this chapter I have attempted to work from what Anderson and Goolishian (1992) refer to as a position of ‘not-knowing’. I have attempted to maintain an attitude where there is no privileged perspective for understanding my autobiographical documents and the narratives they contain about my sense of identity. Wachterhauser is cited in Anderson and Goolishian (1992) as insisting that “language and history are always both conditions and limits to understanding” (p. 28). For me this implies that despite my attempts as researcher Shane to use a ‘not-knowing’ position in my search for a meta-stance, my language and history will still influence my understandings and therefore also the

interpretation of the documents. Gadamer as cited in Anderson and Goolishian (1992) seems to concur with this ‘not-knowing’ position however when he states that:

A person trying to understand a text is prepared for it to tell him something. That is why a hermeneutically trained mind must be, from the start, sensitive to the text’s quality of newness. But this kind of sensitivity involves neither ‘neutrality’ in the matter of the object nor the extinction of one’s self, but the conscious assimilation of one’s own bias, so that the text may present itself in all its newness and thus be able to assert its own truth against one’s forearmings. (p. 31)

The analysis that follows can therefore not be anything but a conversation between the different voices of my sense of identity.

This analysis, and the discussions that follow, are therefore my attempt as researcher Shane to allow this voice to emerge from a ‘not-knowing’ position and optimistically to take a meta-stance in extracting and analysing the themes about my sense of identity and the changes that occurred over time. My desire with this method is to perhaps create an interrogation of the texts in order to say something useful to the discipline of psychology and not simply to provide a personal expression of my experiences.

It is important to note that these documents are arranged in time sequence. Document 1 was written earlier than Document 2 and so on, with each subsequent document being written after the preceding one and before the one that follows.

## **Document 1: A song for the struggle**

### **Analysis for Document 1**

To begin this analysis I would like to focus on the title “A song for the struggle”. If the word ‘struggle’ is considered it can be seen to represent a resistance or a fight which implies that there could be opposing or different sides that are warring or in conflict with



each other. This title also implies that the author is experiencing difficulty and there is almost a sense that this “struggle” is ongoing or incomplete.

In the first stanza there are three themes that seem to emerge. Firstly the theme of struggling or “battling” emerges again, giving the idea of sides or factions in conflict with each other. There is a sense of vagueness or confusion in this stanza as if the author does not understand where his ‘feelings’ arose from or what they mean. This confusion also seems to overwhelm the author where he speaks of it being “beyond my grasp”. The last two lines give the idea that he has an almost physical reaction to the feelings and that they make his heart beat “so fast”. The three themes are therefore confusion, feeling overwhelmed and a physical reaction to this emerging ‘feeling’. There is also a sense of excitement or anticipation in this stanza as if the author is waiting or expecting something exhilarating to occur.

In the second stanza the confusion about his ‘feelings’ seems to have disappeared and he appears to know that there is a single feeling and perhaps even what this ‘feeling’ is all about. The theme here is more concerned with what to do now that he is beginning to acknowledge the feeling. There is also a sense of frustration at not having been aware of it before or also not knowing what to do in the future. He writes about wanting to “shout” and “cry”, which can be translated into a frustration at his present situation. There seems to be some confusion regarding the source of this ‘feeling’. The author mentions “bottling up” the ‘feeling’ but then also that he had “locked it out”. It would appear as if he experiences this ‘feeling’ as exerting pressure from within himself and also from the outside. At this stage it almost appears as if the author’s sense of identity is split. On the one hand his sense of identity is defined by outside influences and on the other hand by inner influences. It is understandable that he experiences this as a struggle. His sense of identity is in two parts and these two parts are in conflict with each other. It would appear that at this time the author’s private internal desires are subjugated by the outside influences which can be understood as societal or cultural patterns.

In the third stanza the idea of being overwhelmed by his feelings again arises but here there seems to be a realisation that he has some form of control over these feelings and also that what he does with them is his choice:

“Last night it almost had control  
Before I could make it stop.  
I wondered if I should just let go  
But then I start to think.”

There is a theme of being responsible where before it seemed beyond his control. When he speaks about ‘it’ being “Too far to influence my life” this could be equated with the idea of a volcano buried but waiting to explode and that the author suspects that there will be a ripple of impact which influences all those around him, should this explosion occur.

In the final stanza the author realises that he needs to work with and perhaps prepare for the aftermath of the explosion. There is also a sense that he is willing to let it explode. He is nervous of the aftermath of this explosion but also in a sense excited. He realises the implications of this ‘feeling’ and also his responsibility becomes more pronounced. However, the final words “I just don’t know” imply that after all he is still unsure and the theme of confusion arises again.

### **Discussion for Document 1**

The theme of battling begins to make sense when one considers that the author experiences pressures from within and without. The influence of cultural or societal narratives can be considered here. It is known that the author is a gay man and was at this time in the closet regarding his sexuality. The conflict between his inner desires and the cultural narratives regarding “acceptable” desires seems to be of importance here. The author is confused about the strength of his desires but realises that should he acknowledge them it would have far reaching implications for his life. At this stage the author seems to be struggling to understand this part of his sense of identity and is

coming to a realisation that there is a conflict between the dominant narratives of the context in which he finds himself and those self-narratives that are emerging within himself. As mentioned above, at this stage it would appear that the dominant societal narratives are subjugating the author's inner narratives and his evident discomfort is probably the result of these subjugated narratives placing pressure on him to be heard. The third stanza seems to support this view. He speaks about 'it' almost having 'control' implying that he experiences some sort of pressure. He carries on to speak about locking 'it' away so that it cannot influence his life implying that he is concerned about the effects it may have on the people or the society around him. Societal pressures or dominant narratives seem more important to him than his inner desires or self-narratives.

There is a sense of despondency in this document as if the author experiences helplessness in being able to resolve the conflict he is experiencing: "Is this what I want to do...I just don't know!". There is almost a searching for some semblance of clarity when he speaks about "knowing" and "not knowing" as if he is in need of some intellectual understanding about what he is experiencing. This implies a sense of being unable to process or understand the conflicting messages he is getting. The one theme that seems consistent is his realisation that the resolution of his conflict will lie with him that he is in some way responsible for solving or managing this conflict.

## **Document 2: Journal entry 11 Feb 2004**

### **Analysis of Document 2**

In the first paragraph of this journal extract there is a sense of realisation that what the author thought of as a problem was much more extensive and involved than he suspected: "It has become a habit that has affected my entire life and functioning and I have to become more aware of the restrictions I place on myself and try to reduce them, for the sake of my own development." There is a sense of fear of the unknown ripples of influence which could spread through his life. There is evidence of him gaining insight into his difficulties but this is more a questioning than any definite understanding of how

he feels. Again in this paragraph there is a sense of responsibility as if his “development” rests on his willingness to be responsible. There is also a sense of blaming himself for allowing his development to be restricted when he writes: “I have to become more aware of the restrictions I place on myself.” The theme here seems to be one of frustration with himself.

In the second paragraph of this extract the author writes about not being able to admit things to himself when he mentions being “scared to form an opinion”. He appears to realise that not acknowledging his own feelings created his experience of them being unavailable or unreachable. The restrictions he placed on himself resulted in his feelings and thoughts being unavailable to him. He writes: “...being a ‘closet homosexual’ I learnt to restrict and deny my thoughts and opinions because I could not admit them to myself” The theme of him being responsible for his difficulties comes out again. His reluctance to acknowledge his own feelings and thoughts seems related to his perception of what others regard as acceptable. The influence of the outside world on his life is becoming more pronounced. The underlying theme of societal narrative subjugating his self-narratives arises again.

## **Discussion of Document 2**

There are already indications of change between this document and the first one. In the first document there is a ‘feeling’ that is confusing and causing conflict but the author is not able to identify it. In this second document he identifies the feeling of fear and that this fear is extensively influencing his life. In this document the author seems to realise that his confusion has to do with his sexual identity but also that this confusion has spread to many other aspects of his sense of identity. This realisation seems to spark fear in him but also an underlying anger which he turns inwards. It would appear as if his realising that his sexual identity is in conflict with the dominant narratives regarding sexuality creates in him a sense of fear and anger which he finds confusing but is determined to manage.

Where in the first document there was a theme of despondency it now seems to change to one of desperation to know himself. There is also a theme of growing awareness about his own role in the difficulties he experienced in the past and still experiences in the future and the desperation that he needs to know more about himself. There is a growing understanding that he can change if he makes a decision to do so. There is also some understanding of the influence of the outside world and that this may have affected his ability to acknowledge his thoughts and feelings. At this stage however, the author seems to place a lot of blame on himself in allowing his difficulties to continue. He seems to show little sympathy for himself.

### **Document 3: Journal entry 16 Feb 2004**

#### **Analysis of Document 3**

In this extract there is a theme of confusion about his emotions. He writes about feeling “lost”. He also acknowledges the fact that it feels like a whirlpool, that his feelings go round and round. His feelings of “frustration” seem understandable if his experience of his emotions is that they stay the same but keep coming around again and again.

There is some kind of realisation that he *intellectualises* in order to deal with his emotions but the purpose or outcome of doing this still seems to evade him. There are themes of fear and confusion and also feeling overwhelmed again in this document. He speaks about the process of feeling out of touch with his feelings and the idea of a whirlpool as overwhelming and maybe even threatening. He also mentions not being able to “explain” the processes inside him which ties in with a theme of confusion but also with a need to understand or intellectualise the process. The theme of feeling overwhelmed can be seen through his feelings of confusion and being scared. It may be that he attempts to intellectualise his experiences as a defence against the overpowering feelings he is experiencing. The problem the author seems to experience with feeling overwhelmed may be related to his need for control. Due to his past and the need for restraint and suppression of unacceptable feelings and thoughts, he has learnt a form of

control which he exerts over his emotions and thoughts. Now that these emotions and thoughts are closer to the surface and more demanding, he experiences ‘overwhelmness’ because he cannot so easily control them anymore.

### **Discussion of Document 3**

This third document seems a natural progression from the first two. The author has realised his responsibility in making any changes necessary and has begun this process. In social constructionism change is not seen as the goal. Rather by means of dialogical conversation a space for newness or a new narrative is created and change may result (Anderson and Goolishian, 1992). The difficulty is that in attempting to change he is realising that he experiences confusion in the process. Perhaps what is occurring is that the voices within him are in conversation and his experience of the resultant space to create newness is unfamiliar and therefore confusing. The confusion almost seems to deepen in this document as if the very act of trying to understand seems to create less understanding: “I’m becoming more and more aware that I’m not really in touch with my feelings and this coupled with the whirlpool process taking place inside me is something I can’t explain and this is scary and difficult to go through”.

What is also important is that even though the author writes about being unaware of his emotions he is already writing about how he feels, for example being “frustrated”, “lost” and “scared”. It would appear that he is more in touch with how he feels than he is aware. This document appears to highlight a new development for the author. He seems to write using more emotional phrases and understanding showing improved insight into his emotions. This could be the cause of his confusion as if being confronted with his emotions creates a sense of confusion and a sense of being overwhelmed instead of bringing him the understanding he thought it would.

Another important aspect of this document is that the author still seems to take his cues from the outside world. He writes: “I am aware of changes and pressures but I cannot put my finger on what is causing them.” There is a subtle implication that he appears to see

external factors as the cause for his confusion. These external factors could be understood as societal narratives and their influence on him at this time. This implies a certain lack of trust in what he experiences and that he needs some kind of affirmation that his experiences are normal or acceptable. Not being able to receive this affirmation could also be contributing to his confusion.

#### **Document 4: Journal entry 17 June 2004**

##### **Analysis of Document 4**

In this extract it is interesting that the author sees telling his family and friends about his sexuality as the beginning of his journey while it is noticeable that he has been on a journey for a period of time preceding this document. The beginning of this document shows a realisation of his responsibility where the author speaks about a “self imposed prison”. He appears to realise that the pressure he was experiencing was partly of his own creation, as was the inability to release the pressure. There is some implication that he may have perceived this prison of his thoughts and feelings as solely imposed by an external force prior to writing this document. He seems unsure of this perception because later he again writes about ‘allowing’ himself to come out of the “thought and feeling closets”.

There is a beginning of owning his situation, as if the author has decided he is now able to take the responsibility for how he experiences himself at present. An important theme that seems to arise is that of his “self-narratives”. The author seems to come to a realisation that the suppression of his thoughts and feelings has to do with the narratives he has been telling himself. There is also a realisation that he can change his self-narratives, as if he realises that they are not fixed but mouldable into something he chooses. What is interesting here is that the author seems to have considered in the past that his self-narratives may have arisen from outside or societal influences. He seems to be reconsidering this influence in the present. This is evident when he writes about “where they come from and why I have them”.

## Discussion of Document 4

An important development in the documents thus far is that whereas before the author experienced confusion and feelings of being overwhelmed as leading to passive behaviour and perhaps even apathy, he now seems to be driven and determined to act. The confusion and feeling apathetic or stuck which was evident previously seems to have been replaced by determination and a willingness to act.

The theme of responsibility is present in all the documents and it would appear as if the author has some obsession with being responsible for himself or is trying to over-compensate for what he sees as a previous lack of responsibility. In Document 2 he writes: “I have to become more aware of the restrictions I place on myself and try to reduce them, for the sake of my own development.” The use of the term “have to” in this extract shows a need to take responsibility, almost a pressure to be responsible and this pressure seems to come from his internal narratives. In Document 4 he goes on to write: “I need to escape from this self imposed prison of secrecy.” These themes of responsibility seem very important to the author. It would seem that for him, taking responsibility is the only path to success as a therapist and as an individual. He seems to place great value on his perception of responsibility as if responsibility itself is the aim and not an understanding of himself. The theme of responsibility could again be understood in terms of a need to control. Being confronted with his suppressed emotions and thoughts leaves him feeling out of control and this sparks a need to control his world as he has evidently done in the past. By forcing himself to be responsible he can exert some measure of control over these ‘out of control’ emotions and thoughts.

There seems to be a theme of almost punishing himself, perhaps for not taking enough responsibility or for not acting on his “problems” before. The above extracts all seem to point to an internal pressure to be responsible. Numerous times in the extracts he uses terms like “need to” or “have to” which could indicate this pressure. His apparent fixation with responsibility seems to link with a form of anger he has turned inwards. It seems



almost easier to be angry at himself than at the world in general. There is a lack of themes of gentleness towards himself as if he is almost torturing or punishing himself by coming out of the closet. There is also a sense that he feels he deserves this punishment. He admits to this being the “hardest and most important journey” of his life but then carries on to use forceful and harsh terms like “have to” in his reasoning for taking this journey. The remnants of perceived societal narratives towards homosexuals may be what are giving rise to this need for punishment. He still seems to experience his emotions as confusing and overwhelming and by becoming angry he can in some way not acknowledge them and this then leads to him feeling less overwhelmed and confused and so he becomes more determined and responsible in his process of coming out. The anger he experiences may also be his attempt at controlling the new situation he finds himself in. In the past anger has worked for him and is something he knows well. Therefore to feel anger is to feel that in some way he can handle the situation.

#### **Document 5: Journal entry 21 June 2004**

##### **Analysis of Document 5**

In this document there are many powerful emotions present. The author writes about “calmness”, “heartfelt”, “hurtful”, “stressful” and “frightening” emotions all of which can be seen as powerful but also very insightful. This document is possibly the most emotionally expressive piece the author has written thus far and shows that his ability to access his emotions, though still difficult for him to acknowledge, is improving. His choice of using letters to inform his family and friends of his sexual orientation shows a difficulty with managing emotional situations but also creates a distance between the writer and the intended recipient, which appears effective in this case for him to convey his difficult message.

There is a tendency in his writing to intellectualise or at least rationalise his actions by comparing them to a therapeutic context. He writes: “I feel this method can be used in therapy with great success because it allows a client to communicate heartfelt and

perhaps even hurtful things to their significant others without the pressure of face-to-face confrontation and arguing”. This may indicate some fear or a lack of trust in the correctness of his behaviour or his emotions. This could be equated to a low self-confidence or previous bad experiences in expressing his opinions to the outside world. However, this may also be the author’s way of testing the waters, so to speak, about how appropriate his suppressed emotions are in various situations and also to gauge the effect on or response from society.

In this document the author for the first time seems to realise that he needs to reject some of the “rules” he may have been following up until now. Here for the first time he seems to grasp that societal narratives need not be prescriptive and can be rejected. He also seems to realise that he needs to use his own instincts to move onwards. He also writes about being “brave” and this seems to be his first acknowledgement that he has been brave in his struggle. Where before he experiences fear at his emerging emotions and thoughts he seems to grasp that he has been brave and perhaps overcome some of his fear. Here also for the first time he seems to be softer on himself and less critical. The entire last paragraph emphasises this point where the author writes:

“No one can tell you how to express your deepest, most difficult emotions and thoughts because there is no right or wrong way. All that I did was to try to be myself and to express those things that mean so much to me and to finally tell these to those I love. That meant going by my instincts and being brave- although, that is not what I felt. I simply felt relieved that I had done it!”

He ends this document writing about ‘relief’. There is a sense that he has a pent up pressure and that in writing these letters it has in some way relieved that pressure. The sense of relief may also be the result of being able to stop hiding who he is and what he feels and that he can now be more congruent in relating to those around him. This relief may even be how he experiences the letting go of the tensions between the internal and external dialogues and narratives.

## Discussion of Document 5

This document brings important social constructionist views into play. The author has slowly, throughout the various documents, begun to acknowledge outside influences and conflicts with his self-narratives and in this document he seems to realise that he may need to reject or modify some of these “rules” or constructs in order to move forward with his journey. Where previously there was extreme tension between external narratives and dialogues and his internal ones, he now seems to experience a sense of relief in the tension which creates the space to explore alternative narratives or unique outcomes. In narrative therapy dominant narratives are often rejected and alternative or unique narratives are sought. This is a large part of the process that the author is embarking on with this study.

In this document there is a shift or movement from fear of his behaviour, his emotions and indications of a low self-confidence, to a realisation that he has been brave. There is almost a sense of surprise that he may actually have been strong in some sense to come as far as he has. There is also a sense that he may be able to manage better in the future with this acknowledging of his abilities. In acknowledging that he has been brave the author can gain confidence in creating space for more new narratives or unique outcomes to be explored. Allowing a dialogue to occur between the different voices of his sense of identity may encourage new narratives to emerge which can assist him on his quest to better understanding his sense of identity.

The relief he experiences in this document may be as a result of realising that he can reject some of the rules he has lived his life by and also that he can trust in his own instincts and abilities in the future. Perhaps the fact that his fear is diminishing even though he has rejected some of the dominant narratives in his life provides him with a sense of accomplishment and determination to continue.

## **Document 6: Journal entry 02 July 2004**

### **Analysis of Document 6**

In this document there is again the sense of determination to acknowledge and experience his emotions even though the author and others may find them difficult or negative. Again there is a theme here of rejecting the views of others and relying on his own judgment or abilities. He writes: “There is still a long road ahead of me but I feel that slowly I am realising that what I feel or experience may not be the best way to feel but it is MY way and no one needs to approve it!”

There is a theme of rejecting the methods he previously used to measure and acknowledge his behaviour and thoughts. The author seems to realise that he does not know all there is to know about himself but also that others around him may not know any better than he does. There is a growing awareness that those around him may not necessarily have contributed positively to his journey and that it might involve rejecting their influences for him to continue. The influence societal narratives have had over him seems to be diminishing and this results in a sense of relief but more importantly a sense of trust in himself.

### **Discussion of Document 6**

This document is almost a culmination of all changes emerging in the preceding ones. The author has realised he has the ability and strength to delve into his past and his emotions and thoughts. He also seems to realise that he can reject the views of those around him and still feel confident that he is acting in his own best interests. His sense of confusion seems to have disappeared and been replaced with a sense of acceptance that not everything can be understood. The author appears to understand that the narratives of society and those around him have influenced him but that he need not allow these narratives to negatively influence his life story anymore. This is a very large step to take

and one he seems willing though hesitant to take. The author writes: “I can be more aware of what I experience, feel and think and I have surely got a far way to go in my development but I believe that I have the right to these feelings, thoughts and experiences. Sometimes I just need to remind myself of this and be aware of it when I notice myself seeking external endorsement.”

There is a theme of confidence in himself and his abilities that was not evident before. There is also a sense of acceptance of his sense of identity even though others may not accept him as he is. The author seems to accept both his limitations and his abilities and has some confidence that he can use them for his own benefit in future. Even though the author seems to have arrived at a place where he feels confidence in his abilities and judgments he still seems to believe that his journey is not over. Edward Bruner cited in Freedman and Combs (1996) states that “Stories may have endings, but stories are never over” (p.33). This view is one of the fundamental concepts of the narrative approach which forms part of the social constructionist epistemological paradigm in which this dissertation is written.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

In this the final chapter of this dissertation I will attempt to bind the literature with the information extracted from my autobiographical documents. This chapter will serve as a culmination of all that has gone before and will optimistically provide the reader with some clarity on the changes my sense of identity underwent over time. A further desire with this chapter is to provide support for using this type of research to analyse and investigate issues surrounding a sense of identity in gay people and any other marginalized groups. This information is of great value to the field of psychology but also to these groups of people themselves. With this chapter the academic segment of this thesis will be complete and subsequent to it there will be what I refer to as a *Coda* in which I will venture to express my reflections of my journey in writing this dissertation. This chapter then ends my use of researcher Shane's voice and the coda that follows will allow the voice of private Shane to remerge and reflect on the process of writing this challenging dissertation.

An important theme that emerged for me from the analysis and discussion of my autobiographical documents was that I seemed to get angry and almost punish myself for not having coped with, or managed better, the often-opposing narratives or voices in my life. If I think about this theme, I realise that I have spent many years turning the anger and frustration I felt inwards, taking out all those frustrations on myself, blaming and berating myself for not being what I felt society expected of me. Coupled with this was the feeling of fear of being rejected should I allow myself to be different. This feeling of fear arises throughout the documents and played a central role in my sense of identity for many years. Freedman and Combs (1996) write about how we feel that the dominant narratives of our culture speak the truth about our identities and so, in realising that my own 'truth' came into conflict with cultural 'truths' it is understandable that I experienced fear of exposing these different views to the world. What is strange to me is that instead of being angry at the world for this fear and for the unhappiness it created, I turned the

anger inwards and blamed and berated myself for being different. In some way I developed a self-narrative which informed me that anger aimed at the culture or the narratives of a culture were unacceptable and that the only means of dealing with this anger was to turn it inwards. I can only begin to speculate on the narratives that influenced this mode of behaviour but one fact remains clear, the cultural narratives of the context in which I grew up informed this self-narrative.

As I peruse the analysis and discussion of my autobiographical documents, I notice that there seems to be a common thread of development and movement in my sense of identity. There is a progression from a confused and frustrated individual who is somehow dependent on outside narratives to lead his life, to someone who is determined and confident and who can rely on his own instincts and thoughts, someone who is discovering that he can trust himself and change his self-narratives despite the fact that they may be different from or opposed to the narratives of the outside world. This change in my sense of identity concurs with Plummer's (cited in Roberts, 2002) findings where he discovered that a "collection of life stories or narratives can also show how individuals relate to traumatic events, reveal or change sexual or other identities, or 'adapt' where an identity is not allowed complete expression" (p.30).

At this time I would like to draw the reader's attention to something I wrote about in the introduction, that of my homosexual voice and the influence of culture and society on that voice. The changes mentioned in the following paragraphs seem to indicate an integration of this voice and other suppressed voices into my sense of identity. This, however, does not imply an end to the journey. The slow integration of these voices into my sense of identity has opened up new and complex areas which contain new challenges and difficulties.

In the first document I barely acknowledge a distinction between societal narratives and my self-narratives or even that these societal narratives have an influence on my sense of identity. As the documents progress however, I seem to become more and more aware of the fact that my self-narratives and those of the society in which I find myself are very

separate concepts but also that they mutually influence and often conflict with each other. Slowly I seem to realise that societal narratives regarding sexuality, as well as many other aspects of my sense of identity, have played an enormous role on the self-narratives I possess. There is also a growing realisation that where I needed the approval or acceptance of the outside world, I have begun to trust in my own instincts and thoughts and even rejected some of the narratives that so influenced my sense of identity before. At this time I seem to experience an intense sense of relief. This diminishing of psychological distress after coming out has been confirmed by numerous studies in the gay community (Wong and Tang, 2004). Here again there is evidence of an enhanced integration of my homosexual voice with my sense of identity albeit a complex one.

As Josselson cited in Roberts (2002) explains, “[My] personal narrative describes the road to the present and points the way to the future” (p.120). My personal narrative has described the road to enlightenment regarding the narratives that have influenced my sense of identity and it also points to the future and how I may begin to rely more on my recently adapted and now alternative self-narratives to assist me as I continue on my journey. The influence of dominant societal narratives has not disappeared however and so relying on my alternative narratives will continue to be a challenge for me especially where they conflict with those of the society I live in. Muller et al. (2004) speak of narrative research as not ending with the conclusion but rather with an open ending. My hope is that with the coda and this dissertation as a whole I may have made a tiny indentation into the infinite world of knowledge concealed within the written narratives of our population and that it may lead to more and perhaps superior research on the narratives of South Africans.

This study was an attempt to discover changes in the sense of identity of a gay man over time. I feel that having gone through the process of deconstruction of the various texts and looking for alternative narratives held within their lines, I have highlighted some changes that have occurred in my sense of identity. If this is the case then my initial aim of the study has been fulfilled. I have also reflected on the process of doing this research and my experiences of having to write it. This study could therefore be seen as



reminiscent of a feminist approach as discussed by Eagle, Hayes and Sibanda (1999). I was concerned not only with the “content” of my writings and the “process” of the research but also the connection between the two. The content of my writings provides information on my sense of identity and the changes that occurred, while the process of writing this study is reflected in the *Coda* at the end. This study may also then be of some value to the feminist perspective that makes marginalized groups and their identities the focus of their research. I do feel however that further research and use of this method of inquiry is necessary before any definitive recommendations can be made as to the value of this type of research.

However, on a more personal note, I also feel that I have grown as a person and gained understanding of my sense of identity, which was perhaps my alternative goal in choosing to do this study. The value of this research and the methodology used should therefore not be ignored. In this instance it was a successful method of extracting themes concerning a sense of identity and it was also successful in highlighting the changes that occur in those themes of identity. There is potential value in this method of enquiry’s ability to investigate the sense of identity of marginalized groups like homosexuals, particularly how their narratives may come into conflict with the dominant narratives of the culture in which they live. In South Africa with our diverse cultures and the many marginalized groups of people who in the aftermath of the Apartheid era are still trying to reinterpret their sense of identity, this method of research may provide valuable information in the future.

My sincere hope is that this research study may provide a beginning of similar research into the narratives and the sense of identity of marginalized groups in South Africa and that it may increase the knowledge of the psychological world with regards to changes in a sense of identity.

## Coda

There were numerous reasons for my decision to write this dissertation as I have done but none more important than the fear that should I not force myself to look inwards and attempt an understanding of what I saw there, I would simply allow myself to blindly continue onwards as I had in the past. For more years than I can remember I denied the feelings, thoughts and desires that I felt contradicted with the cultural narratives I believed to be true not only about sexuality, although this was a major factor, but also about religion, hobbies, sport, relationships and so much more. I simply did not allow them to enter my mind. This denial was complete in that it encompassed almost all aspects of my sense of identity. I came to be unaware of so many aspects of my sense of identity that often it felt like living in the dark. The only place where these thoughts, feelings, desires and dreams trickled through into my life was through my writing and music. With the tool of writing I was able to express some tiny portion of the frustration and despondency I experienced each day of my life. I was also able to breach the ever-growing gap between my life and the denied and suppressed parts of my sense of identity. Writing became the only means by which I could grasp my buried self. So, choosing to use the extracts of some of my writings was the obvious method with which to study my sense of identity and the changes it underwent.

The use of my own writings as a basis of my dissertation was in no way an easy decision for me. I had no small amount of trepidation making this decision and also the decision on which of my numerous writings to include. The fear did not end here however because deciding on how to write about these extracts and the extent of my sense of identity held within their lines that should be exposed, was daunting and frightening as well. To understand how difficult this process was for me I need to explain how I dealt with fear in the past. In the past I would simply deny the fear and suppress it before it could influence my life in any particular way. Deciding to acknowledge and further explore this fear can understandably be seen as exceedingly difficult in my case.

An area that became extremely problematic for me was attempting to reflect on my own emotions and experiences while also trying to produce an academic document. The result of this difficulty was that I found it almost impossible to write anything at all. I found myself in a space where I did not know how to begin or how to structure what I wanted to do or say. It was only with the assistance of my mentor that I could separate the academic work from the reflection process and this separation allowed me to concentrate on the academic work without my reflections, and the difficulties that these implied for me, influencing the process. My decision was firstly to use the first chapter as an introduction to the dissertation but also a reflection on what had brought me to begin this study in the first place. Secondly I decided to create a final addendum in which I would reflect on the process on actually writing this dissertation, which is what you are reading at present.

This decision seemed to work very well except when I began the analysis of my autobiographical works. I suddenly began to experience that same confusion and ‘stuckness’ which I had experienced in the beginning. I realised that again I was trying to be academic while also dealing with the very personal and intrusive process of looking inwards and reflecting on my deepest feelings and thoughts. It was at this time that I decided on analysing the documents in a third person which created sufficient distance between my autobiographical documents and myself. The use of the different voices that informed my sense of identity as a means of creating the distance worked remarkable well and I feel this may be a recommended means for others to approach similar studies.

The above-mentioned ‘stuckness’ has been present in my life and has been a part of my sense of identity for a very long time. In numerous contexts and experiences I have felt this inability to move forward or this restriction on my behaviour as a physical force preventing me from achieving my goals. I believe this affliction is directly linked with the self-narratives I relied upon and the cultural narratives that influenced these. If I think exclusively about the cultural narratives surrounding acceptable sexual practice and behaviour and the conflict I felt within myself because these practices and behaviours differed from my desires and drives, I now understand my ‘stuckness’ as a normal reaction to a difficult situation. The fear I experienced because of the conflicting

narratives in my life was so great that I suppressed and denied any and all thoughts, feelings, desires, dreams and drives which conflicted with the dominant narratives of the culture in which I grew up. The fear that I experienced in the past is by no means gone from my life. It is an ever present cloud which threatens to, and often does, influence my perception of myself and my potential. The benefit of this study is that now sometimes I am able to win the fight and chase away the clouds for a time.

As I sit and contemplate the experience of writing this dissertation I begin to see that the process of writing it and struggling through the difficulties I encountered, has had a profound effect on my sense of identity. I have realised the influence of the dominant narratives of my culture and family on my sense of identity, I have sought alternative narratives or unique outcomes which I could accept as replacements for these dominant narratives, and I have undergone slow but never-the-less on-going changes in my sense of identity. I can only hope that in some small way I have shown the reader the extent to which dominant narratives can affect an individual's life and the changes that can occur within a sense of identity should that individual attempt to seek alternative narratives to inform his life.

Even in this reflection I find that I am still reflecting on what I am writing and I discover that I am describing the process rather than my experiences and feeling in writing this dissertation. My fear and discomfort in functioning on this more emotional and reflective level is still present and I think will probably remain with me for some time to come. Being able to function on this level of course brings new fears and more discomfort but I find I am better able to own them now and so I cope better than I previously did. The advantage of having written this dissertation and reflected on the process of writing it is that I am far more aware of the intricate processes that take place within my sense of identity and that slowly I am gaining insight into the fear that has been present in my life and in my understanding of my sense of identity for so long.

As I look back on my past I realise that my sense of self was influenced deeply by the various contexts of my childhood and adolescence and the narratives of those contexts. I

realise that my internalising the narratives and dialogues surrounding homosexuals and their behaviour from the contexts I grew up in, resulted in me detesting and rejecting the feelings and desires I experienced. As I became exposed to alternative contexts like that of the gay community, I found that my feelings and desires were more acceptable and so my sense of identity began to change. Where before I have hated myself for having these inappropriate and unacceptable feelings, I now feel that these feelings and desires are more normal and acceptable. This is not to say that I have been able to, nor want to, reject all the narratives from the various contexts of my life. I have discovered that I have a choice as to what I accept and what I reject of the narratives in my life. I have also discovered that this journey I am on is by no means over and that each day I experience new and difficult realisations about my sense of identity some of which I am able to manage and change and some of which I battle to comprehend let alone accept. That said, becoming a part of the gay or homosexual sub-culture has opened up new and very challenging aspects of my sense of identity. Having realised that I can reject some of the prescription of the dominant narratives of the society I live in and even having done so, I now find myself faced with other dilemmas. The gay sub-culture also attempts to prescribe various behavioural and cognitive narratives and therefore restrictions onto its members. I have found that there are times when I am in conflict with a new set of subjugating narratives and this leaves me feeling confused and helpless. However, writing this dissertation has allowed me the opportunity to see that I am able to manage and change over time and that I have the strength to stand behind my self-narratives even if they conflict with those around me. The process and benefit of writing this dissertation will therefore stay with me long into the future.

Each day is for me a challenge and a fight to know my identity better and to understand my past better and to combine all this into a future where I can experience the freedom to be myself, the courage to explore my identity further and the drive to know my self as well as my self can be known. The following is a short piece I have written to signify where I find myself at the present time. This piece of writing ends this dissertation:

*This journey is a life-long one and fraught with many foes. Both outside ones and even ones within have challenged me thus far. It is not over, this complex trip, though to continue takes its toll, and I have not survived this lengthy voyage unhurt and unscathed. I've been battered and I've been bruised, I've been sad but I've also been soothed. I've found inner strength and I've found resolve when even I was ready to fold. I found love and found companionship and to me these are profound. I cannot predict the path I'm on only try to persevere. I may not reach the goals I've set but yet I'll strive for them. So this then is the end and also perhaps the start, of a new chapter, a new challenge, so to life I go with heart.*

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