I - Letter of invitation

A celebration feast of women

Dear reader

Letters can be so personal and at the same time very formal in nature. I have chosen to write my thesis in letter form so that you as the reader can see glimpses of the personal nature of this study as well as the neat academic package it is supposed to be according to the requirements of a Doctoral thesis. Listening, talking to and seeing you in person would have been so much better for me, because I like meeting people face to face, having conversations and responding to one another on a personal level.

I have been in private practice for four years now as a therapist using narrative ways in conversation with people, more widely known in the psychological field as patients or clients. Since my approach to therapy in this study precluded an observation and objective account, I have made full use of my participation in the relationship process.

I would like to acknowledge my researcher role as the central position of the construction of knowledge in this study. All findings are constructions, personal views of reality, open to change and reconstruction. Anderson and Goolishian (1988) define the construction of meaning and understanding in the construction of human systems as a constantly changing, creative and dynamic process.

My understanding of the meaning of the word reconstruction is that people have unique ways of understanding and experiencing different words, the meaning of which could be reconstructed in a conversation between people. My clients, readers of this study, I as the researcher, I as the therapist, I as the reflector and health professionals could possibly read English, but imply and apply different meanings to certain words or ideas. Reconstructed meanings, I propose, are at an inter-subjective level. Reconstruction does not imply that the original linguistic account was deficient but, rather, that all communicative actions are an infinite source of possible new expressions and meanings (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988). I also propose that the purpose of providing a reflexive account allows you as the reader to reanalyse the material and to develop alternative interpretations and explanations (Banister, 1994).

This study is based on conversations between specific women and me as therapist, an overview of literature, my own story, and my researcher and reflexive voice. A context of reflexivity is provided through a process in which I as the researcher am simultaneously a performer in and audience to my own performance, and have a consciousness of my production (see Tomm, 1987). This context creates new choices for persons regarding the authoring of themselves, others and their relationships (White & Epston, 1990). Therefore I am a co-author of all the letters in this thesis. MacIntyre (1981) states that "...we are never more (and sometimes less) than the co-authors of our own narratives" (p.213).

Consequently, the starting point for me doing this thesis in the first place is my own story about my relationship with food in excess. Taking on a reflexive stance is thus of the utmost importance to convey the researchable aim of this study which is to create a verbal space for women to allow their voices to be heard as regards their experiences with their relationship with food in excess as individuals, groups or communities. The research question explores various meanings that women could construct with regards to their relationships with food in excess.

In this study you are hereby cordially invited to a celebration feast of women. Here follows women's words when they talk about their relationship with food in excess:

"I love food!"

"Food is my friend!"

"I am passionate about food!"

"Food has so many possibilities..."

"Food helps us to nurture ourselves and others."

"I need food as much as I need air to breathe."

What then could be an effective way to describe obesity in a different light than that of previous research material? For the purpose of this study narrative ways of thinking opens up space for the deconstruction of well-known concepts in the field of psychology, namely obesity and self-esteem. In the literature search the concept of excessive eating practices is interpreted as a search for obesity, implying that excessive eating practices could possibly be a deconstruction of the concept or label of obesity. Likewise, the literature study surrounding women's thinking and feelings about themselves in excessive eating practices is explored by using familiar concepts like self-esteem, obesity and psychology. In other words, I assume these concepts to be social constructions whose social and psychological meanings are contextually bound.

The word deconstruction, in my understanding, is a breaking down of psychological meanings in the context of literature, media and for the benefit of this study, women's personal meanings. This allows for the underlying meanings of the concepts to be questioned. The assumption is that people often live their perceived answers, by conforming to the rules of labels placed upon them by society and themselves. For example, women respond in a certain way to the label of obese women or fat person without asking the underlying question(s). In this study the underlying question could be, how do women, experience their relationship with food in excess? Another question could be, what experiences will women tell when asked about whom and what society or the media portray as the perfect and healthy woman? Another possible question – how do women perpetuate the label? There are a vast number of possible questions to be asked.

In Narrative letter-II, my adoption of narrative ways of thinking in therapy places me within a post-modern and social constructionist framework which offers useful ideas about how power, knowledge and truth are negotiated in families, the media and other social contexts surrounding women's relationship with food in excess. Consequently, in Narrative letter-II the narrative conceptualisation of the abovementioned concepts in this study are regarded as conversations with women where reality is continually created and re-created in the here and now. Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998) state that in the context of life-story research in psychology, the broad issue of the linkage between story and reality can be translated to (among other things) the relationship of self-narrative and personal identity, which resides in the hidden domain of inner reality.

The Letter of different concepts—III comprises a literature review in which a theoretical overview of the field of obesity and self-esteem issues surrounding the label of obesity is examined. In this study, an alternate account of the construction of the label of obesity, as seen in women, throughout literature, will be given. While not denying the importance of a body of literature on the subject of obesity, the alternate view is that through narrative exploration, within a relational setting, other important discourses and alternative stories of women and their relationship with food in excess, will surface. From this premise, the study focuses on how women's discursive practices concerned with their relationship with food in excess impact on their feelings and thoughts about themselves. Consequently, these narratives are of psychological importance as we look at how women experience the eating of food in excess and the meanings they link to their experiences.

At the conclusion of the Letter of different concepts-III the choices women have in a fatty food dominated society are investigated. Living a healthy life style, finding happiness or taking

responsibility for own choices; as different alternatives, are discussed. Lastly, the alternate story surrounding the social construction of the label of obesity from literature as a review on the possible success stories will be discussed.

Searching for a way in which to integrate all the conversations proved to be a challenge. In Letter of the research process-IV the research design and process as a narrative inquiry, together with the personal experience of doing the research, are reflected on and critically evaluated throughout. This letter describes the manner in which the women and sample characteristics were selected. This is followed by a description of the data collection process. Lastly, the process of analysing the data is described. There are many different forms of qualitative research, but for the purpose of this study the focus will be on analysing the data and presenting the results in the form of discoveries, mainly with the use of content analysis. The literature study, transcribed texts of six narrative conversations with each individual, as well as the researcher's reflexive diary and the reflection notes on the reflections of the data, will amount to a large volume of text. According to Neuman (2000), content analysis is useful for problems involving a large volume of text.

In Letter of discoveries-V the results in the form of discoveries, as well as the discussion thereof, are presented by using the method of content analysis. Discourses and alternative stories are formulated from text and after analysis, presented in the form of various discoveries as constructed meanings. Further results in the form of discoveries through drawings are presented in Letter of more discoveries-VI of which some are the researcher's account and some the researcher-therapist and the participants' co-constructed accounts of the possible discourses and alternative stories.

In Letter of reflections-VII it is clearly stated that this thesis does not claim to be fully representative of women's relationships with food in excess, rather the outcome is presented by drawing a comparison between literature, narrative conversations and the researcher's story. By using narrative conversations as psychotherapeutic intervention, close attention to the participants' discourses can be given and alternate life stories may be created, that may otherwise not have been considered part of the experience. In this study the participants and my story will be buried within the pages of the final product. Finally, the outcome of this study remains to be read and evaluated so as to its value to the field of psychology.

Waiting with you for the stories to unfold Co-author and researcher