VOICE, IDENTITY AND REFLEXIVITY

PROCEEDINGS OF THE SECOND RIPPLE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AS INTERPRETIVE PRACTICE CONFERENCE

NOWIK THEATRE
CHARLES STURT UNIVERSITY
ALBURY CAMPUS

22-23 SEPTEMBER 2005

CONVENED BY THE CENTRE FOR RESEARCH INTO PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE, LEARNING AND EDUCATION (RIPPLE)
CHARLES STURT UNIVERSITY

EDITED BY GAIL WHITEFORD
Cover Art

Josie Petrick Kemarre
'My Country, Bush Berry Dreaming, 1996'
Acrylic on Canvas, 170cm x 115.5cm
Charles Sturt University Art Collection

Josie Petrick Kemarre resides near Mt Swan, Utopia in the Central Desert and the depictions of her land seem abstract in all but their title. This artwork is taken from a series on bush berries and different stages in their life cycle.

The artist's dealer informs the viewer that the paintings in this series have no preferred orientation. This may be because of their link to aerial landscape. Kemarre's expression of the land accepts the traditional dot form of representation, but dismisses the icons that depict gatherings, waterholes or meeting places. She uses bright colours, and shows the viewer the landscape at specific time periods, the latter inadvertently linking her artwork to many modern artists who tried to capture a specific moment in time such as Monet in his haystack series.

Thomas A Middlemost (Art Curator, CSU Art Collection).

First published in 2006 by the Centre for Research into Professional Practice, Learning and Education (RIPPLE) from a completed manuscript.

Printed by Charles Sturt University, Bathurst, NSW, 2795, Australia.

All papers in this book of proceedings have been accepted for publication after undergoing full peer review by members of Collaborations in Practice and Education Advancement, The University of Sydney.

Copyright © Centre for Research into Professional Practice, Learning and Education (RIPPLE) and individual contributors.

ISBN 1 86467 173 4
Witnessing, resonance, authenticity: Further explorations in reflexivity

Ian Percy

Curtin University

Abstract
In making complex the notion and status of reflexivity, researchers are obliged to tease out and experiment with novel versions of design. Poststructuralist narrative understandings of life and identity focus on collaborative, relational knowledges generated through private and public fields of influence. Seeking to bring forward the voices of research participants and making visible relevant aspects of the personal and professional life of the researcher activates the potential for a moral critique of a project. With this approach, multiple perspectives are sought without fragmenting into radical subjectivism.

Drawing on narrative perspectives, this paper considers the central features of a four-stage collaborative group design crafted to research the place of spiritualities in counselling and psychotherapy. The significance of witnessing and resonance to the stories being told will be highlighted and authenticity, conceived as personal integrity and as a social accomplishment, will be appraised. Extending understandings of reflexivity through these collaborative narrative processes brings important implications for practice.

Reflexive Narrative Research
By making constant choices about what they will attend to tellers of stories fix the flow of human experience into recognisable cultural forms and content so that transmission to other people may occur. Human beings are constantly engaged in a reflexive narration of their lives whether or not they are actively conscious of that process as it happens.

In social research a narrative orientation has become compelling (Alasuutari, 1998; Hinchman & Hinchman, 1977; Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000; Josselson & Lieblich, 1995; Lieblich et al., 1998; Riessman, 1993; Riessman, 1994; Mishler, 1986). Sarbin proposes narrative, as a universal and unique human ability, is a "root metaphor" (1986) for the interpretation and expression of human experience, while Bruner (1986) writes that narrative and the logico-scientific mode of constructing realities are irreducibly complementary, each having their own operating principles and criteria of evaluation. While both are methods of persuasion and each has a place in attempts to understand the world, they are different in that "arguments convince one of their truth, stories of their lifeliness" (Bruner, 1986, p. 11).

Different contexts will influence the selection and sequencing process of tellable events, as will the hopes and purposes of the narrator at the moment he or she is speaking. Stories move forward through linguistic skillfulness, their indirect or explicit themes inviting both the speaker and listener to fill in gaps in their knowledge as each pursues narrative coherence. As this process is unpredictable, it is not a reliable guide to life trajectories, nor can it approximate certainty when it comes to the course of a research project.

As positivistic methods can no longer be counted upon for knowledge certainty, the idea of truth becomes an exceedingly multifaceted issue (Riessman, 1993). Kvale states that the "conception of knowledge as a mirror of reality is replaced by knowledge as a social
construction of reality. Truth is constituted through a dialogue; valid knowledge claims emerge as conflicting interpretations and action possibilities are discussed and negotiated among the members of a community” (1996, p. 239).

However, these negotiations aren’t necessarily equitable. Interpretative acts and the construction of narratives are discursively situated in relations of power which restrain accessibility to credible, socially tellable stories. Under a poststructuralist scrutiny, the privileged position of the interviewer to decide on the authenticity of the narratives being told and to arrive at objective conclusions is challenged. Each person brings to the interview versions and knowledges of life that can be considered to be “authoritative”.

From hierarchy we move to partnerships of relational truths where all parties co-create knowledges that further the aims of the conversation. To aid the distribution of knowledges, a cooperative group design privileges public conversations over private conversations. The more people that witness narrative speech acts, the more likely it is that there will be additional versions of narratives made available when they are retold. This restrains a sole and authoritative retelling by any participant or the person designated as the researcher and champions an orientation towards the concept of visible co-research practices.

Reflexive narrative research recognises multiple, intersubjective and interpretative acts being performed by all participants within a socio-historical boundedness. It encourages circularity of knowledge-making in the research endeavour. To facilitate reflexive narrative commentaries by participants on the status and evolution of a project, and on a researcher’s explicit or implicit thoughts and actions, transparency or openness on the part of a researcher is vital. In my research on the place of spirituality in counselling and psychotherapy (Percy, 2003), I sought to promote ethics of transparency and symmetry of power/knowledge and knowledge/action by telling interviewees in the spiritualities project why I thought the research was significant, by providing them with a copy of my candidacy proposal, through structuring the interviews so that they witnessed each other’s storytelling and had opportunities to comment on their similar and different outlooks, and by allowing each person the opportunity to review the transcript of their interview.

Further, I asked each participant to peruse a penultimate draft of Chapters 2 to 7 of the thesis to clarify any misunderstandings of their words on my part. I found this commitment to an ethic of relational transparency time-consuming and intricate, yet rewarding for my purposes as it produced episodic multitemporal readings and kept me more accountable for the ways in which I might make use of interviewees’ words. This also brings a curiosity to the unknown, an openness to hear whatever is spoken or performed, and a profoundly respectful stance when seeking to understand the experience of another person.

Research design
Realising that researchers do not have direct entrée to another person’s experience, regardless of the stated method, an interpretive narrative understanding contributes to the conceptualising and the doing of all research. Narrative is a method, and all methods are narrated.

I was guided by the narrative research designs of Amia Lieblich, Rivka Tuval-Mashiach and Tamar Zilber (1998), adopting the holistic-content and holistic-form approaches they advocated. Implementing the holistic-content perspective, I read and reflected upon each transcript a number of times until patterns or themes emerged with emotional textures.
induced through my hearing the voices of respondents on audiotape as I read. Immediately following this immersion in the transcript, I wrote a “global impression” (following the ideas of Lieblich et al., 1998, p. 62) trying to put words to the actions, feelings and thoughts of the teller as they unfolded during the interview.

Lieblich and her co-authors (1998) also regard early and distinct memories as pertinent to the holistic-content approach. If such memories arose during the research conversations I carried out, and if those memories were evaluated as relatable by the interviewee, they were explored. The following questions were derived from those authors’ summary statements and served as an aid to orient myself to the text at hand, though I did not feel any compulsion to respond in detail to every query. To make them more active and to enhance the exploratory mode of research I favoured, I decided to translate their statements into simplified inquiries asking myself:

- As I listen to each narrative and review tapes and transcripts, what connected patterns seem to emerge?
- What are my initial and global impressions? What exceptions or contradictions to the main themes of the story am I hearing?
- As I listen to, and read, the narratives, which themes am I drawn to further explore?
- When does a theme appear and disappear, what are the transition points from one theme to another, and what is the importance of each theme?

As the name holistic-form suggests, this category looks at the totality of the spoken narrative as well. Reading for plot progression reveals “the individual’s personal construction of his or her evolving life experience” and expresses the “identity, perceptions and values of the storyteller” (Lieblich et al., 1998, p. 88). Phrases, metaphors, and analogies that evaluate, describe and re-describe life events emerge, and turning points may be expressed in key words. Similar to holistic content, I found that thinking of questions was more active and encouraging of exploration than simply reading the authors’ statements. I asked myself the following guiding questions throughout my study:

- How might I understand the overall development of the plot, rather than the content in which this development takes place?
- As I listen to the teller historicising events, where do I pick up emotional expansiveness and intensity (or otherwise), and plot congruencies or inconsistencies?
- What specific forms of evocative speech illustrate or capture the plot development?
- How is the teller positioning her/himself in the story? What effect does this have on the story?
- Who is included in this story and for what purpose?
- Who is excluded in this story and for what purpose?
- What kinds of languages are used and what is the effect of these languages on the narrative?
- How am I positioned as listener?
- What has this story left me wondering more about?

While writing global impressions of narratives runs the risk of presenting too coherent a flow that doesn’t capture the fragmentary snap-shots of life told in an actual interview, splitting transcript passages into thematic segments can disconnect those themes from the narrative stream of consciousness in which they were produced. By having global accounts sit alongside the thematic I believed they would augment each other.
In addition, I found myself drawn to Mishler's work, especially his notions of “inter-individual variability, discontinuities and turning points, the multiplicity of self-definitions, [and] the relational grounding of identities” (1999, p. 154). His ideas resonated with my therapeutic experience, and as I engaged with the present research interviews, I was struck by their aptness.

**A Cooperative Group Inquiry**

Taking into account my preferred reflexive narrative approach, I considered Dodds' (1995, p. 37-38) criteria for collaborative research groups which consist of:

- The method involves considerable commitment on the part of all participants.
- Group members must have direct experience of the study subject.
- Participants must feel assured that what they say will not be used against them.
- It is important that there is no great disparity in power or status among group members, including the initiating researcher(s)’ organisational or social position, as this could inhibit the democratic process integral to the method.
- The initiating researcher(s) must perceive themselves as ‘co-learners’ rather than ‘experts’.
- It is a method of research particularly suited to practitioners who have been trained in groupwork skills.

Following my appraisal of these principles I was convinced that a cooperative group inquiry informed by narrative perspectives was fitting, and yet I had a desire to enhance self reflexivity and collective reflexivity further. To this end, I adopted a design similar to the poststructuralist therapeutic interviewing advocated by Michael White (1995).

In a four-part conversational process, participants were interviewed and reinterviewed in each other’s presence, a practice I surmised would bring the greater reflexivity I sought and, if facilitated with respect and accountability on my part, could promote a trusting atmosphere and produce a knowledge community with regard to spiritualities.

In the first part, I interviewed one randomly chosen participant (the interviewee) in the silent presence of the other group members. Questions asked of the interviewee were open-ended, relatively unstructured and guided by White’s landscape of action and landscape of identity enquiries (White, 1995; White & Epston, 1990).

While the interviewee and I were engaged in conversation, the other group members were encouraged to listen with discernment, take notes if they wished, and to ask themselves questions such as:

What aspects of this conversation am I most drawn to for further exploration?
What am I most curious about?
Why might that be?
What images are evoked for me by this conversation?

Listening in this manner created a respectful spacious receiving context for the story being told.

After about 40 to 50 minutes the second part of the interview process commenced. Now the interviewee listened silently to the other group members and myself reflect on our understandings of the narrative we had just heard primarily adopting the subjunctive mode
of speaking. This mode encourages tentativeness when expressing views or opinions, and seeks to promote a sense of 'trafficking in human possibilities rather than in settled certainties' (Bruner, 1986, p. 26) Placing myself in the reflecting group differs from the usual therapeutic practice of outsider-witness conversations (White, 1995) where the therapist would be silent and sit beside the person seeking assistance.

For about 15 to 20 minutes we consulted with each other, sought clarifications, wondered about the purpose of the spoken comments by the interviewee, and situating our statements in personal histories. Primarily, these expressions are intended to open space for the ongoing thickening of the interviewee’s narrative, but they also contribute to a richer description of all participants’ stories, and bring together individual consciousnesses with social and cultural plotlines.

The aim is to expand the range of voices being heard and enlarge possible responses, keeping in mind the themes identified by the central interviewee.

In the third part, which took approximately 10 to 15 minutes, the original respondent was re-interviewed by me for any comments she or he wanted to make concerning anything said so far, perhaps clarifying, extending upon or disputing the interpretations offered.

The fourth and final part consisted of all group members discussing the progress of the overall meeting, and included invitations to interview myself as researcher on why I asked certain questions, my responses to particular themes that emerged and what directions I saw taken or not taken during the interview. It is worth noting that not only do participants circulate the storyline of the interviewee by giving interpretive attention to language, they also contribute via their nonvocal contributions, for example, through bodily stance, eye movements and other facial expressions (Ochs & Capps, 2001).

Global impressions - or biographic impressions as I came to call them - of the previous week’s consultation were given to the primary person interviewed at that time for her or his endorsement. In this way I privileged the interviewed person as the primary authority on the narrative brought forth. Almost all participants offered minor revisions, which strengthened my belief that the design was reflexive and participatory.

Weekly two-hour gatherings took place, serving at least two purposes. First, from experience with reflecting teams in psychotherapy I knew that up to two hours was often required so that participants did not feel rushed to respond or conclude potential meanings prematurely. Second, a weekly schedule allowed contributors time in between meetings to review their narration, and perhaps extend upon it when next we assembled.

Participants
As I was pursuing credibility, trustworthiness and dependability, and I was aware that potential candidates might be unwilling to attend for a prolonged period of time due to other commitments, I came to the conclusion that a purposive sampling approach using six key informants was suitable. The two essential criteria to be considered for participation in the research were that members have a professed active participation in spirituality, however that might be conceptualised, and that they be counsellors or psychotherapists. All members constituting the research group fulfilled these criteria, as did I as co-researcher.

In 2000 I began facilitating professional development workshops on the place of spirituality in personal life and professional practice, attracting people from social work,
and titled the the

I drew up a list of potential candidates based on my knowledge of their work, their trustworthy position in their relevant professional community and their professed spiritual interests. I did not adopt culture as a marker of inclusion or exclusion, but I did attempt a close gender balance. Some of these colleagues I had previously met at professional conferences, while others I knew as friends as well. Given the personal material we would be discussing and the brief time we would have together, I thought of these previous associations as potentially establishing intimacy and trust quickly, which I believed would benefit my research aspirations. Let me add that I accept that our previous associations could have constrained certain narratives being told.

Initially I contacted potential participants by phone to ascertain whether they might find the project worthwhile, explaining the purpose of the research, the design of the interview process, and offering to answer any questions. I asked whether they had the time to attend over a number of weeks. Four people declined to take up my offer due to family commitments or because they did not identify with the terms counsellor or therapist. Eventually four women and one man who had attended the “Remembering Spirituality” workshops accepted an invitation to participate, while the sixth person who joined the group I knew through narrative therapy training I had conducted, and his profile as a social activist. I was also cognisant of his spiritual interests.

Witnessing and resonance

As evident in the research design, all participants became witnesses to each other’s and their own performances of narrative meanings. Positioning myself similarly, a parallax of discourses was produced with every conversation transient, unique, and unrepeateable.

Witnessing is communal and requires an ethical stance of care, collaboration and humility towards listening and responding to accomplish its purposes (Frank, 2002; Simon & Eppert, 1997). No mirroring, or simple reflection, occurs between the events of people’s lives, meaning-making during a witnessed conversation about those events, and a written text produced which speaks to, and comments on, those happenings. Images are created from images through the circularity of ethical and resonant witnessing.

To illustrate this imagistic process I draw on some specific episodes from the interviews and show transcript segments that demonstrate, in their formatting, numerous units of meaning. This latter course I took to evoke a poetic sensibility which I suggest fits well with the notion of storied lives.

Participants in the research group often connected spirituality to earth’s natural environment. In the transcript segment to follow, not only does Deborah⁴, one of the last participants to be interviewed, affirm her “great connection with nature and the earth and energy and all those sorts of things” but she put the research group itself as influential in creating her ongoing ideas about spirituality.

“Before this [the research group] started I was thinking to myself I’ve never really thought about it too deeply and I was thinking “oh I don’t know whatever I have,  

⁴ All participants in the research project adopted pseudonyms.
whatever people think is spirituality”. And then I was thinking “I’m probably a pantheist, or something” because I have a great connection with nature and the earth and energy and all those sorts of things - and I have been stumped by what has been coming out of these interviews, because … I just connect so strongly with a lot of what people are expressing as their experience of spirituality in terms of the connection with things in nature.”

Adopting the intensifier “stunned” conveyed the importance of juxtaposing her “before group” and “during group” knowledges. Coming along without thinking “too deeply” about spirituality meant that Deborah wasn’t clear what it might be for herself or for other participants. Perhaps, she decided, she might be a “pantheist, or something” – the tag “or something” still pointing to unsassurance. But with a brisk tone she amplified her allegiance to the natural environment and, at the same time I would suggest, to the rest of the group by aligning herself “strongly” to “a lot of what people are expressing”. In this excerpt Deborah’s witnessing, and resonance with the other participants’ narratives, brings not simply a repetition of what has been said or noticed but an active engagement in wondering about that which has not yet been said. Her comments evoked a sense of communal receptivity and hospitality. At another time Deborah reflexively reauthored her understandings of a spiritual and social justice nexus through co-opting pertinent group stories and naming shared commitments. In doing so I believe Deborah furthered her belonging and credibility with regard to the witnessing community.

“The idea of spirituality as expressed in a concern with social justice, I connect with very strongly. I’ve never really thought of that as being an expression of spirituality but it’s a very strong motivating value, I suppose, of mine. So if that’s spirituality I guess I do connect very strongly to that.”

This reauthoring of spiritual stories, now envisaged as a connection to the natural environment and related to social justice, provides an associated loosening of the relative solidness of the storyteller’s sense of a spiritual self. In particular, when a history of social protest was spiritualised it provided spiritual identities that were not possible previously, giving some credence to the observation that we live our histories forward and write them backwards in an ongoing engagement with the “truth” of our past.

Witnesses make themselves available to resonate, or not resonate, to the interviewees’ narration and in doing so open up various plotlines that may not have been considered so far. Unlike narrative therapeutic intentions, witnesses are not required to pick up on preferred directions primarily but may range more widely in seeking to gain a fuller picture of the stories being told. For example, after hearing from all other participants on their spiritual association to the natural environment, Harold, when in the interview position, was reluctant to describe any “magical, spiritual one relationship we have with the earth”. He advocated instead an exploratory “deeper” process where different cultures could consider what their spiritual relationship to the earth might be, so that “greater myths” might be “uncovered” or “discovered”.

“I’m more interested in helping people to go deeper, to explore their eco-psychologies, to help different people and cultures to see how they do make sense of their relationship with the earth. And then I guess from that, things will uncover, or things will be discovered, or the connections with the greater myths will become a bit more clearer and I don’t know exactly which way that’s going to go.
As evidenced by the above excerpts interviewees and witnesses may not resonate to previous descriptions, favouring other images to identify their familiar world. In this way, we come to know who we think we are by who we believe we are not, as well as who we believe we might be.

Witnesses may also raise concerns about directions of conversations as occurred when the group considered transcendental and immanent forms of spirituality. At one meeting Carol said she was attracted to Buddhist teachings which posit an afterlife, though she added she was not convinced of this assertion on the strength of the teachings alone. Ultimately it was essential to take care of this life, Carol said, rather than spend time wondering whether there was an afterlife.

"The life that I know, and what I do now, is all that I will know for the moment. So...that I think it's important to not think about whether there is or there isn't an afterlife - that what I do now is what counts."

As our discussion progressed her comment lingered with me and questions emerged along the lines of: What might happen if we chose to spiritualise certain past events of our lives, imbuing them with transcendental purpose or sacred value? How might this recasting affect those events and our part in them?

In response to these wonderings, Carol thought that when "we look at things in hindsight...we can ascribe different meanings, we understand things differently". Spiritualising "seems to put things in perspective and...join maybe previously unrelated things into some sort of theme for your life".

"[It is a way of] searching to see the bigger picture, rather than separate events that seem unrelated. And they make sense of it all in the big picture."

At this point Anna became concerned about the possibility of minimising the negative effects of past situations, or idealising certain happenings that were for her "bloody hard yakka".

"I might think 'wow we survived' but like it doesn't change - I don't idealise it all. Whether I call it hard yakka or the spiritual experience, it's still how it was. And in hindsight I could think 'Oh well you know that was okay and we could have done this differently or that', but like it doesn't make it better or somehow change the essence of it."

Chloe joined the conversation saying she didn't want to idealise traumatic situations either, however it may be through those very events that individuals develop a sensitive appreciation of the preciousness of life, and be able to help other people facing similar distress. So whilst harmful, they could eventually contribute to a richer life in some ways, both for oneself and others.

By transforming past circumstances into spiritual events, or into situations with a spiritual flavour, there was disquiet over potentials and pitfalls. Carol opted for a benevolent reading of spiritualising events, Anna drew attention to the possible dangers of re-interpreting past episodes in this manner, and Chloe attempted to synthesise a conclusion by cautioning against idealisation whilst acknowledging the opportunity for enrichment. From these responses it can be seen that spiritualising the past has no certain reading.
In witnessing the telling of each other’s and their own spiritual plotlines, and resonating or not resonating to these accounts, identities were generated continuously in a recursive and interpretive mode. This complexified any attempts at a singular, totalising, coherent version of their lives, and lent credence to Mishler’s (1999) notions of fluid, emergent identity formations that respond creatively to the inevitable transient contingencies of life, with critical moral turning points often, but not always, being the culmination of a series of smaller decisive moments. From this viewpoint, individuals figure out their identities as they take on, adapt, and refuse culturally defined meanings regarding selfhood. I believe the research design provided an authenticating audience to the tellings of some of these accords, adaptations and refusals through a focus on personal turning points.

**Authenticity**

Tracing the notion of authenticity historically, Charles Guignon (2004) maps out its trajectory as a measure of a life well lived. To respond to his views and proposals in detail is beyond the scope of this paper, so let me choose some remarks that are pertinent to our present discussions.

Guignon notes modernist authenticity has a range of features, while at its heart lays the concept of interiority. Navigating this concealed territory of mind and emotions a person works towards uncovering a real inner self, finally arriving at self-possession, self-ownership or sovereignty, which then makes possible the expression of authenticity in daily life. To be true to myself, to be self-possessed, is to know what I am thinking and feeling at any given moment and to express those thoughts and feelings unwaveringly. The more I can act in these ways, the more authentic I am. This primary concern with the inner condition and its individual expression usually leads people to be ever engaged in projects of recovery of what has been lost or the development of moral qualities that are regarded as intrinsically human or divine. Recovery or developmental projects may involve the quest to retrieve a true or real self, or the pursuit of wholeness or completeness.

Contrastingly, postmodern selves are emergent, impermanent and constituted through interpretation and negotiation of inextricable and contested cultural and social historical discourses (Anderson, 1996; Hodgkiss, 2001). Due to this latter feature of contestation, some identity stories leap out and seem to simply make common sense or appear natural, while others are less likely to find a performative space. Some won’t even be thought of due to the relative dominance of normative discourses. Through these social practices we become selves whose inner images and sequenced storylines are given sufficient stability to make possible a narrative cohesiveness. From a therapeutic perspective, authenticities can be conceptualised as social and relational achievements, and acknowledged preferred identity claims, rather than private and individual attainments (White, 2004).

Relational selves are active agents in the process of self-making, active mediators of interiority and exteriority, of psychological states and social discourses, not simply passive receptacles. They participate in communities of shared concerns, relate where they stand on those various concerns, bear witness to them and possibly resonate with others around those concerns. Numerous personal commitments, with the commitment to authenticity often being prominent, can only make sense within socio-cultural and historical contexts.

Claims to being authentic cannot be unwavering or fixed but need to be fluid, emergent and influenced by diverse contexts, none of which are distinct or predetermined. Relational selves (Eakin, 1999) must rely on the presence of separate individuals for their
authentication, an ongoing achievement which can only be experienced in the here-and-now of each unique moment (Trilling, 1973).

In my research I decided to honour the meanings created in the spaces between the binaries of interiority and exteriority, preferring to see spiritualities as time-bound and embodied in specific individuals, as well as being socially performed and witnessed physically and dialogically. They are experienced as a felt-sense of personal integrity and a collective accomplishment.

Counterpoints
While I focussed on the narrative metaphor as a way of making sense of lived experience, I am not suggesting that this way of knowing should be privileged when it comes to the complexities of human experience. With this in mind it is pertinent to comment about another facet of my project. At the commencement of each chapter in my thesis I chose to call upon Coleman Barks’s (1997) vigorous and affectionate renditions of the poetry of Rumi, a Sufi mystic and scholar of eight centuries ago. These selections are present because they declare a heart devoted to the mysteries of life and because they moved me to nonconceptual, non-narrative and contemplative spaces, which I believed would complement the reflexive narrative consciousness I principally sought.

To write the thesis I entertained these different consciousnesses, spiralled within them, drew upon their ways of knowing, and tried to suffuse the thesis with their possibilities. In practice, I would write for lengthy periods in the narrative mode, then take up a meditative withdrawal that quieted the proliferative capacities of the mind, and sometime later reengage with narration, and so forth in a cyclical pattern. However, as soon as I state this process I note it tends to put a neat gloss on an interplay that I sometimes experienced as conflicting and irregular.

I also mention this process of the research design as it illustrates my view that the potentials of narrative can only flourish when illuminated through a discerning association with non-narrative experience such as that provided through direct bodily awareness of sensation, appreciation of immediate emotional states, and non-discursive meditative practices. Clarity is sharpened, contours are sketched more finely, and insularity is challenged as other ways of knowing bestow complementarity and complexity when it comes to human experience.

Conclusion
A reflexive narrative approach foregrounding an interpretative and relational negotiation of lived experience was adopted as a primary heuristic device in this project (based on Lieblich et al., 1998; Mishler, 1999; White 1995).

Embracing a poetic and pragmatic orientation I gave attention to key themes and beliefs, explored turning points, noted disruptions and variabilities, and identified similarities and differences in the creation of spiritual selves. In witnessing the telling and retelling of these narratives, constituents of the research community were encouraged to respond to resonances and non-resonances in the stories told from a relational ethics of care and collaboration, and in doing so make possible individually sensed and socially negotiated authenticities.

Narrative research from this perspective raises questions as to how people who claim the title of researcher might fully take into account the collective production of their work,
consider the relational ethics of transparency and accountability to multiple participants, and become attentive to notions of individual and social moral agency in the pursuit of authenticities. Naming these as continuous processes points to a commitment to expose the politics of the practices called research. Although all research is already political, a poststructuralist and narrative-oriented perspective implies an obligation to subvert sociocultural narratives of diminishment or degradation, and make visible a just and relationally ethical approach to our endeavours.

References
