"Changing Ourselves, Changing Others":

An Analysis of the Life Stories of Participants in a Training Course for Volunteers within a Non-Governmental Organisation in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa.

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Abstract

Gender-based violence has been recognized as a pressing mental health problem that is prevalent within South African society. Non-governmental organizations play a major role in addressing and highlighting the issue. These organizations make use of volunteers in order to assist in meeting their goals. The modernist perspective has been the dominant investigative mode when research into volunteers has been conducted. However, this study has been conducted with an emphasis on narrative. In its use of this constitutionalist and deconstructive perspective, it examines the identity of the research participants within the dominant social and cultural discourses that story their lives. This presents a major challenge to the modernist framework.

In examining the life stories of the participants an emergent nature of identity is noted. Through the process of storying their lives and ascribing meaning to their experiences and understandings, the participants engaged in a process of constructing their identity. This research recognizes that identity is both multi-sited and multi-storied. The emphasis on personal agency enables the participants to restory their lives in the light of challenging prevailing discourses. It is in this process of challenge that they re-author their lives and are in a position to change their own lives and the lives of others.

Introduction

Gender-based violence against women has been recognised as the most pervasive form of human rights violation throughout the world (Jacobs and De Gruchy, 1998). The World Health Organisation regards it as being a health issue deserving priority status. (WHO, 1997). It is "an area of critical importance for women's mental health" in South Africa (de la Rey and Eagle, 1997,p.150), and as such ought to be an essential component of any programme aimed at promoting mental health or preventing mental illness.

The present government has recognized the critical state regarding violence against women. President Mbeki in his Inauguration Speech on 16 June 1999, declared that "our days will remain forever haunted when frightening numbers of the women and children in our country fall victim to rape and other crimes of violence"(Mbeki, 1999,p2). In this address Mbeki pledged his government's support to efforts to end violence against women in this country. However the reality for many women who experience violence is that the government is unable to meet their needs for support, counselling and legal advice (Human Rights Watch/Africa, 1995). This is true of psychological services in the country as a whole. The legacy of Apartheid is a severely diminished and undersourced psychological service system for the entire population (Parekh, McKay & Petersen, 1997).

This paucity of psychological services, together with the recognition of the impact of patriarchal systems on women's lives has led to many feminist based non-governmental organisations being established to meet the needs of women experiencing gender-based violence. The efforts of these organisations in South Africa and worldwide has contributed to the issue being put on the national and international agenda. Growing awareness of violence against women has resulted in a range of initiatives that deal with the problem at almost every level of society (WHO, 1997). The great number of unmet community needs, a lack of trained professional counsellors and a shortage of fiscal resources has led to the mobilization of volunteer resources, whether in a full-time or volunteer capacity, to serve in these organisations (National Council for Mental Health, 1989). Thus volunteers play an important role in addressing the mental health needs of people within the South African context, and especially regarding issues of violence against women.

Given the importance of the context of gender-based violence in South Africa, the life stories of those who volunteer for work in non-governmental organisations working in this field are important. They provide an understanding of the meaning that these people give to their lives and ascribe to their becoming involved in addressing issues surrounding gender-based violence. However, studies concerning volunteers have focussed on the traits and characteristics of volunteers and thereby ignored seeing volunteering as an emergent process. As such the life stories of volunteers have been ignored. Hence this study's significance. What stories do these people privilege as they tell of what led them to volunteer within an organisation addressing issues of gender-based violence? What meaning do they give to their lives and experiences, and how is their identity constituted as participants on a training course for volunteers? This is the primary goal of the research.

Using a narrative focus this article examines the life stories of those who attended a training course in counselling skills, with the hope of working as a volunteer in a non-governmental organisation (NGO) in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa, and the meaning they ascribe to their participation. The NGO's activities focus on working with women and girl children who have experienced gender-based violence.

Gender-based violence against women in South Africa

Violence against women is defined for the purposes of this article as "any act of abuse perpetrated against women, intended or unintended, of verbal, emotional, psychological, sexual or physical form, which threatens to undermine the health and well being of the person" (Women's Health Project, 1995,p.68). To this definition I would include any form of spiritual abuse experienced by a woman. This violence occurs within three domains: the family, the community, and violence perpetrated by or condoned by the state. Gender-based violence affects all aspects of women's lives, having extensive consequences for both women's physical and psychological wellbeing.

Gender-based violence against women is regarded as endemic to South Africa and has been described as "the most extreme expression of the gender inequality that underscores social relations in contemporary South Africa" (Simpson and Kraak, 1998,p.2). It is recognized that studies conducted into the prevalence of gender-based violence in South Africa have produced differing and sometimes contradictory statistics. Numerous studies have shown how indifference and hostility on the part of police and judicial authorities, allied to perceived social and cultural prohibitions have made it certain that gender-based violence is under-reported (Bollen, Artz, Vetten & Louw, 1999; Human Rights Watch/Africa, 1995; Maboe, 1994; Vetten, 1995). There are thus no reliable official statistics on the incidence of violent attacks against women (Human Rights Watch/Africa, 1995). It has, however, been estimated that one in four South African women are victims of gender-based violence (Human Rights Watch/Africa, 1995; NICRO; 1999) and that South Africa has twice the incidence of rape as opposed to any other country for which statistics are currently available (Simpson and Kraak, 1998). Thus it has been concluded that excluding countries that are at war, South Africa presently has the highest level of violence against women in the world (Human Rights Watch/Africa, 1995).

The use of statistics and interpretations thereof, present a thin description of gender-based violence independent of intentions or circumstances (Denzin, 1994). They do not adequately represent the story of violence against women in the South African context. The use of numbers does not provide a description of the process and context of gender-based violence A thick description (Geertz, 1983) provides the context of the experience, the intentions and meanings that organize the experience and provide meaning. In order to attain a rich description of violence against women in South Africa an understanding of the story of gender-based violence, as being complex and multi-faceted is required. The recognition that is played out across political, economic, legal, social, cultural and religious dimensions must be made. Through this an understanding of how women's lives are constituted through violence and societal expectations is made possible.

The role of Non-Governmental Organisations in bringing about change

One of the major advocates for highlighting issues of gender-based violence and bringing it to the forefront of public and political attention has been the NGO community. Through their efforts, counselling and service centres have been established for victims of gender-based violence. They have promoted public education campaigns and have been instrumental in advocacy and lobbying for legal reform with regard to gender-based violence (World Health Organisation, 1997).

Korten (1990, p.115) identifies four strategies used by NGO's in the development "away from alleviating symptoms toward attacking ever more fundamental causes". He labels these strategies as generations. The first generation strategy employed by NGO's is direct service delivery to meet immediate needs. The NGO serves an active role while the community receiving help assumes a passive role. The second generation identified is the role NGO's play in small scale, local development through which the community is better able to meet their own needs. In this process the NGO mobilizes people, rather than doing the work themselves. Once NGO's begin to look further than the individual community and pursue policy changes at a local, national and global level, then they have entered what Korten (1990) refers to as the third generation. Korten (1990,p.121) describes this role as being that of "a catalytic foundation-like role, rather than as an operational service provider". The fourth generation that Korten (1990) identifies, looks further than seeking to change specific policies to energizing a critical mass of people to address issues of social transformation. Central to this concept of people centered development are ideals of psychological and political transformation. This is vital for "people's choice, stake and commitment to development" (Staudt, 1991,p.173)

Volunteer workers in Non-Governmental Organisations

Volunteers are a critical human resource for NGO's. The reasons given for their value in these organisations vary. The use of volunteers enables organisations to sustain and expand their current services (Cnaan and Goldberg-Glen, 1991). They foster better public awareness of and support for organisations, as well as creating commitment to the cause and goals of the organisation (Ilsley and Niemi, 1981; Jedlicka, 1990). Volunteers also promote grassroots participation, thereby harnessing community knowledge and understandings (Aplin, Baker, Fisher, Poole, Yeoman & Webber, 1982; Jedlicka, 1990). Their participation in this regard is important as Huntington argues that local people need to be treated as "the world's leading authorities" on their own life situation (cited in De Beer, 1997,p.22).

Korten (1990) further describes the value of volunteers and voluntary action. He argues that it is uncertain whether development NGO's will be effective in bringing about massive social transformation. It is voluntary action that will play a major role in effecting change. "If transformation is to come, it must come as a consequence of voluntary action, an act of human commitment to collective survival driven by a vision that transcends the behaviors conditioned by existing institutions and culture. We must look to people's movements as the key to transformational change in the current era" (Korten, 1990,p.105).

Studies of volunteerism have been modernist in orientation. They have focussed on three main areas: personality, motivation and promotion of long-term helping (Omoto and Snyder, 1995). Researchers have attempted to discover whether particular personality traits are common amongst volunteers (Pearce, 1993). Thus volunteers are described as having high levels of self-acceptance and self-confidence. They are thus less socially inhibited (Spitz and MacKinnon, 1993). They are emotionally stable (Burke and Hall, 1986). Volunteers are also described as having a greater sense of trust and persistence. They are also more socially conforming (Howarth, 1976; Smith and Nelson, 1975).

Motivation has been a central focus in studies of volunteers (Pearce, 1993). Researchers have attempted to answer the question: why, in the absence of obligation, do people volunteer? (Omoto and Snyder, 1995). Findings in these studies range across a wide variety of reasons. On the one hand the simple answer is that people volunteer because of altruistic motives. People volunteer because they want to help others and desire to be of service (Clary and Orenstein, 1991; Jenner, 1984). This view has, however, been challenged. Instead of focussing on altruism, researchers have recognised that career prospects, status, religious affiliation, the individuals' own experiences, belief in the organisation's goal, and egoistic motives dealing with perceived benefits to the volunteer, play an important role in their volunteering activities (Bonjean, Markham & Macken, 1994; Forst and Healy, 1991; Rubin and Thorelli, 1984). Rather it needs to be recognised that "volunteers entertain many different motives, or combination of motives, and that these might be extremely complex" (Ilsley and Niemi, 1981,p.5).

Researchers have also examined questions of how to retain volunteers once they have entered the organisation. Findings range from the importance of supervisors and continued training (Fisher and Cole, 1993) discussion on personality characteristics (Bonjean et al, 1994; Omoto and Snyder, 1995;), perceived rewards experienced by the volunteers (Rubin and Thorelli, 1984), satisfaction and goal congruence (Jenner, 1984).

However these understandings of the lives of those who volunteer do not adequately answer questions about volunteers and the process of their lives and experience. To better understand this view, the constitutionalist perspective will be used. The constitutionalist perspective refutes the modernist ideas of objectivity, essentialism and representationism which have impacted on previous studies of volunteers (White, 1996). From this perspective:

- It is not possible to have an objective knowledge of the world. People cannot avoid complicity in the production of their accounts of the world as knowledges are generated according to a particular discourse in specific cultures at specific times (White, 1996). To presume a subject matter's independent existence without recognizing the social processes of the discourse that describe it, leads to an objectification of the discourse that is not warranted (Gergen, 1997). Kvale (1997) argues that this constitutionalist perspective results in "the collapse of the universal meta-narratives", which objectify the truths and facts of our existence (p.34). It acknowledges that the story or text does not stand alone, behind every story is another story (Parry and Doan, 1994). Gallie (cited in Shotter,1997) argues that these concepts of modernism become "essentially contested concepts", that is, concepts about which their proper use involves endless disputes (Shotter, 1997,p.69). Thus Shotter (1997)

is able to argue that talk about motives becomes talk about the reasons for action, that is justifications offered by the individual to others (or to themselves) in rendering their actions appropriate in the context of the occurrence.

- All essentialist notions of human nature disguise the operations of power at work in the constitution of people's lives. Thus Foucault argues that the manner in which things are described cannot be separated from issues of power (Foucault, 1979; 1980). To this end the constitutionalist perspective makes it possible to examine the historical circumstances of inquiry, the roots, limits and sustaining power of the preferred discourse, as well as what it discourages (Gergen, 1997).
- The constitutionalist perspective suggests that the knowledges and practices of our culture, social structures and community of persons are "significantly determining" of our identity; our desires, motives, values, beliefs, and so on (White, 1996,p.174). The achievement of identity requires that persons be active in the negotiation of the different experiences of the ways of life and thought to be had at the different sites of culture, social structures and places in community of persons. This requires the interpretation of experience and the structuring of self-narrative. Thus this perspective emphasizes both agency and subject.

The constitutionalist approach thus invites the challenge of that which constitutes the taken-for-granted world. In Western psychology the existence of reason, memory, emotion, motive and the like is no longer questioned. However these terms are embedded in a discourse that favours certain sections of the population or describe patterns of conduct disparaging to others. With the objectification of such discourse the ossification of the social pattern occurs (Gergen, 1997). Therefore the need to de-objectify the 'truths' of life, to demonstrate their social and historical embeddedness and to explore their implications for social life and the authoring of identity. Instead of assuming a neutral position, the personal and political is conjoined (Gergen, 1997; Gilbert, 1980).

The use of a constitutionalist perspective for this research enables the research to focus on the reasons that the participants give to their participation in the training programme for volunteers. The context of the participants lives are also brought to bear on the research, as are their cultural sites of practice, social structures and their relationships with others. Narrative is used as the means to facilitate this research.

The use of narrative

The primary focus of a narrative approach is people's expressions of their experiences of life as they engage in interpretive acts. Consequently Gergen (1999,p.4) concludes that "life acquires meaning and happenings are suffused with significance". Meaning does not pre-exist the interpretation of experience. These stories also determine which parts of their experience people select for telling. The act of constructing a narrative, or "world making" as Bruner (1987,p.11) argues, is more than merely selecting events to include as part of the story and then placing them in the appropriate order. The events themselves are constituted in light of the overall narrative. They become functions of the story being told. The "narrative metaphor proposes that persons live their lives by stories - that these stories are shaping of life, and that they are real, not imagined, effects- and that these stories provide the structure of life" (White, 1991,p.28). The personal story people tell becomes the principal frame of intelligibility for our lived

experience. Thus Bruner (1987,p.15) concludes that we become the autobiographical narratives by which we “tell about” our lives. Our lives are thus a process of narrative interpretation. This interpretation is not private, locked in our individual minds. Rather, it is premised on an intersubjective exchange with others, based on the premise that we share a common world. It is the structure of this intersubjective exchange, its rules and means of operating, that is the foundation of what we call culture. Thus “our present identity is not a sudden or mysterious event, but a sensible result of a life story”(Gergen and Gergen, 1983,p.255).

Kenyon (1998,p.3) notes that it is more appropriate to speak of the '" 'stories' we are"' instead of speaking about the story of our lives. We favour different forms of stories at various times in our lives, according to the context we find ourselves in, and the reasons why the story is being told. Thus White (1991) concludes that our lives are multi-sited. We also live in a state of continuous construction and reconstruction of our lives; consequently our stories are also in a constant state of construction. White (1991) refers to this as our lives being multi-storied.

Bruner (1986) proposed that narrative is played out on a dual landscape. There is a landscape of action on which events unfold and there is the landscape of consciousness that consists of the inner worlds of the protagonists involved in the action. The landscape of action comprises events linked together in a particular sequence through time, according to a specific plot. This provides the reader of the text with a view of how the theme unfolds across events through time. It is this temporal feature of narrative which ensures that life is not merely "a meaningless drift" and history is not "just one damn thing after another" (Vogel, 1994, p.244). The notion of plot is important in this landscape, stories are not neutral, they are going somewhere; they have purpose (Kenyon, 1998). The landscape of consciousness comprises the interpretations of the characters in the story, and also of the reader as we are invited to share these stories. Perceptions, thoughts, speculations, realizations and conclusions dominate this landscape (White, 1991). It is here that people's beliefs or their way of life come to the fore, as well as the dispositions that characterize their lives.

Gergen (1999) argues that regarding language as fundamentally a derivative of social exchange recognizes the social function of narrative. Discourses about the world operate largely on the basis of social conventions, which are crystallized in terms of various rhetorical rules and options (Gergen, 1990) Negotiating social life in a successful manner means being capable of making oneself intelligible as an enduring, integral or coherent identity (Gergen and Gergen, 1993). Ultimately the terms in which the world and oneself are understood are social artifacts, products of historically situated exchanges and the result of “an active, cooperative enterprise of persons in relationship” (Gergen, 1985,p267). Life stories are highly susceptible to cultural, interpersonal, and linguistic influences. Thus the stories that people live by are constructed within their historical and cultural context in relation to communities of people and the social structures they come into contact with. This is the canonical dimension of which Bruner (1986) speaks. Thus, people's stories are framed by their dominant cultural knowledges, that which has been “deeply internalized” and by the “historically rooted institutions that a culture elaborates to support and enforce them”(Bruner, 1998,p.57). These are constructed knowledges that specify who people are and with whom they are in relationship. "Thus, the discursive creation of identity is more fundamentally a social undertaking"(Gergen, 1999,p.10).

White's defines his use of narrative therapy as a deconstructive method that subverts taken-for-granted truths and ways of being in the world (White, 1991). Hare-Mustin and Marecek (1989) further define deconstruction as exposing the ideology and cultural construction of concepts; thus it may be viewed as "a project of demystification that makes visible what is required to maintain hierarchy and opposition"(p.1333). White (1991) quotes Bordieu who argues that the methods of deconstruction "exoticize the domestic" and thus facilitates the "reappropriation" of the self (p.27). White (1991) interprets this as people becoming more aware of the way in which their lives are shaped by modes of thought and belief, and the way in which people can then be encouraged to engage in a process of re-authoring their lives, by choosing to live by other modes of thought and belief.

This process of re-authoring is also evident in his defining his narrative work as being constitutionalist in perspective (White, 1991). People's lives are shaped, constituted and embraced by the meaning they give to their being situated in social structures, language practices and cultural practices of the self. It includes the relationships into which these lives are recruited. Power is also highlighted as an important issue when examining how people's lives are constructed. People engage with particular practices of power and beliefs of the self and knowledge's about life that have been given or achieved the status of 'truth'. These practices have been negotiated over time within a cultural context. White (1996) argues that these dominant narratives come to reflect the 'truth' about human nature, the meaning of authenticity and people's identity and are internalised.

Personal identity and self-concept is an expression of a single unfolding and developing story through narrative configurations. It is through stories that people obtain a sense of their lives changing (Epston, White & Murray, 1992). This belief served as the basis for this research. The narrative understanding that people's lives are socially constituted is the major criticism of previous studies of volunteers. With regard to the study of volunteers, in their searching to discover universal meaning and objective understanding, previous studies have failed to recognise the emergent nature of becoming a volunteer. This is a phenomenon constructed in the process of each person's particular life, in their engagement with others, with social practices, and with the institutional practices of the NGO involved. Recognizing this emergent nature of becoming a volunteer, this research has a narrative focus and examines the descriptions of the identities of the participants in a training course for volunteers conducted within an NGO addressing issues of gender based violence.

The NGO hosting the Training Course for Volunteers

Despite political transformation in South Africa, social transformation has lagged far behind. NGO's have a major role to play in meeting the many needs that the government is unable to address and assist in the process of social transformation. This is especially true when discussing mental health needs in the country.

> *The previous government did not provide even the beginnings of a mental health service which ould meet the needs off an ordinary society, let alone one in which a high proportion of citizens had been exposed to the psychological distress and battering of apartheid, structural poverty, state repression and political violence. In a context where issues of safety, economic security (or the lack of it), housing, physical health*

> *etc are prioritised, the current health budget does not make sufficient allowance for the extraordinary mental health problems created by our particular sociopolitical situation. (Parekh, McKay & Petersen, 1997, pp. 128-129).*

The NGO studied in this research was established in 1996 in the Eastern Cape. The organisation was formed as a community-based service-oriented and issue-driven organisation (Ilsley and Niemi, 1981). The purpose of the organisation as set out in their Section 21 registration documentation describes the organisation as "an independent, non-racial educational Centre which aims to provide accessible counselling and support to survivors of sexual abuse, rape, battery and assault." This would be provided by

- Promoting crisis intervention through counselling, referrals and support.
- Providing in service training of counsellors and trainers
- Establishing community education and outreach programmes, and
- Being involved in advocacy and lobbying around issues related to the topic of women and violence.

Parekh et al (1997) argue that much of the work progressive NGO's have been involved in, has focussed on the first two of Korten's generations. The emphasis has been on service provision and community development. Thus many NGO's formed to address issues surrounding violence against women have provided counselling services and legal support. They have also conducted education and awareness raising campaigns. Some NGO's have gone further and extended their work to include working towards institutional change. This has meant becoming involved in advocacy work and lobbying governments and those in positions of power. The organisation studied in this research operates on the first three of Korten's (1990) four generations identified earlier. While some examples of fourth generation community organised programmes have been noted, at present much of the work is still driven by the organisation.

The organisation has engaged in a process of training volunteers to work alongside permanent staff as an additional counselling and community resource. Training programmes for volunteers have occurred twice yearly and course participants attend a weekly training session for three months. The NGO has trained 126 people through this programme. A local clinical psychologist and staff of the NGO conduct this training which concentrates on crisis intervention techniques and some work discussing issues of gender in the South African context from a Human Rights perspective. The course also serves as a selection process for those who would eventually be chosen to work as volunteers within the NGO. Those who train the course participants conduct the selection of volunteers. Consequently, not all those who participate on the training course are selected as volunteer counsellors within the organisation.

The research was conducted with those who attended the Counselling Training Course offered by the NGO between March and May 1999. Twenty-one women were accepted by the organisation for training. All of the twenty-one participants had read of the training course in the local newspaper and had applied to attend the course. The NGO had no formal application process in place

at the time this training course took place. Interviews with prospective candidates were not conducted. Rather positions on the course were booked by early payment of the nominal fee charged for attending the training. Previously men had attended the counselling course, but no applications had been received from men to participate in the course from which the research participants were chosen.

The NGO experienced numerous difficulties with the use of volunteers within the Organisation. It was decided during August 1999 to halt this process until further investigation into the recruitment, training and placement of volunteers was made. However, the fruits of previous training can be recognised in six of the full-time staff who first came to the attention of the NGO through the volunteer training process.

The Study

The research sought to investigate the life stories of those who attend a training course for volunteers within a NGO working with issues of gender-based violence, and the meaning they gave to their participation on the course

The sample consisted of the twenty-one participants on the training course. The ages of participants ranged from twenty-three years six months to sixty-three years eleven months. The mean age of all twenty-one participants was thirty-one years one month. There was only one participant older than forty-five years.

All twenty-one participants had Xhosa as their home language. Ten of the participants were married, while ten were unmarried. The marital status of one participant is unknown. All participants had completed High School and matriculated. Thirteen had gone on to tertiary studies, while five participants had received post-graduate qualifications. Sixteen of the participants live in the Greater East London magisterial area of the Eastern Cape, two live in Keiskammahoek and King William's Town respectively, while one lives in Alice.

The researcher initially briefly interviewed all twenty-one candidates to establish which of the participants hoped to work as a volunteer within the organisation. Sixteen of the candidates stated that their aim for wanting to attend the course was to work as a volunteer within the organisation. These initial interviews took place at the NGO and lasted 30 minutes. A total of eight training course candidates were randomly selected from the sixteen to participate in the research. All eight were unemployed and four of them were married. Six of the participants live in the Greater East London Magisterial area, while one participant each from Keiskammahoek and King William's Town Magisterial districts participated in the research. The mean age of the eight research participants was thirty years eleven months.

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In keeping with narrative ideas, the research was recognised as being a collaborative process between the researcher and participants. The process depended on an active, self-determining narrator to supply a story, while the co-narrator supported and encouraged these narrators telling their stories.

The research was conducted with the use of methods outlined by Bruner (1998, 1986) for "eliciting subjectively relevant accounts of life" (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997,p.148). The participants were asked to construct spontaneous verbal autobiographies describing how they came to offer to work as a volunteer in the NGO. Bruner (1998,p.121) writes that an autobiography "is an account given by a narrator in the here and now about a protagonist bearing his (sic) name who existed in the there and then, the story terminating in the present when the protagonist fuses with the narrator." However, there is more to it than this. The story also justifies why it was necessary for a life to develop in a particular way. "The Self as narrator not only recounts but justifies"(Bruner, 1998,p.121), This encourages the participant to engage in meaning making by recounting the narrative of the lives. Thus each participant was asked to describe her life story that had led her to volunteer. This is in line with Kvale's belief that the object of the research interview is to obtain "spontaneous, rich descriptions of where the subjects themselves provide what they experience as the main dimensions of the phenomenon investigated" (Kvale, 1995,p.154).

Once each participant had told her story, I asked questions to clarify events, meanings and understandings in order to come to a richer, thick description of each participant's story. These questions were based on what Kvale (1995,p.154) has named the "red lights" in a person's telling of their life history. These were the use of any unusual terms, strong vocal emphases, and repeated statements and phrases. The use of Xhosa terms and ascribed cultural behaviours were cases in point. While I had a sense of what the terms meant, I constantly clarified whether my understandings were what the participants meant with their use of these terms. At no time did I introduce any concepts into the discussion with each volunteer that they had not first brought up. The telling of the participants' life stories ranged from an hour-and –a half to two hours fifteen minutes in length. Whereas initial interviews were conducted within the organisation, these interviews took place at neutral venues agreed to by the participants and myself.
These stories were taped with the permission of each participant and then transcribed. After the transcripts were completed the accuracy of each transcript was verified by comparing it to the audio record of the interview. This was vital as "words provided the fundamental data on which all analysis would be based" (Mergendollar, 1989,p.124).

Following Gergen (1994,pp.189-193) the following characteristics of the structure of the life stories of the participants were of importance for the stories to acquire credibility "as a teller of truth" (p.189). Reference to 'truth' does not imply that the story is factually driven. Rather truth telling is governed by a forestructure of narrative conventions that are culturally and historically contingent. The narrative conventions that were examined as structuring the participants' stories included:

(a) In order for the story to be acceptable it needed to establish a valued endpoint, namely volunteering to work within an organisation addressing issues of gender-based violence.

(b) In order for the story to be intelligible the events recounted and meanings ascribed needed to make the outcome of the story more or less probable.

(c) Once the endpoint has been decided upon and the events selected to fit this endpoint, these events are to be organised within an ordered arrangement.

(d) The participant's identity must be continuous or coherent within the narrative.

(e) Explanations for the outcome of the narrative must be woven into the story.

(f) Signals were used to indicate the beginning and end of the story.

The use of narrative components is important in creating a sense of the reality of accounts. To this end, Rosenwald and Ochberg argue that the way in which

> *individuals recount their histories - what they emphasize and what they omit, their stance as protagonists and victims, the relationship the story establishes between teller and audience - all shape what individuals can claim of their own lives. Personal stories are not merely a way of telling someone (or oneself) about one's life; they are the means by which identities are fashioned (cited in Gergen, 1994,p.193).*

The use of these structural issues of narrative allows the examination of the structures of these stories according to dominant cultural forms of stories and the stories themselves.

The following interpretive process was followed in this research:

The transcribed stories were continually read until the researcher believed he was fully acquainted with the participants' stories. During this reading the researcher identified common themes which emerged from the data and delineated "the commonalties of the participants' experience" (Mergendollar, 1989,p.126) as narrated in their life stories.

Once these themes were isolated, a reading guide was generated to interpret the data further. The reading guide has been developed as a means of textual analysis in order to provide deeper insights into the actions and beliefs of those participating in the research. This is achieved by extracting "those features of texts that clarify the meaning of the text. It involves generating a set of questions through which the data are read. The reading guide brings an order to the interview and … facilitates the exploration of data" (Gilbert, van Vlaenderen & Nkwinti, 1995,p.231). The reading guide is further important because it assists in recognizing the narrative structure of the data as well as placing importance of the contextual aspects of the data (Brown, Tappan, Gilligan & Argyris, 1989).

The forestructure used in determining the reading guide was based on the idea of narrative as storied by Michael White. White (1991) applies his deconstructive and constitutionalist perspective to the knowledges that people live by, to the cultural practices of self and relationships, and to the discursive practices of professional culture through examining practices of knowledge. Thus his discussion is organised around narrative, practices of power and practices of knowledge. In order to discuss the dominant identity the participants gave meaning to in their life stories, the narrative perspective identifies the need to examine the manner in

which this identity has been constituted by the meaning they have ascribed to their being situated in social and cultural practices, the historical context and the relationships they have been recruited into.

The reading guide used in analyzing the life stories of the volunteers included three questions:

1. The narrative approach recognizes that identity is multi-sited and that the life story each participant tells is related to the context in which it is being told. To this end the participant chooses which stories to include and which to discard when telling their story. These stories provide meaning for people's lives and define their identity within the particular site of the research. What is the dominant story revealed in each woman's telling of their life story as they participated in the research process?
2. The narrative approach argues that people's lives are constituted within their social structures. What are the historical and social contexts identified in the life stories of the participants? How have these contexts influenced the meaning that the participants give to their participation on the training course? What impact do they have on the changing lives of the participants in the research?
3. The narrative approach believes that people's lives are constituted in their relationships with others, which determine the cultural practices of the self. What significant relationships does each participant describe? What events are described in this relationship and what meaning does the participant ascribe to this person's influence on their life? What role do these relationships have in providing meaning to the participants changing life stories?

This guide was applied to each interview and the evidence collated across these records.

The researcher later met with all eight participants after the research was completed to discuss the process and engage with them with regard to any queries or comments they might have had. During this time the researcher and participants engaged in a discussion around the naming of their life stories and this research. The debriefing was not used as part of the data analysis as it was felt that this would militate against the richness of individual life stories.

The use of a reading guide enabled the generation of the ideas concerning the plots of the participants' stories and the events and experiences that comprised their life stories. However, the reading guide is not used to direct the manner in which the data obtained is presented in this research.

<u>"Changing ourselves, Changing others": the stories of the research participants</u>

The title of this research "Changing ourselves, Changing others" was determined by and chosen for this research by the participants during our debriefing session. This naming of the research process emerged as a statement of the meaning they attributed to their identity as participants on the training course. It implies a movement from a previously held position of the meaning they gave to their lives to a new and different position. This process can be regarded as the participants engaging in a process of re-authoring of their lives.

Initially I had thought of using the title “Lives of Triumph” to name the life stories of the participants. However, this view was challenged by two thoughts. Firstly, if the research was truly narrative in outlook, then the researcher was not entitled to make a decision alone. Rather it needed to be done in collaboration with the research participants. Secondly, Pressman’s (1994) concern that white researcher’s often glamourise the lives of Black female participants in triumphal terms and do not recognise this as strategies to cope with an oppressive structural system was also taken into account. Thus the researcher invited the participants to engage in a process of naming the story of their lives as participants in the research. Through this process, it was decided that the dominant story of their lives was one of overcoming difficulties and survival. This had two results. First, the participants were able to alter their perception of their own lives. Second, the participants were able to describe their identity in relation to assisting other women who experienced violence. Thus the title "Changing ourselves, Changing others" was constructed.

White (1991) believes that through engaging in externalizing conversations which "exoticize the domestic", people are enabled to identify the private stories they live by and which guide their lives and speak to them of their identity. Part of this process includes naming a problem or story. The therapeutic use of externalizing conversations is to engage in a process of re-authoring the person's life in order to generate alternative stories. Entering into the process of naming their life story with the participants provided them with an opportunity to reflect on their lives and how they have been constituted. It also provided an opportunity for the researcher to discuss his understanding of the meaning they give to their lives as expressed through their life stories and results of his analysis.

The researcher recognised two different plots in the stories the eight participants told about their lives. Each participant’s story fitted into one of these two plots. The first plot began with the participants recognising themselves as participants on the training course and choosing life events to tell the story which fitted in with their identity. They chose events from their lives that highlighted the obstacles and difficulties they had experienced in order to reach the point of joining the training course. Whereas the focus in the second plot was on changing others, the emphasis in the first plot was on the change that occurred in the participants themselves that enabled them to join the course; the "Changing ourselves" section of the story that was named. The stories of three research participants were structured in this way, namely B., D. and E.

The second plot began with the participants narrating their life story beginning with their early family history. Their stories culminated in their joining the volunteer training programme. These stories emphasised their position of relative personal strength and ability that led them to join the training course. The main focus of their wanting to be part of the training group was a desire to help others. The meaning they gave to their lives as participants in the training course was "Changing others". The stories of five research participants were structured in this manner. These were A., C., F., G. and H.

While many of the events named included similar events and actions, the meaning that was given to these events and experiences were different. For example, in the second plot the meaning the participants gave to the violence they had personally experienced

and witnessed revolved around a realisation of the needs of other women that needed assistance. While in the first plot, issues surrounding personal violence were highlighted to show the difficult circumstances that the participants had to overcome in the personal lives.

Each plot also discussed issues surrounding personal agency in differing ways. The second plot saw emphasis being placed on what the participant had achieved in order to assist them to help others. While in the first this agency was directed towards assisting the re-authoring of the person's story of changing their own life.

The events and experiences which the participants recognised in their stories as constituting their identity as participants on the training course will be discussed in relation to the two different plots recognised in the stories of the participants. These plots have not been conflated. While events and experiences may be similar the meaning given is different according to the plot of the story. For ease of writing and reading I have called those whose stories were structured according to the first plot discussed Group 1 and those whose stories were structured according to the second plot, group 2.

Narrative forms

Gergen (1994) suggests that a virtual infinity of possible narrative forms exists, but that due to the "extingencies of social coordination, certain modalities are favored over others in various historical periods" (p.195). He argues that all plots can be converted to a linear form with reference to their evaluative shifts across time. This allows three rudimentary forms of narrative to be isolated; namely the stability, progressive and regressive narrative. Within these narrative forms the dominant story of each participants' narrative is recognised. The stability narrative is defined as linking events in such a manner that the individual's trajectory remains essentially unchanged with reference to a particular goal or outcome. This contrasts with the progressive and regressive narratives. The progressive narrative links events so that the movement is incremental towards the goal or outcome defined, while in the regressive narrative the movement is decremental.

Plot 1: A Progressive narrative

Each of the stories told by those in Group 1 can be considered as a progressive narrative. The demarcation of the end of their life stories occurred with them describing themselves as overcoming issues and expectations regarding their identity that confronted them. They were thus enabled to join the training course. This was what Gergen (1994) refers to as the valued endpoint of the story. However, the path to this outcome was not without difficulty. Participants identified issues of individual concern (personal suffering and violence), their historical and social context (economic and social hardship), and dominant cultural and structural practices (family relationships, gender roles of women) as causing difficulties in their lives. For each of them these were alternate stories of their identity which had to be re-authored in order to reach the endpoint of their life story as told during the research process.

E.'s story is an example of a progressive narrative. Her story begins with her being a participant on the training course. She spoke of the difference this had made to her as an individual. She then spoke of her community and social context and the violence she experienced as a member of her community. Her story then moved to the difficulties in her husband's family home, which she contrasted with her formative years in her own family. She returned then to the difficulties she faced with her husband's family's reaction to her daughter. She returned to her social context, before finishing her story by referring to her participation on the training course.

This series of progressive-regressive phases as conceptualised by the participants experiences of the past as a series of difficulties to be overcome in order to reach the present is recognised as a *heroic saga* (Gergen, 1994). This in no way implies that the participants have reached a stage of self-actualisation or self-realisation or any other term traditionally ascribed to people's lives. The participants in this research experience their identity as being multi-sited and multi-storied. However, for the purposes of this research, each identified herself as being in a position where she had managed to overcome these often contradictory 'selves' and all that had been part of their construction. Their lives were in the process of being changed through their participating in the training course. No longer were they bound by what others thought of them or the manner in which they believed others expected them to behave. Rather, their use of phrases such as "I decided to go on the course, because the course can help me" (E.); "I decided to do something about my life" (D.), and "I am making something for myself [through being a participant on the course], a new life, a better one for me and my kids" (B.), emphasise their own choices and the manner in which they were involved in changing their lives.

Plot 2: A Stability Narrative

The stories of those belonging to group 2 can be regarded as a stability narrative. The stories that they told all concern their desire to help change the lives of women experiencing gender based violence. This wish to help others is recognised as defining their identity throughout their lives. They define their lives in relation to others and the people they have learned from. This is seen in family life (the example of a matriarchal figure); in social life (their experiences with their friends and others) and in the meaning they ascribe to personal and witnessed experiences of violence.

Thus the trajectory of their story remains essentially unchanged with reference to their particular goal of helping others throughout their narratives. The meaning they ascribe to their experiences serves to sustain this construct of their identity. It also sustains the particular construct of the lives of others. Thus the participants continually speak of other women as "victims" (F. and C.), and as "people who really need help"(G.).

The life story that A. told is an example of a stability narrative. Her story began with growing up in the Transkei and the difficulties she encountered. Her story shows how from this time she began to see her identity as linked to helping others. This

extends through difficulties of feeling out of place at home, to her dealings with her friends and social context. Her story ends with her being part of the training group at the NGO.

It can be argued that the research participants find themselves at the upper end of the stability continuum. Thus the participants were able to say, "I always wanted to help people with their problems, and so I wanted to join to help women facing abuse"(F.). "I want to save others" (C.). "I have seen my community turned upside down and I wanted to make it right again" (A.). The implications of these stability narratives for the future of each participant involve them continuing to define their lives in relation to others and their desire to help others.

A continuous identity

Gergen (1994) argues that one of the characteristics of an intelligible narrative is that the participants' identity is continuous or coherent within the narrative. This is clearly evident in the second plot, described as a stability narrative. The participants' identity as "changing others" can be seen as being evident throughout their lives and the story they tell. The difficulties that are mentioned are told to illustrate the participants' own capabilities to assist others.

However one of the exceptions to the need for a continuous or coherent identity is if the storyteller is explaining any change that may occur across time. In Group 1, one of the consequences of the heroic saga of each participant was the development of an alternative story of their identity. The result of their experiencing and overcoming difficulties helped to restory the meaning they ascribed to their lives in the research situation. Each of the participants was thus engaging in a process of re-authoring their lives. They were challenging the dominant stories that constituted them and through the stories they told of their lives ascribed new meaning to their identities. This illustrates the narrative belief that our lives are continually being constructed. Our 'selves' are not fixed but rather the product of the meaning we give to our lives as we story them.

In order to understand the development of this re-authoring of identity that occurred within the stories of each research participant, an understanding of the manner in which their identities were described as being socially constituted needs to be discussed. Their narratives provided evidence of the role that historical context, social structures, prevailing cultural beliefs, and relationships have in constituting people's lives and defining their 'selves'.

The impact of culture

All eight participants identified themselves as belonging to the Xhosa culture and community. However that was where the similarity between the two groups ended. Those in Group 2 gave their belonging to their culture a positive meaning. They expressed a pride in their belonging to a long and impressive history, in having strong links with the past that continued into the present. However, culture was not something that existed on its own and could not be challenged. Their stories highlighted

instances in which they believed that their culture had been perverted and misused by men in order to bring about their way. They defined their identity as Xhosa women in a positive light.

This was the opposite of the view of those of Group 1. They experienced the definition of the gendered role of women within Xhosa culture as one of being inferior to men. They did not enjoy the same privileges and opportunities that were enjoyed by men, simply because they were women. The role of a 'good' woman was defined according to her meeting the established cultural and social standards of what a woman should be and how she should behave. Their identity was defined in relation to the needs and wishes of men. This involved maintaining the home and looking after the interests of their male partners and children. They described themselves as being economically dependent and susceptible to gender-based violence because of the construction of their gender within their culture. The participants raised the belief that men were the dominant gender and thought that they were able to own women. Women were regarded as being the possession of men, who had the right to beat them if they did not ascribe to this role of being a 'good woman'. The role of women was thus described according to an essentialist outlook in which their biological sex determined their value and possibilities for their lives. Thus the identity of women according to the dominant cultural norm is developed within social relations of inequality (Richters, 1994).

The identity of the participants of Group 1 was in-part determined for them according to accepted ways of acting within the Xhosa tradition. Families played an important role in transmitting these values to the participants, especially through the examples of their mother's or female family relatives. These female role models had already been recruited into the dominant cultural narrative of a woman's role and identity. Thus the participants learned that being female brought with it certain tasks and obligations which they were expected to carry out. This often had to be done at personal expense. As women, their lives were interpreted and evaluated against this prevailing cultural discourse of women and the meaning ascribed to their lives. Those who deviated from this discourse were judged to be aberrant or problematic. This was a powerful way in which their lives as women were constituted.

B. spoke of her relationship with a previous boyfriend. She said he believed that it was his right to get her to do whatever he wanted her to do. "He was always expecting me to do something for him and in the process I'll suffer. That's where I learned to sacrifice everything I had because my mom told me if I don't do things like that then people are going to start saying I'm not a good woman." Thus in B.'s life we can see how the canonical rules of behaving within her culture were passed on to her by her mother. Her ideas were not simply of her own invention, but part of the culturally constituted way of looking at lives and giving meaning to it. In order for B. to be regarded as a "good woman", it necessitated her sacrificing parts of her life to meet his wishes and needs. Thus her story highlights the constitutive power of the dominant cultural discourse.

While recognising the ways in which the self-regulation of women's lives was practiced, this was not the only reason why they defined themselves as good Xhosa women and acted accordingly. To act in another manner meant the possibility of being beaten

or abused. Living their lives as a 'good woman' was not merely understood as a cultural imperative by the members of Group 1, but also a survival requirement. This idea of a 'good woman' was transformed in the telling of their stories. In order for the participants to change themselves, they had to move away from accepting the canonical view to a new definition of their identity as a 'good' Xhosa woman. The 'good woman' became transformed into a courageous and capable woman, no longer dependent on others. She is capable of making decisions and caring for her own life and the lives of those she loves.

The two groups differed on their understanding of the manner in which violence was culturally sanctioned. For those in Group 1, the Xhosa culture gave the right to men to act in a violent manner towards his partner. However, Group 2 challenged this view. They did not ascribe violence against women to culture, but rather to the perversion and misuse of culture by men. Culture was used as an "excuse" by men to beat their partners (F.).

C. argued, "I wouldn't say it's a culture thing.... I don't want to say culture because there is a saying in Xhosa that says 'you can't beat a woman because we would not then make a home. So I wouldn't say it's our culture." C.'s view of culture is that of a moral force. I believe that the purpose behind C.'s argument was her trying to reconstruct the breakdown of moral thought and behaviour in contemporary society. Thus her statement need not be viewed as an empirical one, but rather as a rhetorical device to challenge those who invoke cultural traditions as fixed, but distort them for their own ends.

Recognising C.'s view of culture as a moral force links with Geertz (1993) who argues that "culture is the fabric of meaning in terms of which human beings interpret their experience and guide their action; social structure is the form that action takes, the actually existing network of social relations" (p.145). Geertz (1993) further argues that people's lives are "suspended in webs of significance" that they themselves have spun (p.5). These webs he refers to as culture. He argues that social events, behaviours or processes cannot be ascribed to culture. Rather culture is a context, within which people's lives can be thickly described, that is they are able to be examined with reference to the manner they are produced, perceived and interpreted, and without which they would not exist. Geertz (1993) argues that culture is an enacted public document. The symbols and language employed within a particular culture do not merely refer to objects, but are constitutive of the culture. Thus people's actions both constitute and provide meaning. In line with this understanding, Howard (1991) argues that culture can be viewed as a community of individuals who share particular interpretations as central to the meaning of their lives and actions.

G. argued that while she was proud of her culture "there [were] things that should be digged up, if it's culture to beat a woman there are things to be thrown away". Her view was that despite the constitutive power of culture and the meta-narratives that it appealed to for justifying itself, culture is not fixed, but dynamic. Culture can be changed if there were ways of being that were harmful. F., who said, "people must be told that this part of culture is not the right thing", supported this.

The belief expressed by the participants of Group 1, that gender-based violence is sanctioned by prevailing cultural values was further strengthened by their experiences in attempting to address issues of violence within their families in accordance with culturally accepted mechanisms. According to Xhosa cultural practice a woman is entitled to go to her husband's relatives in order to seek recourse if her husband acts in abusive ways. If nothing comes from this then she is entitled to report this behaviour to the clan leaders and the emissaries who participated in the marriage arrangements (Holomisa, 1999). However, to argue that these mechanisms are impartial judges within the situation is to deny their cultural and social context. Their lives are also socially constituted and their outlook "shaped through the cultural weave of community discourse" (Madigan, 1999,p.2). These mechanisms also form part of a conservative construction of the dominant community discourse. The experiences of participants in this research however reveal that these cultural mechanisms uphold the prevailing cultural discourse regarding men's power as expressed in gender-based violence against their partners. This conception of male privilege and the negative construction of women's identity were adhered to regardless of the circumstances regarding the behaviour of the male in the relationship.

However, again a difference was noted in the manner in which the stories surrounding traditional practices were told. The purposes of the stories highlighted different issues across the two groups. For Group 1, these stories were used to highlight the personal difficulties that the participants had experienced and which had limited their definition of themselves. In Group 2, these stories were told to highlight personal strength and determination to help others. The ability to challenge prevailing notions of culture was also illustrated. One example from each of the plot forms will be discussed.

E.'s story will be used as an example from Group 1. She spoke of the difficulties she was experiencing in her relationship with her husband and mother-in-law. She also mentioned that she was not allowed to go and work, and was confined to the home. However, going to her husband's family was not an option for her, and she was unable to return to her own parents for what she described as cultural issues. She said that as a newly wed in her family, she has "got no word…. I've got no words." Her voice had been silenced the moment she was married. She was unable to raise any protest about the behaviour of her husband towards her. She was expected to accept what happened: "I must just do what they tell me and keep quiet".

E. also highlighted the traditional Xhosa practice of *lobola* (the payment of a bride-price to the man's future wife) as a contributory factor to a negative construction of women's identity (Simons, 1997, Watts, Osman & Win, 1995). She said that men believed that they had bought the women and thus they were their possession to be treated any way they liked. This practice also made it difficult for a woman to return home if her husband beat her. D., who said "in some cases they (the parents of the bride) use that lobola because there is no money now, no cows (as they have no other possessions to use)", supported E.'s words. "Before there were cows, but now there is nothing and all parents they use the money". Thus these participants argued that as women they were trapped into an inferior identity because of this practice. Whereas the position of the male in the dominant cultural narrative was that of privilege and the power to effect their will (Simpson, 1999), there was an element of resigned pessimism of the identity of women within these relationships and the gendered power structures which operates. E. summed it up

by saying, "In our culture the wife has always been beaten and you must stay whilst you are beaten, because there are some laws that you are going to die as in this home. You must never go."

The meaning F. gave to events in her life were in marked contrast to those of E. Whereas E.'s story told of pain and hardship, and a negative identity as a woman in the Xhosa culture, F.'s story emphasised a woman's ability to challenge prevailing cultural structures. This led to a more positive identity within the culture.

F. told of how her mother, after being repeatedly battered by her father, went “to the relatives and the other family members” to ask for them to intervene in the situation. The children had also been subject to his abuse. However, the elders instead of condemning the violence sided with her father. "They said she must not talk when the man is talking. She must accept whatever he is doing, whether it is right or wrong". This despite F. describing her mother as follows: "my mother is swollen all over, and is having the blue eyes, and she looks so terrible". F.’s mother continued in the relationship and so did the battery. She went again to the elders of the family, and once again they ignored her pleas to get her husband to stop beating her.”

If F.'s mother had decided to hold to the prevailing cultural dictates of the means for dealing with problems, she would have stayed in the marriage. However, she did not do this. F. spoke in quieter, almost reverential tones, when she spoke of her mother’s decision to leave her husband and bring an end to the abuse she was experiencing. "My mother got us together, and said we were going. She said that it was no good for us to be like this [beaten] all the time. We were going to a better life. We were all scared, but she took us (F. stops talking, while tears are visible in her eyes)…she took us and we left. She was a very strong woman." Despite attempts by her father to get F.'s mother back, she refused to go home. The elders also came and asked her to return home, but "she told them she was not going back. It was their fault she had stayed, and she was not ever going back to him".

It was this example which illustrated for F. the need to assist women and children experiencing violence and abuse. F. said " I think I can save people by telling them their rights. That they can…if they are in a abusive relationship they can be saved". F.'s participation on the course was to enable her to carry out this hope that her mother had modeled to her. The events surrounding prevailing cultural practices were similar for E. and F. however, the meaning these events were given differed. The end-point of the story influenced the manner in which their stories were told and the identity they described.

A further example of the different meanings participants gave to similar events in seen in stories of children whose father was not the man the mother married. According to Xhosa culture children are the responsibility of the mother and her family and are not to be brought into the new family being established (Holomisa, 1999). The issuer of girl children’s position in culture was raise twice during the interviews. A. was a member of Group 2, while E. a member of Group 1.

In A.'s case she was born before her mother married, the child of another man. Because of this she had to go and live with her grandmother as she was not welcomed into the mother's new home, before being moved to the home of her mother's brother. Eventually the abuse of her uncle and aunt led to her being taken into the mother's home. However, she was never able to feel a member of the family. She always felt like an "outsider".

If A. had left this story there it may have been viewed as a negative influence in her life. However, A. continues to give this event a more positive outlook. She spoke of how this experience had made her more aware of others who were in similar situations. She linked up with four girls at her school who she discovered were experiencing similar difficulties. These friendships enabled her to cope with the difficulties at home. "They made me feel good about myself, we were very close. We used to study and do things together. Sometimes they would come to the house and we would play some games and talk." I asked what she had learned most from these friends. She replied " I felt like I belonged somewhere and they loved me. We used to dream of what we would become when we were adults". It was at this time that A.'s dream to help others started surfacing. She decided with the support of her friends that she would study to become a Social Worker, "I like to help people and I love people and my friends always encourage me to become one because they said I would be good at it." However, financial difficulties meant that A. was never able to fulfil these dreams. But she said the wish to help others always stayed with her. She had "gone through pain and now I wanted to show others they could change their lives and that there were others who supported them". Attending the training course would enable her to meet this dream of "becoming a counsellor to help other people".

Whereas A. spoke from the position of herself as a child and how her identity as a helper was constituted, E. spoke from the position of a mother. Her first child, a daughter, was born from another man, before she met and married her present husband. E .says it is difficult for her to take the child and go and live in her husband's home. One of the reasons that she gave for this difficulty was that "they said me, as a that (pause while E. begins to cry) I want to feed this girl with their brother's money, many things like that." The family also behaves in an abusive manner towards E.'s daughter if she is present in the home. E. contrasted this behaviour towards her daughter with the family's behaviour towards her husband's son. This son was born to another mother before he married E. Yet E. argued the son has been assimilated into the family, despite the child's mother being capable of looking after him. E. is expected to treat the boy well and like he is her own child.

E. includes these events describing discrimination towards her daughter on the basis of gender as illustrating her being recruited into a position of powerlessness within the family and her understanding of her identity being constituted as being inferior within the relationship and culture.

The belief that their lives were being defined in negative terms meant that the participants of Group 1, described experiences where they believed that the violence and abuse they experienced was their own fault. Part of changing their lives was to recognise these instances and construct alternate stories.

Discourses privilege certain understandings and inhibit or deny other perspectives by referring to meta-narratives. Thus their power is regarded as being normal and natural. Holland, Lachiotte, Skinner & Cain (1998) argue that one of the ways in which this internalised regulatory mechanism is seen is through the evaluative discourse of inner censure which has helped to divorce women from each other. Women accept the definition of what constitutes a 'good woman' in order to avoid negative evaluations of themselves. Thus blame is ascribed to women if they are beaten. It is their fault, they have provoked or even supported and encouraged the violence (Jenkins, 1997). This is evident in B.'s story. She spoke of how she believed that men's violence was appropriate given that women do not fulfill their accepted roles and values, that is, women are not being the 'good woman'. Thus B. argued that she previously believed that "if women are beaten it means that they are wrong". Violence is regarded as being the "normal" and acceptable response of men towards women in this situation (Jenkins, 1997).

The constitutive power of this discourse is further recognised in the belief that if a woman is beaten, it means that the man who perpetrated the abuse loves her and wants what is best for her. D. said, "some people think that if a man ignores what his wife does wrong, it shows he is not interested in her life". This is perhaps one of the most pernicious ways that patriarchal power regulates the lives of women. Gender-based violence is recognised as being for the benefit of women, and its role as a mechanism of social control privileged by the dominant cultural discourse goes unchallenged (Pressmann, 1994). However, the participants in their life stories challenged this view of gender-based violence being a reflection of male interest and love. E. summarized their challenge by arguing "that's not love, beatings is not love. Beat you by sticks and some women by sjamboks, at the end of the day to say I beat you because I love you…[she silently shook her said, as if saying 'no, that's not love']".

The Group 1 participants used these stories of violence and abuse as a literary device to return to their identities as participants on the training course that they had begun their stories with. By illustrating their opposition to these beliefs these participants showed the manner in which they were changing their own lives. They were no longer bound by the traditional and dominant cultural understandings that had constructed their identity. They were in the process of re-authoring their lives. This was the major importance of being a participant on the training course. Their stories illustrated how they were overcoming the beliefs and values which had, in D's words, "made me think I was so bad and useless for such a time". It enabled them to put this re-authoring into effect in their lives. This meaning is different to that of Group 2, who used stories of culture to illustrate and confirm their desire to help women who were experiencing violence.

The impact of context

The narrative approach recognises that the stories people live by have been constructed within a particular history and context of social structures and institutions, and in relationship to others (White, 1991). People's stories cannot be separated from their historical context. The history of South Africa, which underlies the lives of all participants, is that of the movement of South Africa from the oppression of Apartheid to democracy. A history of colonialism, apartheid and armed struggle, social destruction

and economic impoverishment has all contributed to a society tortured by violence. The identities of the participants in this research have been constituted in a gender system that has been socially and politically structured.

However as with cultural issues, the meanings given to events and experiences within the participants' social and historical context differ across the groups. For group 2, the meanings ascribed relate to helping others. The following story told by A. illustrates this. A. described her experience as a young woman during the struggle for Liberation thus. "It was a time when nothing else was important other than changing the country, getting rid of Apartheid. All the things we did was meant to help getting rid of the *Boers*. This was what we had to hope for, not hope for ourselves. One day coming back home after school, I was stopped by a group of comrades. They pushed me around, and swore at me and called me names. I went home crying, but was told that they were comrades fighting [the Nationalist government] and that I must not say anything. I must just not go that way again."

Although she was told not to say anything A. informed her friends of this incident. "I told them that they, must also be careful. We had heard some stories of other things happening to girls too. I told them so that maybe it would not happen to them."

Thus A. experienced her individuality being subsumed by the struggle to end Apartheid. Her personal experiences were not seen as sufficient to challenge the prevailing social discourse of liberation. However, by not keeping quiet and through sharing her experience with her friends she engaged in a process of subverting the silence surrounding such incidents (Maboe, 1994).

The social contexts the participants lived in were also discussed in similar terms. The emphasis in group 2's stories was not on making a difference in their own lives, but the focus instead was on the community and they placed greater emphasis on the situation of others. F. spoke of the situation in her community thus: " People are victims first of all. The victims of crime. Children are abused. Women are abused. And then there is lots of diseases. The community is just upside down". For these five participants the meaning given to the context they described focussed on themselves as "helpers" (A.; C.; F. and H.); saviours (F.) and "providers" (A.; F. and G.). They discussed their identities in relational terms. These descriptions also provided evidence of personal skills and abilities that they could share with others.

This was also seen in the description of growing up in contexts of rural poverty given by two members of Group 2. They spoke of difficulties with regards to attending school, and shortages of basic necessities like food and clothing. However, both G. and H. spoke of the achievements during and despite these difficult times.

G. fell pregnant while in Standard Six. She left school and found part-time work to support her and her baby. After working for five years she went back to school and continued to tertiary training. G. looked back over her early life and concluded, "I'm very proud of me. I didn't know that I'd be here [on the course] because of my life as a child of poor parents."

Her experiences while growing up in the rural Eastern Cape taught H to be independent. She lived with her grandmother, who was able to provide very little for the family. Her mother was a teacher and she was only home during weekends. H. recounts these times and her response to the difficulties faced as follows: "It was a strain on my mother, her being a single parent. There was very little money for us. She had to take care of four of us, you know, plus my grandmother. So things were not very easy." H. decided that she needed to assist her mother and help provide for the family. " As a result I started doing things like buying sweets, selling them at school for pocket money and food for the house. Just to give my mother a bit of relief. Then I wouldn't need to ask her for money. I would buy the things myself. Sometimes a pair of shoes. Sometimes help the others buy things with the money I had and since then until now I am a really independent person."

The participants of Group 2 develop the ability to overcome their contextual constraints through helping others. However, this is not the same for those of Group 1. The effect of living within a context violence and fear, leads them to challenge themselves in order to overcome their contextual constraints.

The marginalisation and inferiority described by the participants of Group 1 while discussing issues of culture were repeated in their discussions of their social context. Thus B. described her life as being "contaminated by the things happening in the townships". Her life could not be seen as separate from what was happening around them and these experiences contributed to the meaning she gave to her identity and life. Each of these three participants recited a litany of social ills. These included violence and the actions of gang members; ongoing crime; poverty and economic hardship.

Group 1 participants characterized their lives as "filled with fear" because of the high levels of crime and gender-based violence in particular that inhabit their social context. This has negative results for individual woman and the entire community. E. spoke in great detail about the crime and gender-based violence that exists in the community in which she lives. She argued that the weakest members of the community were targeted by the gangs, namely the elderly and women. The research participants acknowledged the terror of living with the constant threat of the gangs that inhabit their communities. These gangs use sexual violence against especially young women. As women they did not have the freedom to go where they wanted, when and if they wanted. They spoke of staying inside after it became dark in the hope that they would not be attacked in their home. The meaning the participants ascribed to these experiences of the presence of gangs provided insight into how their identities as women were further restricted by their own sense of marginalisation and inferiority (Brownmiller, 1975; Simpson, 1999).

Crime and gender-based violence was described is a daily occurrence in the social contexts of the Group 1 participants. This has two results on the manner in which they interpret their lives. Firstly, they live in constant fear of crime and violence. Secondly, they expect to be victims at some time. It is almost predestined that they will experience some form of crime and violence. In defining themselves as victims or potential victims, people get stuck in what White (1989) has described as a "problem-saturated description" of community life (p.5). The continuing and often increasing context of crime and violence, and the seeming failure

of political, judicial and community initiatives to halt the violence, serve to confirm the presence of “”various negative personal and relationship qualities or attributes” within the participants (White, 1989,p.5). The Group 1 participants described their identity within these social contexts as being vulnerable and powerless in the face of such crime and violence. Thus E. was able to conclude; “It is scary to be a woman sometimes." Stanko (1990) argues that this is “a logical assessment” of women’s and the elderly’s ability to defend themselves in the face of male assailants” (p.84). She also identifies this fear as a form of social control over women. Women’s movements are restricted, and they are taught to rely on men for their safety and protection. This maintains the dominant patriarchal view.

The importance of being a participant on the training course was seen in the way in which the Group 1 participants re-authored their lives. Their being on the course was to change their lives and the conditions they lived under. They believed that through the knowledge and skills they would obtain on the course they would be in a position to participate in efforts to change their lives. Thus B. exclaimed, "I don't want to live being scared like this all the time. It's not right that we [women] must sit at home and men can go where they want. I want to be able to do things too. I want my life to change. Things must become better".

The identity described by each of these three Group 1 participants moved from that of victim to "survivor". They no longer spoke of still enduring the hardships, rather that in the process of being on the training course they had recognised themselves as being survivors. This provided the opportunity for them to continue in the process of re-authoring their lives. This provided space for personal agency. They were now able to speak of decisions that "I" had made, instead of focussing on the manner in which their lives were constituted from other influences.

<u>The role of caregivers and other relationships of significance</u>

The major sites of relationship highlighted in the lives of the participants of the research that helped to shape their identity were familial relationships and relationships with a partner. Within each of these Holland et al (1998) argue that our communications with each other not only convey messages, but also make claims about who we are relative to one another and the nature of our relationships. Thus the discourses of relationships influence the meaning that people give to their lives and the manner in which their identity is constituted.

The participants in Group 1 of the research all highlighted events of their childhood as a member of their family of origin. The meanings they gave to these events were an important aspect of challenging the manner in which their lives were constructed in other situations. They were able to use these stories as a means to re-author their lives. Their stories were not similar in meaning, for example while E. ascribed a very positive meaning to her early family life, B. did not. However, both used their experiences to re-author their identity.

E. described the early years of her life with great satisfaction. She had lived with her family in the rural areas of the Eastern Cape. This was an idyllic time for her. She spoke of lots of good times, and how her experience of the positive relationship between her father and mother enabled her to find value in her life. During this subplot of her story, she mentioned how chores were determined and that her brothers were expected to assist their father while her and sisters were expected to help her mother in the house; "I learned to cook and look after a house very young." E. did not recognize this gendered division of labor as perpetuating male dominance and privilege in any way, nor providing varying forms of opportunities that were denied to her. Instead being part of her family was a time of fulfillment and happiness. Paramount to this was her being treated with respect and love.

The manner in which she stories this part of her life as positive was significant given that she first mentioned it in the context of talking of her present situation. Since being married she has not enjoyed the same respect and value that was given to her in her family of origin. "I do not count to them", she said, "I am just there to do the things". Her identity is constructed as being inferior to her husband and his family. In this, the knowledge she had of her own value, which was constituted through her positive experiences when she was with her family of origin, was subjugated by the dominant patriarchal discourse in her marital family. She is not included in any family discussions and is left feeling like an observer in her new family. "It's like I am looking in at them, I cannot say a thing." She is not entitled to voice her opinion on the manner in which the house is run. Her husband's mother tells her what to do. If she does not act accordingly, her mother-in-law tells her husband, who, while never using physical violence, verbally abuses her and treats her badly until she apologizes to her mother-in-law and does what she is told in an appropriate manner. She also feels that her identity is devalued, because her husband prohibits her from working, this despite his being retrenched from his employment. Her identity is thus defined in relation to her role in the home. She was also prohibited from knowing what her husband earned when he was working. It was his money that he would choose what to do with. She had no say in the matter, so she need not know what he was earning anyway.

E.'s life story thus includes two sites of relationships, her family of origin and the family she has married into. She contrasts the two experiences. Whereas her family-of-origin provided her with an identity which was to be valued, her identity within her marital family she stores as the opposite. The juxtaposition of these two stories enables the listener to gauge E.'s present difficulties in defining herself within her marital family in a dramatic manner. However from a therapeutic viewpoint it also provides what White (1989; 1991; 1994; White and Epston, 1990) has called a unique outcome. He argues that as people engage in a process of storying their lives, alternate practices, which contradict the dominant or totalising stories that constitute people's lives, are able to be identified. Through engaging in performances of new meaning with these unique outcomes, people are able to plot an alternate story of their life (White, 1989). The juxtaposition of these two stories of subjective selves provides evidence of the manner in which E. is able to positively describe her self and her hopes and values in the face of her negatively valued self in her marital family.

D. spoke at length of times of sorrow and lack within her family of origin. She fell pregnant when she was a "little girl". This led to her being rejected by her family; "I grow in frustration because my family is negative towards me because I've done a wrong thing to have a child before time". D. speaks of having a "negative mother" with a "bad attitude" towards her. D. concluded talking about her mother by saying, "she has not got enough love."

White (1995) writes that a culture has a story of dominant moral worth. The ideas and beliefs that accompany this dominant story are prescriptions of cultural preferences. Thus D.'s identity was storied within a moral framework. This was premised by the belief that sex outside of marriage was wrong. When D. fell pregnant, others thus isolated her because of the ways in which culture informed and gave meaning to her behavioural practices.

However D. did not ascribe a negative meaning to her experiences with her family, especially her mother. In her narrative, she follows this account of her relationship with her mother, by discussing her children. She contrasts the manner in which she treats her children with the manner in which she was treated at home. Where D. experienced rejection from her family, she speaks of trying to show her children love all the time and of trying to provide for them. Her experiences with her mother have made her more caring and loving towards her own children. She has learnt of the "things that children must have if they are to be happy, like love and respect and not rejecting them". Thus the event is storied in such away that it provided lessons for D. to use in her life as a mother. The issue of personal agency is highlighted, as D. is able to choose an alternate story of being a mother. She does not define her identity in the same way as was defined to her by her mother. This illustrates White's belief that a constitutionalist perspective does not imply that people's lives are fixed according to their experience and social and cultural constructs. People story their lives and give meaning to them in a manner which "emphasises agency and the subject" (White, 1992,p.41).

Each participant of Group 2 highlighted a positive matriarchal role in constructing the meaning that they ascribed to their lives. This figure was either their mother or maternal grandmother. The events recounted occurred while still of school-going age and younger. The matriarchal figure was placed in the position of rescuer and protector, and as a provider.

The matriarchal figure assumed the role of rescuer and protector when the participant was removed from places where they experienced abuse or else sheltered them from violence within the home.

F. told of an incident when her father assaulted her mother and herself. "My father was drinking too much. He also beats my mother; he also beats all of us. My mother helped us outside while he … he's still beating her [pause while F. begins to cry] and…then she tells us to go outside and ask for a place to sleep by the neighbours. All while he is beating her up. We go and sleep by the neighbours but not her. She didn't run. She got us out, not her [F. begins to cry again]".

F.'s story continued by telling of how her mother never left her husband until she had been to their relatives twice and had received no help. Her mother then becomes a more powerful figure. Instead of staying and the violence continuing, F.'s mother finds a place for her and her children to stay and leaves her husband. F.'s mother's action in leaving creates a safe environment for her children. F. spoke of how her life improved: "We stay and we stay all together and my father was living alone. We were staying with my mother, and then I try and do my studies well because we were no longer in that situation. We were living nicely". Thus F.'s portrayal of her mother is of a protector who rescues her from harm. The influence of this action on F. affects more than her daily life. The event of her mother protecting and rescuing her gave her the opportunity to give meaning to the event in shaping her dreams for her life. F. spoke of her wanting to help other people who were in the same situation as she was in. She began to dream of being a social worker and of saving others; "I think I can save other people by telling them their rights. That they can [pause while F. cries] if they are in abusive relationships, they can be saved".

A further positive aspect of matriarchal figures was that of being a loving provider. C. provides an example of a matriarchal figure as a loving provider. C. spoke of township life and the difficulties she experienced growing up. She stayed with her aunt while she began school. All was well until she reached puberty. She had to spend a lot of time in with her uncle alone. This made life very uncomfortable for her because "he always wanted to be close to me and try and touch me and that." She moved out of her aunt's home to be back with her parents.

While at home, C. said she saw a large number of children who were hungry and belonging to gangs "because they got nowhere to go, no home." It was here that she recognised the service her mother provides to others. Although there were no children in the house apart from C., she said "You know, if you go to my place you'd think there were lots of children there, but there is no-one. There are children especially during the lunch hour. So what happens during lunch hour, the little one's go to my mom and ask for bread everyday. Everyday and she'd give them bread and something to drink."

C. identified these actions she witnessed performed by her mother as the reason why she places a high value on people and the related importance of helping to provide their needs. The narrative continued with C. expressing her wish to be involved in "doing something for my community."

The role played by grandmothers was seen in interviews with A. and H. In both cases their grandmother had to look after them because of difficulties their mothers experienced. H.'s grandmother had to assist in bringing H. up, as her mother was a teacher, working on a farm a distance from where they lived, so H.'s grandmother "had to give a hand". H. remembered instances where people would come to her grandmother for help: "Maybe they needed help with this and that, they'd come to her. And then would sometimes [pause while H. begins to cry quietly]…. We used to sit. She would tell us stories of her helping people, things like that". H. said that it was because of her grandmother's example that she wanted to help others when they're in need of help: "I looked at her and thought, 'Jeez, she's to me *the* person."

A. had been born before her mother was married. When her mother later married A. was left with her grandmother, as her mother's new husband was not the father. Although her grandmother died when she was "very young", A. spoke with great fondness of her. She has helped her she was left by her mother and had shown great love towards A. After her grandmother died, A. was sent to live with her aunt. A. was beaten badly by her uncle during this time and her mother came to fetch her. Although her mother is portrayed in the role as a rescuer in this instance, A. gave very little meaning to living with her mother, "It was okay, but I never thought I belong there, but it was okay." Clearly A. gave prime place to her grandmother as the person who cared for her. It was her grandmother's example of caring and her subsequent difficult experiences that A. identifies as the reason for her desire to work with people who suffer especially children.

Clearly the events and experiences of the Group 2 research participants lives have led them to identify a matriarchal influence in their life. While their experiences have not always been positive, they have storied their lives in such a manner that the meaning given to these events are identified as one of the reasons why they became a candidate for the counselling course and wished to offer their services as volunteers.

The other relational site mentioned by those in Group 2, was that of relationships with their partners. C. and H. spoke of how they had been recruited into the idea that their wishes were subservient to that of their male partners during their relationship with them. Their partners during these relationships conducted this recruitment through the use of violence and threats of violence against them. However through these experiences, and their own agency, these women were strengthened in their wish to help others. These incidents were told to reflect the personal strength and character that the participants had shown, and which was to be used for others. H.'s story will be used to illustrate this.

H. described her relationship thus: Her experience was with a partner she labeled as "a devious thing". He was a policeman and ten years older than she was. "Well at first we were in love. He was working. He gave me money. He did everything that my mom could never do for me when I was still a child. I just went on with the affair and then there came a time when problems started in the relationship". H.'s partner would date other women while going out with H. He would not let her question him about this. "He would deny to me and if I started shouting at him, like 'you lying, you lying', then he would smack me". This was a frequent occurrence in the relationship. "He said he would shoot me if I ever tried to leave him. I knew he had a gun and so I was very scared".

H. persisted in this relationship for a year before she was able to leave him. "I just did it and here I am. I told myself 'This is enough. He can do whatever he wants'. And I left him, I said I was not going with him any more." H.'s actions in leaving her partner left her feeling relieved. "I didn't regret leaving him at all. I discovered it was the best favour I could have done myself and always felt maybe I should have done it long time ago." H. describes herself as "brave" and "determined" in the manner in which she left this abusive partner.

This experience contributed to H.'s "desire" to help others to change their lives. "I need to be able to help people when they are in need. I need to be there when they need someone to talk to. Those who come to me, I'll at least be able to help them, be able to say something."

Through their experiences all eight of the participants were also able to recognise alternate stories of identity in the ways in which their lives have been constituted through relationships. Their stories also show how people's identity is not fixed across all relationships, but develops within each relational context. Thus people are able to experience different selves in different relationships. People's "sense of identity is very significantly determined by [their] experience of other people's experience of who [they are]" (White, 1995,p.97).

Re-authoring women's lives

The stories of the participants in the research have been privileged, as has the meaning they have ascribed to their lives and identity in light of their naming the story of this research "Changing ourselves, Changing others". It is in this process that the emergent nature of their identity as participants on a training course for volunteers within a NGO that addresses issues of gender-based violence is made known.

Holland et al (1998) writes that people live in social contexts where many different, often conflicting, discourses operate. The discourse of the human rights of women provided a conflicting voice to the voice of the cultural and social norms and values the participants of both groups recognised. In this they were placed in a position to recognise the way in which broader political and social change within South Africa have impacted on their lives. Through the Human Rights discourse they were now hearing an alternative story of how their identity could be constructed. This voice was strengthened by their participation in the training course at the NGO. This discourse enabled them to reach the point of engaging in a process of renaming violence, thus creating the opportunity for the participants to create alternate narratives of their lives. They were able to engage in changing themselves, as their identity was no longer limited to being a victim of gender-based violence. They were also able to change the lives of others, as they now able to engage in activism to combat gender-based violence.

White (1995) argues that gender-based violence results in effects that "are highly impoverishing to the person's life" and identity (p.82). The experience of gender-based violence recruits women into a very negative story of their identity, thus making it more likely that these women will story their experiences in a negative manner. Thus many women's understandings feature themes of culpability and unworthiness, that they deserved the abuse, or could have stopped it if they really wanted to. Their lives become informed by oppression, exploitation, despair, and personal impoverishment (White, 1989).

For the participants in Group 1 instead of interpreting gender-based violence as something deserved or regarding themselves as unworthy, they were able to story their experiences of abuse as "exploitation" (B. and E.), "hurting" (E.), and "torture" (D.) among

others. For the participants of Group 2 the reinterpretation of gender-base violence took the form of outrage, passion for justice, and of assisting others to address this injustice. “These are expressions of that experience that brings with them very different real effects on the shape of their lives, effects that are judged to be constructive rather than destructive” (White, 1995,p.84). Thus an alternate story of the meaning of violence leads to different and more positive stories of identity.

Naming gender-based violence thus enabled the participants to be in a position to challenge this violence and its effects. This challenge is on both a personal and societal level. This enabled them to join in the work of organizations such as the NGO in this study and work towards the eradication of gender-based violence. For this reason too, many organisations that deal with women who have and are experiencing gender-based violence encourage women who were previously in such a position to work with those currently experiencing gender-based violence (Whalen, 1996).

White (1991) emphasizes the role of personal agency in re-authoring lives. This agency is reflected in the stories of the participants of this research. This meaning is also defined within the realm of activity. The activities of the research participants in their own communities are perhaps the beginning of Korten's Fourth Strategy in the development of NGO's.

Each participant of Group 2 describes herself as wanting to engage in activities that benefit others. This has been seen in the lives of the research participants since my first contact with them and their completion of the training course. Due to internal changes in the NGO, no volunteers are working within the organisation at present. However this has not stopped the research participants from carrying out their goal to help other women. Both A. and F. have begun groups within community. The purpose of these groups is “to teach the women about violence and that it is wrong for us to be beaten. We can also help each other and know we are together.” Thus these groups provide an alternate story of their value and place within their social and cultural context. G. has made contacts with the schools and police forums in her community and has conducted workshops within these settings. Her work has been highly praised by the headmaster of the High School in her community.

However, it is not just Group 2 participants who have embarked on a programme of action. D. and E. from Group 1 have also become involved in organizing the women of their community. D. explained; "I want to share with others the way in which I have changed, and my life has been made better". E. has returned to the NGO and organised workshops to be conducted by the Organisation's staff in her community. She has gone out and informed the women of her community of the workshops and the reasons why they should join.

Conclusion

This study has shown how people’s identity is both multi-sited and multi-storied. Instead of viewing self as a fixed or static notion, the narrative perspective has shown how people’s lives are shaped according to the prevailing discourses available to them. These discourses are never neutral, neither are their effects. They serve a purpose within the prevailing social and cultural

context. Through these discourses people are recruited into understandings of their identity. This study has also shown how these discourses are internalised and thus form part of a self-regulation of behaviour. However, they are also enforced through more direct uses of power.

However, this study has also shown that dominant discourses can be challenged. While these meta-narratives proclaim absolute truth and demand obedience from people, it is possible through engaging in a process of deconstruction to challenge their power base and underlying assumptions. Thus people are enabled to construct alternate stories of their lives. It is in this process of re-authoring that the emergent nature of people's identities is highlighted. These emergent identities in no way reflect a 'true' identity, as they cannot be regarded as neutral in construction. They are the result of alternate discourses. The discourse of Human Rights, which has influenced the participants in restorying their lives, is not neutral. Rather it holds to certain basic values and beliefs about people and the manner in which they should live their lives. Failure to recognise this aspect of any alternate story results in a reification of the story and creates another meta-narrative that cannot be challenged. It becomes the 'true' story of life.

The desire of the participants to work as a volunteer has been facilitated through the emergent discourse of an alternate story informed by the Human Rights discourse and their active participation in ascribing new meaning to their lives. This was strengthened by their participation on the training course run by the NGO. It has provided greater options in their lives, one of which has been to volunteer their services to the NGO discussed in this study. They have been able to protest the dominant narratives that have constituted their lives and have begun to engage in a process that they have titled "Changing ourselves, Changing others".

The results of this study indicate that NGO's must not view the facilitation of training courses as an end in themselves. Training courses need to be recognised not merely as means of information sharing, capacity building and selection for future work within the organisation. Rather they need to be viewed as a setting wherein those who participate in the training courses can re-author their lives, and challenge those dominant discourses that they recognise as impacting on their identity. Provision must be made within training courses for the participants to examine their lives, relationships and context in order to engage in this re-authoring process.

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