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**The Narrative Study
of Lives in Central South Africa
Part II**

by

Jan K. Coetzee & Asta Rau

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Note

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Narratives and Everyday Life

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Contributions in this Special Edition reflect on the epistemological and methodological practice of using narratives to understand individual and social reality from a sociological standpoint. They all reveal dimensions of the same concrete reality: contemporary society of Central South Africa. We invite readers to engage with individual articles, each of which provide a brief episode—a vignette—in a larger reality. We also invite you to engage with the entire collection, through which a more detailed and clearer picture of the larger reality will emerge.

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This Special Edition follows on the one that appeared in the January 2017 edition of this journal (<http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/volume40.php>). As with the previous Special Edition, each article in this issue opens a window on everyday life in Central South Africa. Except for two, the articles originated from research in the program *The Narrative Study of Lives*, situated in the Department of Sociology at the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein, South Africa. These windows on reality display the capacity of the narrative as a methodological tool in qualitative research to open up better understandings of everyday experience. The articles also reflect on the epistemological journey towards unwrapping and breaking open of meaning. Narratives are one of many tools available to sociologists in their quest to understand and interpret meaning. But, when it comes to deep understanding, narratives are particularly effective in opening up more intricate levels of meaning associated with emotions, feelings, and subjective experiences.

Storytelling

Humans live in storytelling societies. If you want to know somebody, then you must know that person's story. Likewise, if you want to know a particular group, you need to know at least the most import-

ant stories told within and about that group. When we share our stories with other groups and cultures, we get to know more about each other. The more we know about other groups, the less likely we will be to hold unjustified stereotypes and to spread untruths. So, through our stories, we discover what is true and what is meaningful in our life and also what is likely to be true and meaningful in the lives of others.

We pass our stories on from one generation to another. And in this process, we add to our ever-growing narrative repertoire: our reflections of, and on, the overall reality in which we live. As sociologists, we are particularly interested in the social role and functioning of these stories: how they are told, the ways in which they are received or read, the role they perform in the broader social context, how they change, and how they fit into bigger processes related to the living together of people. Our interest in the social role of stories takes us, in the first instance, directly to the individual. Narratives display the goals, intentions, motivations, and after-effects of individual reflection, experience, and action. In the second instance, narratives can also unwrap elements of wider social order—of large-scale social, political, and structural trends and disruptions. Ultimately, narratives help us to understand what is going on in society.

The analytical point of departure for any understanding of society should be people and the ways in which individuals experience social reality. The very essence of the concept “society” is the living together of people within a specific context. As sociologists, we seek to understand how people live together with other people. We also seek to reveal

which elements in society constitute obstacles to living together—or even make it impossible. We have to acknowledge the presence of a multiplicity of relevance and meaning structures, and to achieve this we need to listen to various—often divergent—accounts. The stories of individuals often differ because their experiences, circumstances, and lifeworlds differ. Underlying our understanding of the meaning that people attribute to their lifeworld is the assumption that such meaning is accessible to others. The mutual accessibility of meaning provides a crucial starting point for understanding of narratives, and via narratives.

Our search to understand our social reality—as well as the social reality of others—coincides with the assumption that underneath the visible structures of the human world there is a hidden, invisible structure of interests, forces, and trends waiting to be uncovered. We can be brought closer to viable interpretations and understandings of these factors via the narrative study of lives and via the everyday experiences revealed to us by our research participants. The methodological implications of such interpretations and understandings are that sociological concepts can never become models or representations of reality to which meaning is attributed from the outside. The constitution of meaning takes place by means of uncovering the typifications that are already inherent in the situation. The aim of our narrative sociological interpretation is to break open and to clarify, as plainly as possible, the meanings already present in situations and in experiences. To realize this aim, one needs to first identify the meanings and, thereafter, relate them to other meanings and meaning structures. In this

way, our narrative analysis can lead to the creation of a meaning framework.

Understanding through Qualitative Research

We already noted that as social researchers we direct our efforts towards one major aim: to understand the world in which we live. In order to do so, we must decipher the meanings, the motives, and intentions of people, as well as the effects of their actions on social life. In their introduction to *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2011:3-4), Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln elaborate on these issues. They point out that the aim of qualitative research is to increase our understanding of social reality through the use of materials—such as accounts of personal experience, introspection, the lifeworld, interviews, artifacts, and texts—via which we can describe and understand routine, as well as exceptional moments and meanings in people's lives. John Creswell (2013:44) shares the desire to unwrap exceptional moments and meanings when he talks about being “sensitive to the people and places under study,” to generating “complex descriptions and interpretations of the problem,” and to uncovering the “meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem.” Most readers will agree that qualitative data should lead to rich descriptions, fruitful explanations, and new interpretations. We trust that this second Special Edition will achieve these aspirations.

Understanding through Narratives

Few methods of data collection capture context, meaning, experience, subjectivity, the lifeworld, re-

flexivity, and action as effectively as narrative studies. When people tell coherent and meaningful stories embedded in a particular context, they reveal to us, as researchers, insights into our own, as well as other people's experiences. Narratives provide accounts of how particular phenomena came to be what they are, how those phenomena take on different meanings in different contexts, and how individuals do/perform/constitute social life.

A narrative captures the importance of context, the meaningfulness of human experience, thought and speech within time and place; it provides opportunity to understand implicit, as well as explicit rationales for action within a holistic framework...the narrative approach is seeking comprehensiveness of understanding within the individual case. [Bazeley 2013:342]

In *The Narrative Study of Lives* program—from which the articles in this Special Edition originate—we mostly analyze narratives from several participants in order to access multiple meanings attached to a particular issue. Gathering stories from several people about the same phenomenon is in keeping with the notion that “narrative understanding is a dynamic process, and narrative meaning accrues by degrees” (Popova 2015:n.p.). The unfolding of perspectives and events is usually constructed by our narrators over multiple interviews. Multiple narrative sessions create a mosaic in which individual elements can be pieced together to reconstruct singular scenarios, as well as to constitute a whole picture. Seldom is it possible to assemble a picture of the “full reality” in one session. Sometimes our hermeneutic journey towards understanding—our

reconstructions of other people's constructions—involves fewer narrators, but in most of the articles in this Special Edition, we explore the lifeworlds of several narrators. It is only in one article, *Deconstructing My Library, Unwrapping My Lifeworld*, that the focus is autobiographical and on the lifeworld of a single narrator.

The very essence of lifestory research—especially in as far as narrative inquiry, life history, and oral history are concerned—is that it provides an epistemological key to a wide scope of knowledge of everyday reality, of local and indigenous knowledges, of cultural transmission and community engagement. Lifestory data can, however, never simply be accepted as “unmediated representations of social realities,” as Atkinson and Delamont (2009:316) caution. For this reason, all the articles in this Special Edition attempt to execute a double reading in which research participants' narratives are read against the background of the empirical reality in which they are embedded. Like all researchers, those in the program of *The Narrative Study of Lives* must always engage in a reflexive process to question how narrative realities relate to historical truths, and how they are logically consistent with other understandings of social reality. Ken Plummer (2001:2) agrees with this view when he contextualizes the use of narratives as:

getting close to living human beings, accurately yet imaginatively picking up the way they express their understandings of the world around them, perhaps providing an analysis of such expressions, presenting them in interesting ways and being self-critically aware of the immense difficulties such tasks bring.

John Spradley's (1979:34) classic statement on why narrative research offers such great potential to understanding the lifeworld of people echoes our aim for this Special Edition's collection of articles:

I want to understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know in the way you know it. I want to understand the meaning of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you explain them.

Narrating the Everyday

The emphasis on understanding, meaningful interpretation, lived experience, and the constitution of the lifeworld inevitably positions the narrative study of lives as a micro-sociological perspective with a strong focus on the micro-processes composing social reality. What do *individuals* say, do, and think in the everyday sequences of events and experiences? And how do their perspectives and actions coincide with the wider interactions and expressions of meaning underlying social reality? In this regard, we find an important guideline in Randall Collins' (in Knorr-Cetina and Cicourel 1981:83) remark that empirical reality must be regarded as residing in direct experience. Collins regards “the encounter” as the basic micro-unit of analysis: it is a “shared conversational reality” at the basis of all social interaction, negotiation, and exchange.

Narrating the everyday implies that such an empirical and objective reality exists. But, this objective reality, as exemplified by empirical, describable, and sometimes visible phenomena, cannot only be analyzed as structural facts. The objective reality of

urbanization, for instance, is far more than a statistical construct or “hard fact.” Urbanization embodies an endless chain of personal experiences—“ritual interaction chains” as Collins (1981:985) terms them—as well as forms of interaction, bargaining agreements, resistance, and compliance. Urbanization also exists as a collective noun for individual action, individual constitution of meaning, and individual experience. The rich nuances of this can only be captured by means of a series of coding and hermeneutic procedures.

We understand something of urbanization if we ground this phenomenon in its constituent micro-elements. The narrative study of urbanization allows for such a micro-sociological translation strategy. By listening to the accounts of individuals, we focus on their everyday reality and the contextual situatedness of their experience. Recurrent accounts, repeated symbolic expressions, and shared meanings can tell us about the context within which interaction takes place. All articles in this Special Edition are similarly situated in the sociology of everyday life and point to the ritual interaction chains linking personal experiences to larger social phenomena.

Challenges of Narratives

It is clear that if we are interested in revealing human meanings and motives, interpretive, qualitative methodology provides the key to understanding how people perceive and experience their lifeworlds. But, our very point of departure—to comprehend the world in which we live—constitutes an epistemological problem: people are endowed with consciousness and they see, interpret, experience,

and act in the world in terms of a vast range of subjectively and intersubjectively constituted meanings. When people actively construct and co-construct their own social reality, fluid and multiple perspectives of the world emerge: there is no single truth. This compels us to (re)assess and (re)interpret our sociological enterprise. So, it is through continuous oscillation between hypothesis formulation and revision that we move towards understanding.

As inductive researchers, we focus in an interpretive-constructivist way on the specific details of what people tell us, and then we use these specifics as a basis for building our understanding of their lifeworlds. We depend on the openness of the research participants and their willingness and ability to articulate experiences, recount events, and offer explanations and opinions. Experience shows that no matter how well researchers set up the in-depth interview and create a conversational partnership in which the interviewee participates fully and can talk openly, the very nature of memory poses a hermeneutical challenge.

Memory is a person’s capacity to recall or summon up information stored in his or her mind. Remembering is a mental act of “thinking of things in their absence” (Warnock in Misztal 2003:9). All articles in this Special Edition focus on mental recall; and in addition, some focus on more *embodied* aspects of remembering. There is a strong emphasis on the content of memory. However, we are equally interested in processes of re-membering, in other words, in the memory experience. To remember information, events, and experiences is a complex—and notoriously fallible—process. This is partly because memory is

not an exclusively individual and objective act. Even the most personal accounts and memories transcend our subjective experience of them and are shared and mediated by others around us (Zerubavel 1997:81). As Barbara Misztal (2003:6) remarks, our memory is always “of an intersubjective past, of a past time lived in relation to other people.” Thus, memory is almost always “intersubjectively constituted”: an idea on which we focused and published more specifically elsewhere (cf. Coetzee and Rau 2009).

Memory is by definition “the leap across time from the then of happening to the now of recall” (Frisch 1990:22). This implies a triangulation between the experiences of the past, the set of circumstances within which these experiences occur, and the way in which the individual reflects on these experiences. The latter includes the influence of the narrator’s present circumstances. Although memories become adapted in these processes, there will always be a nucleus of aspects that remain the same. As Paul Connerton (1989:23) points out, the habitual aspect of recall serves to entrench ways of reflecting on and narrating personal societal experiences, and ensures—to some extent—a containment, coherence, and continuity of meaning.

From this it follows that the way in which we and our research participants remember experiences from the past will depend on the nature of these experiences. For instance, several narratives in this Special Edition originate from lifestory research projects that explore trauma narratives. Traumatic experiences leave a negative memory. Whether it is sustained exposure to trauma—such as long-term experience of physical disability or a life lived with HIV—or whether we are exposed to a brief moment of numbing shock, the ef-

fects are likely to be similar: a negative disturbance in the way we think back to that part of our past. Another issue needs to be kept in mind when we analyze memory. According to Kai Erikson (1994:231), instances of shared experiences can create a community: “trauma shared can serve as a source of community in the same way that the common languages and common cultural backgrounds can. There is a spiritual kinship there, a sense of identity.” He concludes: “Indeed, it can happen that otherwise unconnected persons who share a traumatic experience seek one another out and develop a form of fellowship on the strength of that common tie” (Erikson 1994:232). So, Erikson shifts the notion of trauma experience from an individualized context towards a collective one. But, the shift from an individualized context towards a collective one is not necessarily restricted to the experience and recall of trauma. All shared experiences—also pleasant ones—can transcend the individual to become collective experiences. The result of this is that personal memory often obtains collective or cultural dimensions. And when individual experiences become part of a collective consciousness—they become institutionalized (see: Alexander 2004:8). While individuals do the remembering, their remembering often arises out of shared social contexts and motifs.

The halo effect is a bias that arises when research participants “give socially approved responses as an interaction strategy characterized by responding in normatively correct and conformist ways and generally trying to present a good face” (Ross and Mirowsky 1983:529-530). We do not deny that, to some extent, this form of bias occurred in data collection for the various projects featured in this Special Edition, but we are of the opinion that the narratives presented

are not unduly influenced by it. In the case of all the projects featured here, researchers took great care to establish, over time, a high level of trust and rapport with their participants. One of the key emphases during the various and many seminars, debriefings, and supervision feedback sessions in which all researchers partook was to reiterate and remind one another of the importance of establishing an optimum environment for meaningful encounters with research participants.

Understanding the South African Context through the Narrative Study of Lives

It is now a quarter of a century since South Africa transformed itself from being an apartheid prison and arch-pariah to a widely acclaimed example of the potential for a “new humanity.” Few countries were as reviled by the international community as the apartheid state formed by the National Party of South Africa when it came into power in 1948. Institutionalized and legally enshrined racism enforced a culture of separation and isolation. A person’s race determined where he/she could live, who he/she could marry, and what education, medical care, occupation, social services, legal protection, and property rights he/she would be entitled to. In the wider context of the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 09, 1989 and the approach of the end of the Cold War, South Africa negotiated a new dispensation under the leadership of Nelson Mandela and F. W. de Klerk. In April 1994, our first democratic elections took place and South Africa was finally free.

Although technically free and democratically constituted, the remnants and shadows of South Africa’s

past did not miraculously disappear with the dawn of the new dispensation. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), a body similar to a court of law where testimony could be heard, was set up shortly after the end of apartheid in 1994. Anybody who felt themselves to have been a victim of the violence perpetrated during the apartheid years could come forward, tell their stories, and be heard at the TRC. Perpetrators of apartheid’s violence and crimes could also give testimony and apply for amnesty from prosecution. The formal hearings of this Commission began on April 15, 1996 (South African History Online 2017).

The TRC was an important part of the transition to full democracy in South Africa. It was also a major turning point in the South African awareness of the power of narratives to establish parameters for the living together of people and for striving towards a better society. The TRC was set up in terms of the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, No. 34 of 1995. The number of cases brought in front of the TRC gives an indication of the scope of the narratives heard by the Commission. Out of 7112 petitions, as many as 5392 people were formally refused amnesty, whereas 849 were granted amnesty. Several applications were withdrawn. Many of the hearings of the TRC were aired on public television channels and most newspapers covered the events extensively.

In many ways the work of the TRC can be seen as groundbreaking in terms of providing an official forum for victims, as well as perpetrators to have their stories heard. Many witnesses who gave testimony about secret and immoral acts committed by the

apartheid government of South Africa would not have come out into the open if it was not for the protection provided by the laws governing this process. In turn, many of the crimes committed by liberation forces would also have stayed undisclosed.

South Africa is now a country with a constitution lauded as one of the most enlightened in the world. Yet it remains a country marred by inequality and inequity. This second Special Edition on the narrative study of lives features many stories from Central South Africa that illustrate inequalities and inequities that persist in the country's post-democratic era. In her introduction to the comprehensive coverage on lifestory research in the SAGE publication, "Benchmarks in Social Research Methods," Barbara Harrison (2009:XXIII-XXIX) points out a number of factors that heralded a growth in narrative research. These include an awareness of the role that oral history and narrative accounts can play in contributing towards a democratization of knowledge: How do we remember and experience the past? How are injustices of the past still part of our lives in the present? How do we deal with transition and trauma? How do we experience, and celebrate, cultural diversity and everyday aspects of our identities? Some of the narratives in this Special Edition address these questions directly.

Documents of life from our pre-democratic dispensation rarely incorporated the voices of the majority of South Africa's people. The apartheid regime suppressed their voices by relegating entire racial groups to the economic and cultural margins of society. Through political exclusion their experiences were hidden from most historical accounts and their views

seldom played a role in representations and reconstructions of reality. In step with new horizons and freedoms, everyday discourses on issues that reflect everyday life as explored by us in the program *The Narrative Study of Lives* contribute to greater inclusivity, and provide more opportunities for political and cultural participation and self-expression.

One cannot deal with the contributions of increased political democratization in South Africa following the regime transition of 1994 and the growth of the awareness of the power of public testimonies during the sessions of the TRC without referring to the influence of feminist thinking in South Africa. Feminist scholarship at South African universities and research bodies played a major role in sensitizing society to take action against hegemonic, male-dominated practices and ways of thinking. Contributions in this Special Edition such as the articles on narratives of cosmetic surgery, and on the experiences of physical disability emphasize gender issues.

Life histories allow us to learn about people and the way that they live (Rubin and Rubin 2005:8). We pass on our stories—our histories—from one generation to another. And in this process, we add to our ever-growing narrative repertoire: our reflections of, and on, the overall reality in which we live. The contributions in this Special Edition—together with those appearing in *Qualitative Sociology Review* (QSR) of January 2017 Volume XIII Issue 1—provide broad brushstrokes of life in Central South Africa. The voices and the stories in the articles reach into and open out deeper levels in the experience of "ordinary people." In doing so, the articles uncover new understandings of our histories and our evolving social world.

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Deconstructing My Library, Unwrapping My Lifeworld

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Abstract One of the most frequent ways of narrating everyday life in developed countries has been via the printed book. The invention of printing allowed for an ever-increasing mass production of *documents of life* that systematically established an era of communication and a political economy that had profound implications for the structure of living together. This article departs from the context of my own lifeworld: a lifeworld closely related to printed books.

When attempting to explore and understand the overt and covert meanings embedded in the historical development of our social lives and the objects around us, we can turn for assistance to an analysis of the books on our shelves, books that have been constant companions for long periods of our lives. In this article, I propose that any valid interpretation, understanding, and depiction of social reality need to be, in essence, autobiographical. The autobiographical account I present includes how my personal life trajectory led me to the books that surround me. And how, in turn, these books become a reflection of myself and my roots.

Keywords Storytelling; Meaning-Making; Lifeworld; Documents of Life

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Telling Stories

In today's world, there are strong indications of an increasing interest in narratives. One example of this interest is the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2015 to the oral historian Svetlana Alexievich for her work in the literature genre of narratives (Alexievich 1992; 2006; 2016; 2017). This comes in the

wake of our need to better understand human experience, human motivations, and the ways in which we impact our social and natural world. Narratives imply memory. In his ground-breaking work, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Paul Ricoeur (2004) reminds us that any phenomenological analysis of memory needs to include two essential questions: “Of *what* are the memories? *Whose* memory is it?” Our narratives center on our appropriation of memory, our capability for self-reflection. To understand how memory works, one must realize that *to be reminded of something is at the same time to remember who you are*. Memory is a complex system of storing information, an experience and a dialogue with the past. But, in the end, memory is an engagement with, and thinking of, the events, the people, the experiences, the beliefs, the truths/lies that we came across or were told about. My attempt at understanding the social reality in which I find myself is related to my autobiography. But, even though it is autobiographical, my memory is not free from collective, social, and institutionalized influences. My memory is an individual mental act, but it is also socially organized and mediated.

From the beginning, humans have found themselves in storytelling societies. We tell our stories; we listen to others’ stories; we story our lives. We are the only creatures to have this capability: to tell and record stories and then pass them on from one generation to another, from one culture to another. And our stories have consequences. They work their way into all aspects of how we live together with other people. Storytelling is a meaning-making activity. It is important in our search to make sense of our lives. Our stories tell of happenings and experi-

ences. They also tell of visions and of dreams. They speak of reality and of imagination, of politics, and of religion. Our stories and our ability to verbalize our lifeworld already at an early stage of our development opened the door to imaginary worlds and to the realms of the spiritual. And, gradually, our ability to make intellectual and emotional connections started to infuse our lives beyond the basic instinct to survive. From images drawn by early humans on the walls of caves it is clear that these were people who could think symbolically, and who could make visual representations of things they remembered and imagined. Not only is ancient art a marker of these shifts in cognitive activity, it also reminds us that the sophisticated ability to think abstractly has not been restricted to one part of the world as we know it today. Whether on the walls of caves in Europe or in artifacts found across Africa, the Americas, and Asia, examples of our unique capacity for imaginative expression and for symbolism are found all over our world.

One can even argue that stories are of such importance that had nobody ever spoken to us from the outside, we might only have had silence within ourselves. It is only by listening to others’ stories that we start to develop the capacity to tell our own stories. By internalizing others’ voices, we come to discover who we are and to discover our fellow humans. We are shaped by the stories preserved in our society. We are molded in such a way by our shared stories that we appear similar to others around us, and for this reason, we can be recognized by people from “inside” and from “outside” as members who belong together in a unique collective: a society. But, no child is merely accepting society’s stories. We

have the ability to resist the stories, we can participate in them, and we can collaborate in the stories. Quite literally, even as a young child we can start to talk back.

Writing Stories

The use of systems of symbols to capture and to convey meaning is very old. Long before writing as we know it was developed, several traces can be found of encoded utterances that made it possible for others to accurately reconstruct a written message. Although obviously connected, the development of writing and the development of well thought out, coherent texts are not the same. Early on in humankind's history we started to experiment with recording our stories. The moment when the first people started to think and plan for the future, and to remember and learn from the past, they displayed a higher order consciousness. This higher order consciousness gave humans a huge advantage and it helped us to cooperate, to survive in harsh environments, and even to conquer and to colonize. And all along, we have been using our ability for storytelling to record, to pass on, and to add to the narrative. Although the first traces of writing go back to Egypt more than 3,000 years BCE (The British Museum 2017), and many forms of proto-writing can be found on surfaces such as stones, tablets, tortoise shells, scrolls of leather, papyrus, clay vessels, and parchments, it was only by 1450 that the printing press and moveable type were invented (Childress 2008:42). Various political, industrial, and cultural revolutions ignited enlightenment and led to a slow replacement of ignorance by the light of knowledge.

The predecessors of what we call "books" were cumbersome, expensive, hugely exclusive volumes or codices, handwritten and illustrated—the reserve of the rich and the powerful. And even after the introduction of the printing press in Western and Eastern Europe noticeable changes towards rational and democratic knowledge were slow. Books remained the exclusive property of the powerful for centuries—a scarce item in many homes well into the 20th century. But, although books were scarce in most ordinary homes of workers and other less literate groups, the gradual increase of literacy brought about by the Reformation, and later the political and industrial revolutions in Europe, slowly led to changes in every aspect of the daily life of Europeans. And as a descendant from Europe, the roots of my life—from my distant past to my not-so-distant everyday reality—were also touched. Telling stories increasingly moved to writing stories and as an adult in the 21st century my life is mainly influenced by *documents of life*. I use the concept *documents of life* as a collective noun for materials that have been written or printed or reproduced in any way—materials that have an objective and independent existence. In this article, the term *documents of life* refers to books that were printed or a manuscript that represents a book meant to be printed. I exclude verbally conveyed biographies, narratives, oral histories, subjectively constructed summaries/testimonies, accounts or tales from this use of the concept *documents of life*.

This project of analyzing a serendipitously selected collection of *documents of life*—printed and published books—constitutes a way of making my own life, as well as life in general, intelligible to myself

and to others. I want to understand my own life and the society in which I live by focusing on a selection of printed documents that I have come across over almost 3 decades. These documents—all of them books—deal with many issues. Some deal with the abstract and imaginary world of the spiritual and/or religious, whereas others deal with concrete issues related to the experience of everyday reality. Given the position of religion and the institutionalized churches in the predominantly Christian part of Europe where my roots lie, it is to be understood that a large percentage of the oldest texts containing a documentation of my roots are related to Christian religion. In addition to religion, other important themes that run through my own life history are the themes of colonialism, imperialism, racism, language, identity, and time.

The Texts on My Shelves

The books in the collection on my shelves—books that I group together and refer to by the collective noun as the *documents of life* that I came across over many years during my travels in Central and Western Europe—have all been added to my collection based on their physical appearance. They are all old texts and they have considerable aesthetic appeal. Some date from the 16th century; the oldest one is from 1567—printed almost 100 years before the Dutch sent Jan van Riebeeck on the mission to colonize the Cape as a refreshment station for their fleets *en route* to the East. Although these *documents of life* are all old, they were all written, created, and presented in the format that we still associate with a book. At no point do I attempt to deconstruct the material book object. Their deeply instilled custom-

ary forms as objects and as vehicles for conveying their messages via text are largely left unchanged.

The words inside the texts in my collection—as well as the bound pages of these books—originated from and bear witness to the intentions, motivations, hopes, and sometimes even the fears and sufferings of human beings. They tell us something about the everyday lifeworld; they narrate a message or a story. But, in the context of them being a collection of documents, their ability to narrate is undermined: many of the texts in this collection are written in old, inaccessible languages and within opaque narrative structures. So, I cannot merely present these texts; I need to re-narrate, deconstruct, and even subvert narrative conventions. And this happens by presenting the texts in a way that evokes new stories in my mind as “reader” or that prompts my re-membling of old stories in new ways.

Let us for a moment not try to open these texts and not try to translate the languages of these texts—the inaccessible Latin, the High German or Dutch, and the old Czech, Slovak, or Hungarian—or to get a feel for the ancient English of 200-300 years ago. Let us rather accept that these books come from the past and that they contain content that is somewhat closed or obscured to us. These books now require improvisation—a new interaction and experience—in order to be “read.” Let us critically inquire into the aims, objectives, context, and content of the books in this collection of *documents of life*. We can start this inquiry by systematically reading the title pages of the texts; only the title pages. Without opening the rest of the texts and without converting the original print on the inside pages to meaning and message,

let us try to constitute a text for ourselves; remembering the old stories. In this way, we bring the old texts in this collection of *documents of life* into a dialogue with each other. By gathering them together in one area on the bookshelves the books have already attained a different character and the whole collection starts telling us more than what an individual book can do. The collection of *documents of life* brings us into a dialogue with the wider context of time and history. If I choose to engage, then I am obliged to reflect—to look back on and weigh up the motivations, intentions, successes, and sufferings implied by the different title pages, and presumably described on the pages of the different texts. I am also obliged to engage with the wider range of historical and philosophical preconditions they offer for understanding our social reality and its making.

The books in this collection on my shelves tell of things real and imagined, factual and fictional. Each book speaks about the doings, the plots, the characters, and story lines of a particular era and sometimes of a particular moment. And as any serendipitous collection will do, the collection constitutes *documents of life* of only some segments of reality. Some of the texts resonate in a way with the personal, subjective, and autobiographical dimensions of my life. Others belong more to group ideas, to the social world, to a collective—in this case, a collective that I can empathize with because it constitutes my own roots. And yet another part of the texts belongs to the story of humankind, of nations and cultures. The narratives contained in this collection of texts bring the themes individual, the group, and the larger social reality together in an intertextual dialogue. The narratives contained in the different texts and

the themes raised by them shape and influence each other. In addition, my own biography influences how I “read” each text, as well as how I “read” each text in relation to the others in this collection of *documents of life*. When visiting the Edvard Munch Museum in Oslo in May 2017, I was struck by a quote on the museum wall referring to the work of Munch, Norway’s most important visual artist: “Munch was preoccupied with how one picture could alter another picture when placed beside it, how the relationship and context created something greater than the individual works, a resonance, as he called it. And that is how it is with people too. Together we are more than separate individuals...” This notion is also true for books. When bringing a collection of books together in one place, the books start taking on a different character; the collection starts telling us more than what the individual books can do. In the same way as a small private library in an ordinary present-day family home can reflect something about the family, the collection of texts in this project on *documents of life* reflects something of my lifeworld as it resonates with wider social, cultural, and historical refrains.

The *documents of life* in my collection contain many topics—ambitious and wide-ranging moralistic guidelines, histories, rules and regulations, sermons and speeches, diaries and journals, textbooks, dictionaries and encyclopedias, Holy Scriptures, philosophical utterances, commentaries and exegeses, novels, and volumes of poetry. The books range widely in their physical size and shape, and, as I mentioned before, the oldest texts predate the first settlement of Europeans on southern African soil. All these *documents of life* have something in common

with me and my journeys, and—I believe—with the construction and re-construction of my life and its roots, but not one of the texts is South African. The closest to a South African text is the translation into the Afrikaans language of two Bibles containing the Reformed Calvinist Christian canonical books of the original Hebrew Old Testament and the original Greek New Testament.

Although they seem to be unconnected, the set of more than 140 texts in my collection weave and interlink with each other with the result that they create a closely related intertextual panorama. Within this panorama, as author—and as the “reader” of these texts—I am positioned as a White, Afrikaans-speaking, South African male whose secondary schooling, as well as university training took place in Afrikaans-speaking apartheid institutions. My professional career as an academic started at a bilingual university and continued at an Afrikaans higher education institution. I worked at universities situated in the heartland of apartheid South Africa. In the middle of the various states of emergencies proclaimed by the apartheid government during the second half of the 1980s, I was given the opportunity to work for a quarter of a century as a professor and head of department in a cosmopolitan, highly critical, English-speaking segment of the South African academic world. For the first time in my life, I performed my role as academic within the broader parameters of critical rationality and not guided by the many constraints of an ideological political structure. This opportunity opened the door to almost three decades of academic contact with colleagues in, and regular visits to, the Visegrad Group of countries—The Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland

and Slovakia—and Western Europe. My first prolonged stay in the Visegrad cultural and political alliance took place shortly after this Group was established on February 15, 1991 (Visegrad Group 2017).

At that point—the early 1990s—there were high expectations that the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 09, 1989 could lead to a worldwide broadening of autonomy and liberation from the shackles of oppression. Several historical events took place in quick succession. The rapid disintegration of the Soviet Union coincided with a series of events in Poland that led to that country’s Communist Party losing its grip on power. For the first time in the post-World War II history of Europe, a Communist government—the one in Poland—handed authority to a non-Communist opposition (Wnuk 2000). Shortly after this ruling, the Hungarian Socialist Party decided that it will no longer be officially called “Communist” (Kort 2001:69), and Czechoslovakia had its Velvet Revolution (Kuklík 2015:217). On April 23, 1990 Czechoslovakia changed its name to the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic with Václav Havel, former political prisoner and leader of the Civic Forum, as its first President (Encyclopedia Britannica 2011).

On the other side of the globe, in South Africa, the process towards democratization was also pushed and smoothed by conditions and causes not entirely unrelated to what was happening in Central Europe. The international success of the Anti-Apartheid Struggle against the ruling South African regime contributed to increasing acceptance of the idea that the National Party’s racist and restrictive domination must end (South African History Online 2012).

Effective disinvestment campaigns, boycotts on cultural, sport, mercantile, and academic levels, and extended lobbying in international council chambers forced the minority government to negotiate on the political future of all South Africans (South African History Online 2012).

When the Cold War drew to a close in the early 1990's, many people experienced a feeling that the world was naturally moving towards democratization and to an opening up of previously closed political structures. Democracy seemed to champion a system of basic values built on the foundation of respect for human life and dignity. South Africa's democratization process contained these sentiments. Reflecting a similar shift in public views as the one when Václav Havel became president of the Czech and Slovak Republic in 1990, many saw South Africa as a world leader in the establishment of justice, reconciliation, equality, and peace when Nelson Mandela—like Havel, also a political prisoner—was inaugurated as its first democratically elected president in 1994.

Now, a quarter of a century later, there are worldwide signs of growing disillusionment and pessimism. The move towards democracy and greater well-being for all is not as smooth or inevitable as previously thought. The world is not moving spontaneously towards democracy. Rather, many signs of democratic decay or anti-democratic reversal are visible. Some argue that in South Africa democracy has become a shell of itself, associated less with aspirational humanistic ideals than with its mundane manifestations in free, fair, and regular elections. Once again the stories are about

our world changing, fragmenting, and dispersing. The stories change because the forms and structures of the living together of people change. On the other hand: sometimes the stories change, but the underlying forms and structures remain defiantly unchanged.

Sociologists widely agree that the concept *social structure* refers to the way in which society is organized to meet the basic needs of its members. The social structure entails all the ways of doing things that have developed over time; it implies a widely accepted way of life, a broadly agreed definition of reality, and a shared view of the overall reality within which we live. Social structure is shaped by dominant norms, but also by their contestation. Layer upon layer of the social structure becomes set and sedimented over years, but also gets eroded. Our stories—contained in *documents of life* such as the collection on my shelves—help us to understand how we construct and reconstruct our lifeworld. Our stories contain and harbor our memories; they reflect the themes of our lives and of our social structure.

The Themes from the Texts in My Collection

Reflecting on the memories and stories in my small library of *documents of life*, four groupings of themes stand out—religion; colonialism, imperialism, and racism; language and identity; and time. These themes are not separate from each other or loose-standing. Political decision-making is often related to religious beliefs and motivations. A well-developed language often facilitates political sophistication and religious acumen. All the

themes above combine to illustrate the underlying principles of social change and of Western modernization—a process deeply ingrained in the notion of progress and one that is dominating my own Western mind (Nisbet 1980). The texts in my collection confirm a widely held assumption (Van Nieuwenhuijze 1982), namely, that the characteristics of modern people have always been related to their abilities to attain sustenance, comfort, peace of mind, material benefits, the optimization of progress, ascendancy, and maximum control. The collection of texts on my shelves—some old and others not so old—tells this well-known story of Western progress, prosperity, control, and wealth. One of the aims of this article is to search for deeply rooted principles of my own development history, as well as of the development history of the broader cultural tradition of Western Europe—from where I originate. Some of these deeply rooted principles might be:

- The acceptance of a single, linear time frame, within which it is possible to improve the quality of life.
- The possibility of social reform that is based on a historical foundation that can impact the present.
- The inevitability of the future, combined with hope and expectations of prosperity.
- The controllability of welfare, stability, equality, freedom, peace, and justice.
- A reciprocal relationship between rationalism and idealism.

- Confidence in the autonomous contribution of future generations.

Most of the *documents of life* on my shelves echo in one way or another the idea that the individual should constantly strive towards cultivation and learning; they praise rationality and a scientific approach. In contrast to the traditional society's restricted capacity to solve problems and to control the physical environment, the books in this collection proclaim that a modern society must strive to control not only the present but also anticipate and eliminate future pressures. These general threads running through the texts on my shelves lead us to focus more specifically on four broad themes.

Religion

Most of the oldest texts in my collection of *documents of life* are religious books, written mainly by members of religious orders. They deal with all kinds of sacred issues, morality, directives for everyday practices, as well as with guidelines for specific religious festivities. These old religious texts narrate in no uncertain terms how influential and powerful religion and the religious elite were: the texts tell the religious believers even how they should meditate and what the content of their prayers should be.

The religious texts in my collection of *documents of life* contain ideas, on the one hand, on beliefs—the coherent whole of convictions or opinions regarding the transcendent or supernatural—and, on the other hand, on specific practices or actions. These religious texts point out that people who shared convictions, particular forms of faith, and a specific

kind of religious awareness organized themselves together and willfully attempted to experience their everyday lives in terms of their faiths and convictions. This grouping together led to the establishment of structures, prescriptions for behavior, and a spectrum of practices. These structures—often in the form of Christian churches—had an effect on the broader reality of society and had a specific impact on the political, the economic, the educational, and the social levels of societies in the past. And these religious organizations had a strong effect on my own society.

The relationship between religion and society is clear in the collection of texts on my shelves. This relationship is also clear in the history of my country, South Africa. The majority of South Africans describe their religious affiliation as “Christian.” Within this general grouping of Christians, a range of opinions and positions exists regarding the role of religion in society. For many years, the Dutch Reformed Church tradition has been the most influential conventional western church grouping in this country. Within the broader Christian tradition in pre-democratic South Africa, there was little consensus about the roles and responsibilities of the church and of religion to eliminate discrimination and inequality in society, to care for the suppressed in all population groups, and to take a stand against the violation of all people’s rights and human dignity.

From early on in the history of South Africa, up until democratization in 1994, White South Africans determined the content of human rights and the distribution of wealth in the country. During this

entire period religion was connected to particular group interests. Since its formal institution, the Dutch Reformed Church supported apartheid. This church was even expelled from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in 1982 because of its role as church of the state. Its congregations were racially segregated and the White segment of the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa—the mother church—was constantly in conflict with the members of the daughter churches—the sections for Colored (the Dutch Reformed Mission Church), Black African (the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa), and Indian (the Reformed Church in Africa) members—who all endorsed the World Alliance of Reformed Churches’ exclusion of their mother church.

The role of the Dutch Reformed mother church in setting up, sanctioning, and practicing racial segregation—apartheid—is clear for all to see. Even before the National Party came into power in 1948, the church proclaimed and mixed into her teachings ideas on racial purity and White superiority. And as the policy of apartheid gradually became more and more institutionalized with the proclamation of the Population Registration Act and the Group Areas Act in 1950, the Mixed Marriages Act of 1949 and its amended version the Immorality Amendment Act of 1950, the separate Amenities Act of 1953 and various other discriminatory laws, the Dutch Reformed Church often provided biblical support for the government in order to carry out its policy of “separate development.”

Many of the books in the collection on my shelves have to do with the importance of religion. Religion and church constitute an institutional structure that

will guide church members' actions and practices. And these manifestations of religion ultimately have an effect on the political, the economic, and the broader cultural spheres of society. The collection of texts on my shelves tells me that, although religion is about the supernatural, about righteousness, and about striving for a better world, religion all over the world—and also in my country—often contributed to hatred, injustice, domination, and exploitation. Many of the evils of this world were conducted in the name of a god and of religion. When looking at these old religious texts, I can only wonder about their role in establishing my society—a deeply divided society.

Colonialism, Imperialism, and Racism

My collection of *documents of life* contains several books on history, geography, and civil rights from the period referred to by Harry Magdoff (1982) as “old imperialism.” This period started in the 15th century with European mercantilism in terms of which countries such as Spain and Portugal spearheaded the entry of European commerce onto the world stage—a stage that included the previously unknown continents of the Americas and Africa. One of the texts in my collection, Johannes Mariana's *Historiae de Rebus Hispaniae* of 1605, reflects on *The History of Spain* and on the discovery of new continents. With the blessing of the Catholic Church, the armadas set out to satisfy and expand the early appetite for industrial capital and for conquering the largest possible economic territory. The mission of priests accompanying the armadas was to expand religious conversion and conquer the territory of the soul. So, material and religious expansion went hand in hand.

Other texts in my collection of *documents of life* summarize wide-ranging ordonnances, resolutions, orders, and proclamations. They signify the—then new—order of European imperialism and of organized domination and control, of appropriation, and exploitation (Cohen 1973). And if you are a world player in the field of expansionism, accumulation—and almost inevitably—dispossession, you need a well-organized judicial system, reflecting the rational philosophy of age-old Roman-Dutch concepts of justice. In this way, the desire for political and economic dominance can be packaged as a “civilizing mission” and as part of the development of a rational economy. The texts from this genre in my collection of *documents of life* remind me that the beginning of the South African nation was closely connected to international quests for markets and the desire for growing profits of those times. And underlying this was a disregard for the rights of indigenous peoples, their values, traditional laws, and cosmologies. History is written by the victor, and in many cases, by the oppressor. The collection of books in this project are all from Europe—the oral histories of South Africa's colonized peoples are silent.

Closely related to colonialism and exploitation are the slave trade and forced labor. Trading in African slaves began with Portuguese—and some Spanish—traders taking African slaves to their new-found American colonies. British pirates joined in and the British were later given the right to sell slaves in the Spanish Empire after the Treaty of Utrecht (BBC. KS3 Bitesize History 2007) in 1714. By that time this roaring and pernicious trade was well underway.

The Dutch also participated in the slave trade. In Indonesia, the Dutch enslaved entire populations and it was therefore not difficult to extend slavery to the Cape Colony, a process that began soon after the 1652 arrival of Jan van Riebeeck, the founder of the Dutch East India Company's refreshment station. Van Riebeeck's efforts (South African History Online 2016) to get labor from the indigenous population through negotiation broke down. In 1658, the first slaves were imported—captured from a Portuguese slave trader. This group of slaves came mainly from Angola. Later that same year a group from Ghana arrived. A constant supply of slaves appeared to flow from the Dutch East India Company's returning fleets from Batavia. The slaves were not allowed entry to Holland—ironically, slavery in the motherland was illegal—so many officials sold their slaves at the Cape before returning to Holland. Throughout the Dutch control over the Cape—until 1795 when the Cape Colony became British property—slavery was well-integrated into the everyday lifeworld (South African History Online 2011). This situation continued under the British rule of the Cape Colony and until the abolition of slavery in 1834.

At the basis of slavery is racism. Slaves are defined as property; one human being is the legal belonging of another human. They could be sold, bequeathed, or used as security for loans. Laws governed the rights of owners and secured the subordinate position of slaves. The owners were allowed to dish out harsh punishment, to withhold food, to chain, and even to kill a slave—in case of a slave allegedly threatening the owner's safety. All of these were institutionalized in the social structure of the time. Out of slavery grows a culture of domination, control, and

subordination. No doubt the early history of master and slave, of Christian believer and infidel, of rich and poor, of White and Black played an important part in setting up the intergroup relations of our present-day world, including South Africa. The *documents of life* on my shelves remind us that we live in a world that throughout history clearly had the potential to be a better place, but societies did not create conditions for the actualization of each individual's full potential or personhood. Rather, the books remind us of the pro-active role religion and social practices played in the creation and maintenance of institutionalized and unequal lifeworlds. They remind us that the capacity to live a good life goes hand in hand with access to the most basic needs of social justice, humanity, and respect (Coetzee and Rau 2017).

Language and Identity

The *documents of life* on my shelves tell a further story, of the hegemonic power of language. From the early history of the printed book as we know it, Latin played a major role in providing a linguistic framework for and basis of control in as far as the exercise of power was concerned. A significant number of the printed manuscripts of the 17th and 18th centuries are in Latin—and a large proportion of these were written by members of religious orders such as the Society of Jesus, whose members are known as Jesuits and who carried large influence in the areas from where the texts in my collection originate.

History has taught us that the ruling class often uses language to manipulate the values and norms

of society. Imperial dominance goes hand in hand with language: the stronger state dictates the way in which the internal politics and the societal character of the subordinate state play out. Antonio Gramsci (1994; 2011), the Italian social theorist, sociologist, and linguist, is best known for the theory of cultural hegemony. This theory describes how the state, the ruling class, and elite members of society use cultural institutions to maintain power. Through a hegemonic culture they use ideology rather than violence, economic force, or coercion. The hegemonic culture propagates and reinforces its own values and norms, which then become entrenched as the common sense values of everyday life. In this way, the generally accepted conceptions of what is desirable coincide with the maintenance of the ideas as expressed by those holding power. And the fact that the vast majority of people living during the times the old texts were written could not read and could not understand a language such as Latin made it easier for the dominant classes to read their own meanings into the texts and then translate their interpretations into directives for living the everyday life. Thus, language was the vehicle to spread ideology and to maintain cultural dominance.

In order to consolidate dominant ideas and spread them into and across different languages, the compilation of dictionaries played an important role. The practice of compiling bilingual wordlists began as far back as the production of the first manuscripts containing text. The development of printing made it possible and practical to compile glossaries with equivalents for Latin words in some of the major medieval European languages. The dictionaries in the collection on my shelves signify the evolution of

language processing: the ability to use language in order to determine meaning, to control culture, and to preserve identity.

Most of the texts in this collection of texts on my shelves are old. The books are visibly old, and the languages in which they were composed are much older. The texts not only reflect the exhaustion that accompanies time, the engagement with ancient languages brings its own exhaustion. My personal biography led me to engage with the classics—with Latin, Greek, and Hebrew—and I experienced this exhaustion firsthand. Very little of my proficiency in these languages survived my resolution to move to a career in sociology, instead of the church. What does endure is an almost intuitive interest in how the underlying rationalities and ideologies embedded in classic western languages endure and continue to shape current realities. All the “book works” in my project reflect aspects of aging, of endurance and exhaustion, resolution and dissolution.

Time

In Western thinking, time is mostly seen as linear: a succession of existences or events from the past, through the present, and into the future. The idea of change occupies a prominent position in the way most people interpret their world (Nisbet 1980). Change and the modernist focus on the possibility—indeed desirability—of progress are closely interwoven with a number of other concepts: liberation, peace, justice, equality, and communality. These concepts resound with the ambition to move away from a primitive state towards one of wisdom. And so, the future becomes synonymous with

our desire to eliminate or to reduce problems and shortcomings related to our physical, social, personal, and emotional environment. This thread runs through most of the texts in this collection on my shelves—a thread that runs deep in the psyche of modern Westerners.

The less benevolent underbelly of this idea of progress and its altruistic aims is the ambition towards greater control. Our perception of change is founded in our view of the past and of the past's contribution to the present. But, it is the idea of the future—and the hopes and expectations regarding the future—that drives us to control our welfare, our stability, our freedom, and our peace of mind. But, as history shows, greater control often heralded much darker versions of the future than envisaged or desired.

In Conclusion

My deconstructing of the collection of old texts on the shelves of my library represents a qualitative attempt to explore and to understand the meanings embedded in the historical development of my social life, our present-day lifeworld, and the objects around us. We constantly participate in establishing our ever-changing social reality and part of this process should involve reflecting on what brought us to where we are. To reconstruct everyday reality and to reflect on how it has come about can never be an objective or value-free exercise. That is why I emphasized at the outset that my interpretations, understandings, and depictions of aspects of social reality—contained in the texts on my shelves—are largely autobiographical. As indicated in the section *Colonialism, Imperialism, and Racism*, the texts in this

collection are all from Europe. The voices of indigenous peoples are silent and their values, laws, and cosmologies largely disregarded. This silence and disregard are not deliberate: it is entirely to be ascribed to the nature of this project. My deconstructing of the texts in my library is an autobiographical encounter with texts that I came across during decades of engagement with Western and Central Europe. These texts were all authored and printed in Western and Central Europe. The unwrapping of these *documents of life* coincides with how my personal life trajectory led me to the texts in this collection—texts that contain elements of the broad historical context of my own lifeworld and that thus reflect and shape the way I make sense of them. The texts on my shelves become, to a large extent, installations that are my creations—in the same way as the books in these installations are the creations of the respective authors or scriptors who originally put pen to paper. I do not engage with the actual content of these books. I simply aim to take note of my collection's content and to situate this content within the context of my knowledge of my social reality and its historical roots. This exercise reveals how deep my social reality at the southern point of Africa is embedded in religious beliefs and practices, imperialist and colonialist policies, racist perceptions, cultures of domination and control, and values and norms that were incubated and nurtured in Europe centuries ago.

Living as a sociologist in a highly segmented South Africa sensitizes me to the ever-present danger of ethnocentrism—a major reason why people are divided and polarized. In a deeply divided society, conceptions of superiority and inferiority are based

on and shaped by race, social status, religion, and language. I was born a member of a specific race that regarded itself as more powerful than any other and that, for a large part of my life, exercised domination and control over other races. I was born into a mother tongue whose speakers wielded political power in an unequal social system where full participation was bestowed only on members of the White race. The church I was brought up and confirmed in is a church that openly declared its support for the unjust political domination by the racial and cultural minority into which I was born. Race, language, and religion clearly determined large parts of my life.

An autobiographical attempt to reconstruct some of the main parameters for understanding who I am and where I came from carries an important proviso—it is an intrinsically subjective exercise. Nonetheless, the books in my collection do not reflect

only the roots of deeply personal experiences. They are artifacts of a shared history, a shared society. They are also testimony to our common humanity: the fear and fallibility that walks hand in hand with our remarkable ability to construct and to unwrap. Although the world in which we live continues to divide us in terms of different racial classifications, we are intrinsically the same—we are all of the human race. There is also no intrinsic difference between the speakers of different languages. Just as there is no intrinsic difference between and within the many different religions and other cosmologies. We are all human. And as a human being I am endowed with the abilities to reflect critically, to encounter dialectically, and to strive towards understanding through inquisitive praxis. These all guide my epistemological journey towards unwrapping and breaking open the often neglected, subliminal meaning of my everyday lifeworld.

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Emotions and Belonging: Constructing Individual Experience and Organizational Functioning in the Context of an Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC) Program

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Abstract The analytical approach of this article is inspired by C. Wright Mills' (1959) notion of "the sociological imagination." Individual experience is viewed through the lens of the wider social context, particularly that of the organization. The socio-organizational context is then viewed through the lens of individual experience. The aim of this bi-directional gaze is to explore the relationship between individual experience and wider society. And in doing so, to identify and reveal the shared motifs—the significant, recurrent themes and patterns—that link and construct personal experience and social world.

The aims, findings, and research processes of the original study are rooted in the instrumental epistemology of program evaluation. Specifically, a mixed-method implementation-evaluation of a local non-governmental organization's Orphans and Vulnerable Children program. The aim of *this* article is to take the analyses and findings of that evaluation beyond its epistemic roots. Qualitative data were disentangled from the confines of thematic analysis and freed into their original narrative form. This allowed for a deeply reflexive "second reading," which brings whole narratives into a dialogue with original findings, contextual factors, and sociological discourse.

Key conceptual anchors are located in Vanessa May's ideas on the self and belonging, and in Margaret Wetherell's writings on affect and emotion. These are important aspects of working with children, particularly orphans and vulnerable children in South Africa, where many fall through the cracks of government's social services. A second, deeper, qualitative reading of the narratives of children, their parents/caregivers, and the organization's staff, explores three key pathways of individual and group experience that are inextricably linked to emotions and belonging, and which co-construct the social functioning of the organization itself.

Keywords Emotions; Belonging; Identity; Organizational Functioning; Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC); Sociological Imagination; Social Constructivism

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South African Children and Their Familial Caregivers

South Africa is unique in the regional and global contexts regarding the extent to which biological parents are absent from children's daily lives (Jamieson, Berry, and Lake 2017:101). As is the case with most social inequalities in the country, this circumstance is highly racialized (Stats SA 2017). Of the estimated 18.6 million children¹ in the country, Black-African children are by far in the majority,² and less than one quarter of them live with a biological parent (Wilcox and DeRose 2017:26). Instead, most stay with family, friends, and even neighbors—a way of life that is largely accepted and which originates in factors such as labor migration, poverty, the (un)availability of housing, and educational opportunities. “Many children experience a sequence of different caregivers, are raised without fathers, or live in different households from their biological siblings. Parental absence does not necessarily mean parental abandonment. Many parents continue to support and see their children regularly even if they have to live elsewhere” (Jamieson et al. 2017:101). For some children there is no prospect of being reunited with their parents: 17% of South Africa's children are orphaned (Stats SA 2017), most often due to HIV/AIDS.

Orphanhood, or living in a household without at least one biological parent, are conditions that *may*, but do not *necessarily* lead to child vulnerability—

which is a much more complex, intersectional issue. Poverty and unemployment are key contributors to vulnerability. Locally, in the Free State, approximately one third of all children live in households without an employed adult (Jamieson et al. 2017:107). And 14.5% live in households where there is reported child hunger (Stats SA 2017). Income poverty constrains children's access to basic human rights such as healthcare and education; it also compels children and their caregivers to live in physical environments that are unsafe (Jamieson et al. 2017:105). On the issue of personal safety, South Africa has alarming levels of violence against children, including sexual abuse (Burton et al. 2016). These are some of the main factors implied in the definition of a vulnerable child as, “a child whose survival, care, protection, or development may be compromised due to a particular condition, situation, or circumstance that prevents fulfillment of his or her rights” (DSD 2005:5).

The Organization as Caregiver

Many vulnerable children fall through the cracks of government-based programming, social services, and social welfare. As in other areas of South African life, civil society—particularly in the form of non-profit, non-governmental organizations (NGOs)—steps in to bridge the gaps. A longitudinal evaluation of South African community-based organizational support found that community-based NGOs have a positive effect on vulnerable children, particularly HIV-affected children, by improving their behaviors, their mental health, and reducing their exposure to violence and abuse (Sherr et al. 2016).

¹ Children are defined as those under the age of 18.

² Approx. 75% of all children in South Africa are non-White (Stats SA 2017).

One such community-based organization is the local Free State Province NGO featured in this paper. It reaches approximately 650 orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) via a program with four main components: OVC support groups; home visits; child rights and protection interventions; and household economic strengthening activities.

The organization has nine childcare workers operating at ground level. Each childcare worker is assigned to one of nine geographical clusters/areas, usually the cluster closest to her home. I use “her” deliberately: the childcare workers are women.³ Top and middle managers are also all women.

Theoretical Lenses

Ontologically this “second reading” of data and initial findings is rooted in phenomenology. Participants’ direct experiences of the world—of phenomena and events, even those in the less concrete realm of perceptions and emotions—are taken as “real” and are understood as having real consequences for participants in relation to self, other, and lifeworld. Importantly, perhaps unusually, my second reading regards “the organization” as a *living entity* made by people, for people, with an identity, and *capable of experiencing*, as well as interpreting and adapting via interactions with people and the wider social domain (Senge et al. 1994; Wheatley 1999). Regarding epistemology, phenomenology focuses on the relevance of understanding and interpretation in everyday life (Phillips 1990).

³ At the time of the research the OVC program had only one man at ground level; he was not available for data collection and left the organization soon after.

This second reading also draws on critical-constructivist ontology: on the view that (social) reality is constructed via language, and manifested in rules and norms. Epistemologically the focus is on understanding how the social construction of society links to the construction of the self (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Rau, Elliker, and Coetzee 2018). This involves excavating and exposing commonly held assumptions concealing the dynamics and structures of power in written, spoken, and visual texts (Foucault 1988). Researcher’s reflexion is key to this process, not only because we wield a lot of power over our research and must be mindful of the assumptions we bring to it, but less obviously, because the thinking processes and pathways of reflexion *itself* are socially constructed and therefore not value free. As Foucault (1988:38) asks: “How is the reflexivity of the subject and the discourse of truth linked?”

Belonging and emotion were submerged in the original evaluation in as far as their influence on program implementation and the organization itself was not measured, nor closely scrutinized. At the level of substantive theory, insights on belonging and emotion from the work of two academics help to shape my second reading.

Briefly, this article draws on Vanessa May’s (2011) notion of belonging as related to identity and reflected in the sociology of the everyday. Everyday life is characterized by intersubjectivity and involves, for instance, roles, status, and attachments to institutions, groups, cultures.

Margaret Wetherell’s (2012) writings provide conceptual anchors for analyzing affect and emotion.

Schools of thought in the sociology of emotion include evolutionary, symbolic interactionist, psychoanalytic, psychobiological, interaction ritual, stratification, and exchange theories (Turner 2009). Wetherell deftly sidesteps their many jostling, and often rigid, classifications to offer a pragmatic, holistic “way in” to studying emotion. She starts by defining it as a “relational pattern involving interaction, intersubjectivity, and ‘ongoingness’ which are embedded in *situated practice*” (Wetherell 2012:3). She elaborates:

Practice draws attention to both a transpersonal “ready-made” we confront and slip into, as well as to active and creative figuring. Routines do in some sense “land on” people and “subject” them. And “forms of encounter” or social relationships arrive with the affective slots for actors already sketched...It is an organic complex in which all the parts relationally constitute each other. [Wetherell 2012:125]

Wetherell’s (2012:4) formulation encompasses pattern and order, form and function, process and consequence. It posits that affect and emotion can be understood as *embodied meaning-making*. It is hospitable to complexities and allows for analyses that are not “boxed in” by rigid theoretical borders but open to the exercise of sociological imagination.

Analytical Processes

The analytical approach of this article derives from C. Wright Mills’ (1959) injunction to exercise “sociological imagination.” Analyses seek out significant motifs—shared recurrent themes and patterns—that link individual experience to the wider social

context, particularly the organization as social context. The aim is to reveal how the individual and the social context interact, and to explore if and how they co-construct one another.

Importantly, the analyses in this article go beyond those of the original research project, which generated the primary data and initial findings. The aim of the original research, its analyses, and findings served a very pragmatic goal—to evaluate the implementation of an OVC program and to generate recommendations for improving it. The aim of *this* article is distinctly different: to extend and deepen the original analyses by bringing them into a dialogue with sociology as discipline and discourse. As such, the insights presented here percolated slowly through layers of critical reflexion on the research as a whole—on its primary data, on findings, and field notes, on clues in the data and signals in the context. The second reading also derives from my personal experience and professional re-appraisal of the entire project and its processes. New interpretations emerge from my shift in gaze from pragmatic evaluator to reflexive sociologist. And this calls attention to the mutually transformative relationship between researchers, their subject matter, and their participants (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

Of note for a special edition featuring narrative methodology: qualitative data were originally analyzed thematically. I reversed this approach in the analyses for this article, returning to the whole narratives, to the full stories as participants told them. Thematic analysis can have the effect of dislocating data from their immediate textual context, from their position in the natural flow from one

statement to another, from one paragraph to the next—from the often untidy sequencing and intrusions of thought and speech to the neat categories of themes. There is a severance of meaning, or at least a disturbance of it, that can happen with thematic analysis. Narrative analysis allowed me to hear the voices again, to pay attention to the cadences, the sequences and timings, the slow hesitations and quick exclamations. Therein lay many clues to help re-member the texts and discover new meanings and connections.

Research Design

Primary data were gathered via a realist, mixed-method, assessment-oriented implementation evaluation (Pawson and Tilley 1997; Chen 2005) of a local OVC program (Rau et al. 2014).

Ethics: Formal ethical clearance was obtained from the ethics committee of the University of the Free State's Faculty of Education (Clearance no.: UFS-EDU-2013-043, dd. July 30, 2013). Researchers were very mindful of the comfort and rights of participants and great care was taken to do no harm. To this end a project psychologist was appointed to facilitate group-work with the children, childcare workers, and the children's parents/caregivers. She also supported the research team members.

Participant sampling/selection and data collection: Data were gathered by teams of two: one researcher and the psychologist. Throughout the process team members recorded their reflections, insights, and questions. These texts were useful in shaping and

sharpening our focus during the evaluation; they also contributed to the initial findings, and their secondary analyses for this article.

- *Children (OVC):* Random sampling avoided risk of selection bias. The total population of 608 OVC was stratified by sex, cluster, and age. Random processes identified 32 OVC to approach, and a list of replacements should any decline to participate. Children were reached in contact sessions lasting three hours per day for three consecutive days—so we opted for a more in-depth approach. Sessions were held in a mix of Sesotho-Tswana, the children's home languages. Methods were participatory and used drawings, decoupage, writing, and storytelling.
- *OVC parents/caregivers:* Caregivers of each of the randomly sampled 32 OVC were invited to participate. They were reached in focus group discussions that generally lasted 1 hour, were led by guidelines, audio-recorded, and also conducted in Sesotho-Tswana.
- *NGO staff:* All childcare workers (9) and all program managers/leaders (3) participated in informal talks, meetings, focus groups, and one-on-one audio-recorded interviews held in English.

Data processing: In preparation for analysis, audio-recordings, OVC writings, and field notes were transcribed, translated if necessary, and names were replaced with pseudonyms. The data were then exported to NVivo (qualitative data management software).

Insights and Findings

This second reading traces cycles in the social construction of individual and organizational experience and functioning in the context of serving in, and being served by, a local OVC program. Clues to detecting the cycles lay in the emotive content of participants' narratives. And how *inter-subjectively constituted* (Coetzee and Rau 2009) dimensions of emotion interface with belonging—that sense of connectedness between self, other, and society as manifested and experienced in everyday life (May 2011).

Circulating Conflict—Interrupting Fear

Narratives of children indicate that they most often express caring via discourses of “sisterhood” and “brotherhood.” One interchange between two boys during a child-contact session illustrates this. Both were pushing boundaries during the session—one through rebellious behavior and the other through non-participatory behavior. Clearly these two were friends, but what characterized their exchanges is that the boy with a “rebellious” attitude was over-protective of his “self-isolating” friend and would come quite fiercely to his aid whenever he felt that his friend was threatened or uncomfortable. It was like a brotherly bond of protecting the weak: he shielded his friend from being laughed at, from being mocked for his inability to express himself, or write, or even draw. But, in a strange turn of loyalty, *he* would then tease his friend—in essence, it was not fine for others to tease his friend, but it is fine for him to do so. Our project psychologist pointed out that the interchange was an interesting representa-

tion of the children's home and wider social environments—protecting and needing protection—yet (unconsciously) taking advantage of these roles, and the situation, to re-enact patterns of interaction that maintain a status quo. These patterns, and their well-worn emotional slots, are what Wetherell and Potter (1988 as cited in Wetherell 2012:12) refer to as “interpretative repertoires...threads of sense-making that work through familiar tropes, metaphors, and formulations.” The repertoires of these two boys function to maintain identities that are divergent and contradictory, yet each is indispensable to the existence of the other, like poles of a magnet (strong one-weak one; bully-bullied; feeling brave-feeling fearful). Importantly, these repertoires (Wetherell and Potter 1988 as cited in Wetherell 2012:12) work to maintain configurations of power, and to maintain roles of belonging (May 2011) that both boys tacitly accept and which, therefore, become repeated and reinforced.

What is intriguing in this interchange is the synchronous co-presence of two very different expressions of power: defending and violating. And this is not an isolated occurrence, the interaction pattern circulates more widely amongst children in the program. In a poignant narrative, delivered like a little soldier standing bolt upright, with eyes fixed straight ahead, one girl, aged nine, confessed her perplexity in the face of a significant moral dilemma:

I don't like it when other people are fighting, I don't like it when people are being laugh at, when we tease one another and make fun of other children. When they laugh and tease me and push me down on the ground, I told the teacher here. Then she told them,

“No” and why. But...but...me, I am also teasing. I know it’s wrong, but it just comes. I am heartbroken and I...I try to make right. I want stop hurting. I am not a thug.

Her narrative suggests that teasing does not only present as a dilemma, it involves complex and sometimes conflicting emotions, which in turn are situated in conflicting practices (bullying and then trying to “make right” with her victim). It is clear from other children’s narratives that these emotions and practices reach well into schools and other wider community-level contexts. The space of the organization’s support groups offers some succor, as another child observes:

I like [this place]. It protects us when it’s raining, it makes sure the thugs are not beating us up.

Again the word *thug*—it comes up repeatedly in the narratives. This is because crime and its perpetrators are part of everyday life in the communities where participants live and work. Crime and violence reach children in schools (Zuze et al. 2016), on the streets, and in their homes. The child support and prevention component of this organization’s OVC program is designed to mitigate the negative effects of different forms of violence on the children. Some advantages of attending the after-school support-group sessions are that children are kept off the streets, occupied, under the eye of childcare workers, and being taught about child rights and life skills such as knowing their own worth, how to say “No!,” and how to get help. Two children comment:

I learned that when you are abused at home, you should write a letter and put it in the box there. If you cannot tell the lady who teaches at the support group, you write a letter and put it in there, but if you can tell her, then you can call her to the side and tell her.

There are a lot of things I learned from [this organization]—like one has to have a bright future and not be attracted by gangsters. Because once you end up being a gangster, your name will be ruined; then when you’re older and want to find work, you’ll find difficulty because you have a lot of things that have made you lose sense of yourself, making it hard for you to get a job.

Childcare workers do not only teach children, they actively come to their assistance. One child attests:

If something has happened to anyone from us on the street, Sister [childcare worker] will say they should tell what has happened so that she can go call the police or go to the social workers.

Sometimes attacks on children on the street result from their belonging to the organization’s OVC program. Their parents/caregivers also speak about being stigmatized and discriminated against in their communities because they belong to a program that others associate with being poor and HIV-infected. Program staff do good and sensible work to interrupt this by making children aware that bullying undermines a person’s sense of acceptance and belonging in their support groups:

They have to be taught that bullying is wrong, bullying is the same as discriminating, and they are

discriminating one another. The children must be taught right here [in this organization] that they have to learn how to treat one another. Facilitators have to go and see how the children sit in each and every group and ask: “How are they coping towards one another?”

So, childcare workers do well to interrupt aggression among children in support groups. Nonetheless, there is a gap in the organization’s understanding: program staff do not connect bullying in the OVC program itself with societal-level violence. The program’s support group meetings are intended as a safe space for the children, physically and emotionally. Bullying violates this. Like a seed of aggression, bullying grows, and it matures into the myriad other forms of fully-fledged violence that have reached alarming levels in South African society (Burton et al. 2016). From the narrow context of the support group, to the wider communities in which the children live and in which the organization operates, this “ongoingness” (Wetherell 2012:3) of violence and aggression propagates emotions of fear and deep anxiety. In turn, these emotions structure patterns of interaction that have negative consequences for children (Carthy et al. 2010) and for the adult societies that they will come to shape.

Circulating Belonging—Interrupting Neglect

Several children’s drawings, and the stories they told about their drawings, pointed to crises of belonging, even when they are cared for by family or extended family. Three children have the following to say:

I am not seen in the house. There are their own children. It hurts one’s feelings.

I do not like my family because they treat me like a dog.

It hurts when there is family members who do not like or love you.

There are also differing degrees of personal neglect. The experience of one childcare worker illustrates what she and her co-workers witness on home visits:

Sometimes you get into the house you will find that there is no table, there is no TV, it’s just an open space. Even the blankets are not looking well. Even the child when comes at the support group is wearing clothes that you will feel sad when you look them. Some their shoes don’t sole, and the socks as well, and the dress don’t have zip. So, you will see by those things. Not to say the parent is careless, but is just that she is getting these things from people who notice that the parent have needs.

The organization receives donations of food, clothing, and blankets and distributes these from time to time. They prioritize those most in need. While understandable, the strategy has a most unfortunate effect: some children and their parents/caregivers feel unnoticed, as if they do not belong. This reinforces and re-circulates feelings of need and neglect. One parent says:

If people get food parcels from [the organization,] it would be only those who are poor-poor. It can’t be like that—other children get hurt.

Emotions tied up with giving and receiving are complex and charity can have unexpected negative outcomes, especially when there is not enough to go round. I recall a refrain repeating itself in my mind whenever I returned from the contact sessions: *Running on empty; Running on empty*. I remember feeling hollow. I understood exactly why childcare workers try to compensate for gaps that simply cannot be filled by available resources. Many overcompensate, for instance, with their energy and time: children and parents' needs or calls for help do not always coincide with working hours. One childcare worker speaks for many when she says:

You will find that you don't get rest. Even on the weekend you have to work.

The lack of boundaries between work-time and personal-time has serious repercussions for childcare workers; they become physically and emotionally burned out. And they cannot access psychological care. The organization cannot afford to pay for counseling, and the welfare system cannot supply it either because it is already overburdened—the ratio of social workers in direct formal welfare service to the general population in the Free State Province is estimated at 1 to 9,000 (Hall, Meintjes, and Sambu 2015). Two childcare workers have the following to say:

After some time, you know, maybe if we had two to three cases that are very painful, you will find yourself depressed and then when we come on Monday's meetings, we talk about issues...We comfort each other as staff.

In a statement broadly representative of childcare workers' attitudes and actions, the following statement shows how socially and emotionally constructed injunctions to duty and compassion override her longer-term mental health needs:

It makes me sad because you would be so heartbroken and see that you are damaging your mind emotionally and feeling like leaving the job. But, tomorrow, when you get to the support group and see the children, you feel you want to help them.

It is quite common to have a "stampede" on resources in severely under-resourced settings. This is precisely what happens to childcare workers in relation to their practical and emotional resources. They are not considered to be officially "at work" if they respond to calls for help after hours and on weekends. But, they are emotionally "hooked in" and more often than not, they do respond. In doing so, they find themselves using their own money for transport. Sometimes children simply arrive on their doorstep, and they cannot turn them away. As clearly demonstrated in the narratives of the children and their drawings of hearts containing the name of the organization, childcare workers are exceptionally kind and caring. But, they sometimes feel overwhelmed, and inevitably, cracks appear in their practical and emotional capacity to "contain"⁴ themselves and the people they serve. This can lead to resentment and frustration, as a statement from one childcare worker suggests:

⁴ "Containment" is a psychological concept. It refers to one person (usually a therapist, social worker, or "helper" of some kind) being able to receive, understand, and appropriately process the emotional communication of another without being overwhelmed.

There are those that are lazy; the ones who like to fight—they want everything while just sitting and doing nothing.

In the face of so much need, the organization itself also struggles to set appropriate boundaries. Instead of limiting its focus to a few specific areas of response, the organization develops “bleeding mandates” and tries to service too many children and too many varying needs. So cracks begin to appear at the organizational level too. The OVC program was initiated specifically to address issues of inequity in relation to the children and their households, but what a second reading reveals is how these very same inequities manifest and operate within the organization itself. In an ominous cycle, crises in belonging and neglect experienced by the program’s children also circulate amongst OVC program staff. Their stories point to experiences of “organizational neglect,” particularly when they compare their conditions to staff who work in the organization’s other programs. Uniforms are very important in the psyche of South African community-level workers: uniforms mark them out as important, as gainfully employed, and worthy of recognition and respect. Staff in the OVC program do not have a uniform and they feel this lack deeply; they interpret it as not being valued by the organization. One notes:

It’s ten years that [this program] has been working, but we don’t have uniform—other sections inside here, and other NGOs, when you look at them, you can see from where are they coming. People respect them.

They also have inferior working conditions compared to their counterparts in the organization’s

HIV testing program and HIV treatment literacy program. Because their work is concentrated on the poorest of the poor, and those hit hardest by the HIV epidemic, OVC staff also experience stigma-by-association, which manifests as being regarded with suspicion by some community members.

What becomes uncovered in the second reading, and its application of sociological theory and sociological imagination, are “affective-discursive loops” between the experiences and responses of the childcare workers and those of the children and their parents/caregivers. Significantly, their shared “rhetoric and narratives of unfairness, loss and infringement create and intensify the emotion[s]. Bile rises and this then reinforces the rhetorical and narrative trajectory. It goes round and round” (Wetherell 2012:7).

Circulating Power—Interrupting Dependency

Power operates via norms, values, and social rules, all of which are underpinned by assumptions. Sometimes we are aware of the assumptions that underlie how we see our world and shape how we live in it. Sometimes our assumptions are like shadows, indistinct and dimly understood. This section explores some of the assumptions underlying how the organization views itself and the children it serves. The emphasis is on how assumptions work to shape relations of power and to position the organization and its beneficiaries in relation to themselves, to one another, and to the wider socio-economic world. The exploration begins with parents/caregivers at the household level, then moves to the children, the childcare workers, and finally to relations of power between the organization and key factors in the

funding environment. In keeping with C. Wright Mills' (1959) "sociological imagination," the analysis tracks links in the social construction of reality from the level of the individuals, through the level of the organization, and into the wider societal level.

At the household level the program delivers training and support to OVC parents/caregivers to establish and run voluntary savings groups, and household economic strengthening activities such as home gardens and bread making businesses. During 2012, 59 voluntary savings groups with over 550 members had been established, and between them they amassed R1,146,974 in that year, which is a significant sum by South African standards, especially in poor communities. Household-ers are supported with very practical skills-training in establishing governance structures to manage members and their contributions, in banking know-how, and keeping good records. So exceptional work is done by the organization to extend the self-sufficiency of OVC households and caregivers, and this is achieved in ways that foster inter-dependency rather than dependency; this balances relations of power between the householders and the organization. Ultimately, this benefits the organization, which has good hard evidence showing the success of its efforts. And without a doubt the householders are empowered. One speaks for many when she attests:

VSL [Voluntary Savings Groups]—they work very well. We share in December, everybody save what they afford, we do it for ourselves and we were trained before we start our society...Whenever we have a problem, we call one of them [OVC program

staff] to please come and then they explain to us...We are satisfied about it.

Regarding the children themselves, as the previous section clearly shows, some are seriously disempowered by their life circumstances. In a touching testimony to his sense of agency and self-in-the-world, one boy concludes:

I don't know how to talk.

An effect of daily conditioning—of witnessing children, households, and communities locked into hardship—is that childcare workers in the OVC program develop a prevalent view of the orphans and vulnerable children as being needy, passive, and lacking real power. As discussed earlier, childcare workers get so *emotionally* hooked into this view that they help to the extent of overtaxing their own physical and emotional capacities. It is not only childcare workers in constant contact with the children who develop a predominant view of them as being needy and powerless. This view of orphans and vulnerable children circulates so widely throughout the world that it has become a stereotype—a taken-for-granted construct that is so entrenched in collective understanding that we rarely question the assumptions on which it is based. An effect of this for the organization and its OVC program is that childcare workers and managers can miss (at worst) or underestimate (at best) the very real strengths and capabilities of the children.

When asked about what they liked and disliked about support group meetings, some of the older children in the program mentioned being bored

with repetitive activities and topics. Some alternatives they suggested are quite creative and could be viable for the children, as well as the organization. For instance, they felt that they could be more involved in fundraising activities and that some support group meetings could be used to brainstorm ideas, learn how to select the best ideas based on their viability, and then learn how to plan and implement them. Even small and simple ideas could provide a platform for the children to improve their self-efficacy and resilience, both of which are key to surviving and thriving in the context of their difficult life circumstances. From the narratives of a group of older children it is clear that they already mobilize group participation to find solutions to problems. One older child states:

A thing I love is that when we are here, we can all sit down and share ideas with each other, and even if the idea you present is not so satisfactory, it can be discussed in the group. And you can be free to express your feelings—it's not where you keep your feelings bottled up. When it's time to go home, you feel that you are satisfied. Even if you have a problem and you feel you can't tell your parents, it's possible to sit down and find a solution in the group.

The organization delivers a range of interventions to children, including psycho-social interventions that teach them about self-worth, assertiveness, and the importance of giving and deserving respect. But, how they apply their learning is not easy to monitor. The organization could take one small leap to incorporate activities that allow self-sufficiency to be *practically* experimented with. Engaging children in designing and running their own programs

transfers power into their hands and opens the door to them becoming more pro-active in solving everyday problems and dilemmas (Feinstein and O'Kane 2005; Save The Children 2005). As Wetherell (2012:125) points out: "Practice draws attention to both a transpersonal 'ready-made' we confront and slip into, as well as to active and creative figuring." A greater sense of personal power is a hospitable space for "active and creative figuring" (Wetherell 2012:125) to occur. It opens up new positions to adopt, new energies to try out, and new feelings to emerge. From the local level to wider communal and societal contexts, shifts such as these can interrupt dominant discourses and stereotypes of orphans and vulnerable children as being passive, helpless, and sad.

At another level of experience, and power, the narratives of some of the organization's childcare workers point to a demoralizing instrumentality in the workplace, and emotions that arise out of this. Rather than feeling like creative human resources, they feel undervalued and resentful because within the OVC program they are implementers only. They have little say in mid- and higher-level planning such as target-setting, in practical aspects of organizational functioning, or in OVC program design. Their practical and emotive "felt" reality arises out of cycles of cause and effect. As discussed earlier, childcare workers do not set appropriate boundaries between their personal-private lives and their communal-work lives. This repeats at the next level: the organization also cannot seem to say no to any call for help. Instead of focusing steadfastly on demarcated areas and quotients of response, the organization develops "bleeding mandates" and tries

to service too many of the various needs of the community it *belongs to and feels for*. In doing so, physical and human resources are spread ever more thinly. Three childcare workers explain:

We started with orphans and HIV-positive children. So, we started with small groups. But, children are children, they tell each other—so we found ourselves going from 30 children [each childcare worker] up and up to 60. And now, even more. But, not all came because of needs: some children are just coming because other children are coming though they don't have major needs in their households. So, we must look more at children's needs.

If we add more children, then we should know that we are not going to do the best job, there will be children that I'm going to visit only once in a year and maybe some not even once in a year because I'm not working with children only, I work on gardens, groups of society, people of IGA [Income Generating Activities], chickens, gardens, bread ovens.

It is difficult because the time that we get it's not enough that is needed for all the jobs and the monthly targets. Sometimes it feels impossible...Our work is too much—we must work during weekends if we want our report to be good. We have to push and pressurize ourselves.

As a result of mounting pressure, and in a troubling mirror image of conditions in the communities it serves, the organization finds itself in a constant state of crisis management. Meetings are not regularly attended by top-level managers, who are hard pressed to meet donor demands, report writing, and

relentless rounds of fundraising. Childcare workers also have very heavy workloads. In all this rush, little space is left for real engagement with challenges, for important strategic work, or for formulating new approaches to programming—in effect, the inputs, and the very voices of program staff are silenced.

Open communication between people *at all levels* within an organization facilitates feedback and the exchange of ideas. This allows for new voices to be heard and for leaders and managers to take up ideas that have their genesis in the needs and experiences of co-workers as they engage on a daily basis with the realities of the workplace. This empowers all concerned to create their organizational realities (Wheatley 1999:37). It challenges outmoded structures and stimulates the innovation so vital to survive and to thrive. As Wheatley (1999:67) comments: “an organization rich with many interpretations develops a wiser sense of what is going on and what needs to be done. Such organizations become more intelligent.” They also become much more resilient in the face of wider social pressures such as donor funding.

No analysis of NGO's serving vulnerable children, and households made vulnerable by HIV/AIDS, can ignore the influence of funding on organizational survival and success. Accordingly, in this final segment of my second reading, I view organizational belonging and identity through a much wider socio-economic lens: its funding environment.

In the first large scale inflows of international HIV/AIDS funding, beginning around 2000, it was a fairly straightforward business for civil society organi-

zations to access donor and bilateral funding directly (Kelly and Birdsall 2010). Then, in 2005, "The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness...called for greater national ownership and control over development assistance and better harmonization of donor activity at country level" (Birdsall and Kelly 2007:1). This meant that the bulk of HIV funding would be channeled to recipients via large scale international and national NGOs and national government sub-granting mechanisms. In the process, funding flows became less easy to navigate and did not reach many small local organizations trying to serve their communities (Birdsall and Kelly 2007:2). Birdsall and Kelly's fascinating research on the dynamics of civil society and AIDS funding in Southern Africa showed how these changes in funding flows altered the face and functioning of civil society organizations over time. Their research traced three phases of change: from pioneers to partners to providers. Small local organizations developed organic, often innovative, responses to on-the-ground needs (they were Pioneers). Following the Paris Declaration, they partnered with national level NGOs and government departments to harmonize responses and access funding (they became Partners). In time, their independence and their responses, which were deeply rooted in local needs, gave way to a commercial model wherein they were contracted to roll out standardized programs which they did not devise (they became Providers).

On reflection, I came to realize that this is exactly what happened to the organization and its OVC program. What resulted is an organization that moulds its agenda to fit the priorities of funders. The organization staff told of many instances where interven-

tions based in on-the-ground needs had to give way to interventions that better suited national and global agendas. Local funding via corporate responsibility programs were also not sustainable in the longer term. Of note is that not one of the organization's funders support the costs of key managerial and planning processes such as formal evaluation, and key personnel needs such as counseling for child-care workers. Ultimately, this small organization has little room to move and little space to formulate a unique, solid, and enduring sense of organizational identity. As Wheatley (1999:39) observes:

There is an essential role for organizational intent and identity. Without a clear sense of who they are, and what they are trying to accomplish, organizations [and people] get tossed and turned by shifts in the environment. No person or organization can be an effective co-creator with [this] environment without clarity about who [they] are intending to become.

An effect reaching from the individual through to the organizational level pivots on intersubjectively constituted understandings of the self as "subject," not agent. The narratives of organizational managers and coordinators speak of their sense of powerlessness in the face of systems that they cannot change. This plays out at all levels in emotions of panic, anger, and frustration. Wetherell (2012:12) observes:

The interrelated patterning of affective practice can be held inter-subjectively across a few or many participants. It can thread across a scene, a site or an institution and is spatialized, too, in complex ways. Intriguingly, an affective practice can be "held" in

a particular place. Further solidification comes into view when we consider the affective practices of entire social categories and historical periods.

The experience of belonging (or not-belonging) arises out of dominant discourses with their underlying assumptions, their overt and covert rules and norms, and attendant affective practices. Individuals have power and can exercise it in many ways. By “individuals” I also mean “the organization”—which in this second reading is regarded as a living entity made by people, for people, with an identity, and capable of experiencing, as well as interpreting and adapting via interactions with people and the wider social domain (Senge et al. 1994; Wheatley 1999). But, as the data and my second reading show, individuals and the small non-governmental organization that they constitute are more often the recipients or “subjects” of power than “vehicles of

power” (Foucault 1988:98) in so far as they are contained in, and constrained by, the whole and intricate architecture of our global-local, or, as it is called nowadays, our *glocal* world.

In Conclusion

Social cycles are complex and spherical. They also intersect. I started by “pulling on threads” (Wetherell 2012:12) in a second reading of individual and organizational narratives. The aim was to see how experiences of belonging, and their accompanying emotions, influence and perhaps even co-construct individual and organizational realities. I found structural knots of top-down and bottom-up power, and looser, more circular relational strings of power, all working together in the construction of individual and organizational identity and functioning.

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Reflecting on Female Beauty: Cosmetic Surgery and (Dis)Empowerment

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Abstract This project aims to unwrap some of the complexities related to female beauty and the body. It reflects on the second wave radical feminist view that beautifying the female body serves to attract male approval via the male gaze, both of which are deeply entrenched in patriarchal power. This perspective positions cosmetic surgery as a disempowering act for women. In riposte, we turn to third wave liberal feminist ideas to engage with the narratives of ten participants who tell of their personal experiences of, and motivations for, undergoing a cosmetic intervention. We undertake an in-depth exploration of these lifeworld experiences and the interplay of subjectivity and intersubjectivity in the women's encounters. Findings suggest that a cosmetic intervention is often obtained for the self as opposed to satisfying the "other." Importantly, cosmetic interventions allow a process to occur in which an individual's physical body becomes better aligned to her sense of self. From this liberal feminist perspective, cosmetic surgery is positioned as an empowering act.

Keywords Feminist Thinking; Cosmetic Surgery; Phenomenology; Lifeworld; Social Constructivist; Embodiment; Self-Empowerment; Femininity

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Plastic surgery can be a life changing medical intervention. Having the ability to reshape a birth defect or the physical scars of a traumatic incident is socially accepted. The individual is normally supported in his/her decision to change the flawed/damaged body via a surgical intervention in order to present a more refined and perhaps socially constructed ideal of “normal.” By permanently correcting the disfigured body, the individual has the opportunity to live a fuller, more ordinary everyday life—physically fitting into his/her lifeworld and everyday social encounters. However, cosmetically reshaping the healthy/undamaged female body for beauty purposes often incurs a different and somewhat negative understanding—particularly from a radical feminist perspective.

Cosmetic surgery in the context of feminist thinking has received much attention and discussion in recent years. Beauty is a socially constructed concept. Early first wave feminist literature traditionally explores the disempowering effects of gender norms on female beautification and body work. Tradition-

al second wave radical feminist frameworks often view women who beautify the body as submitting to patriarchal norms and ideals. These women are subsequently regarded as being vain, superficial, and frivolous.

This article argues for re-negotiating this radical feminist outlook by exploring an individual’s subjective and intersubjective encounters and understandings of her experiences, perceptions, motivations, and desire for employing aesthetic surgery. The article explores the interpretive nature of participants’ everyday experiences by focusing on each individual’s “action and choice” in relation to how her reshaped body influences her lifeworld and sense of self—from her feminine embodiment to her self-empowerment.

Theoretical Positioning of the Research

Philosophically, the study is positioned in the theoretical frameworks of Alfred Schütz’s (1967; 1970; Schütz and Luckmann 1973) phenomenology, Peter

Berger and Thomas Luckmann's (1991) social construction of reality, John Creswell's (2014) interpretivist methodology, as well as Kathy Davis's (1995) and Iris Marion Young's (2005) feminist literature. This theoretical structure enables us to unwrap and explore the complexities related to an individual's subjective perceptions and experiences of her everyday lifeworld. The focus falls on the interpretive nature of a lived experience.

From a phenomenological perspective, attention is given to the essence and uniqueness of lived experience. Emphasis is placed on an individual's subjective understanding in relation to socially sanctioned cultural norms and ideals of what is considered desirable or not, as viewed along a continuum of interventions from temporary beautification tactics, such as wearing make-up, to the more permanent strategy of aesthetic surgery. To achieve a deeper appreciation of the phenomenon of cosmetic surgery and female embodiment, the study engages Alfred Schütz's phenomenological themes of the "lifeworld," "stock of knowledge and consciousness," "subjectivity and intersubjectivity," "embodiment," as well as Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's "social construction of reality." These thematic approaches provide the research a structured context for unwrapping unique moments and understandings within the lived experience—particularly in as far as self-perceptions, emotions, and meaningfulness are concerned.

As meanings are socially constructed, we try to understand the interaction between self, other, and society as manifested in the reasons why a woman opted for a surgical intervention and how this cos-

metic "action and choice" influences her self-perception—and more specifically, how it constructs her personal identity, femininity, gendered embodiment, and (dis)empowerment. The cosmetic encounter is subjectively experienced. However, due to processes of social dialectics,¹ intersubjectivity plays a vital role in how the individual views herself, interacts with and understands others, and how she acts to be socially correct. These lifeworld experiences influence how an individual perceives and (re)constructs her sense of self—emotionally and personally. Clandinin (2007:186 and 294) agrees: "Individuals construct their identities through their own and other's stories...People can control the meanings that others hear in their stories through 'positioning' themselves in socially acceptable ways vis-à-vis their narratives." To present a reflexive methodological account and analysis of the narratives, we apply Bamberg's (2012:101) "narrative practice perspective" and Creswell's (2014:197) "six step model" to structure and guide the data processing, analysis, and presentation process.

In keeping with its focus on female experiences, we approach the research from a feminist perspective, notably the third wave liberal feminist ideas of Kathy Davis and Iris Marion Young. Davis (1995; 2003) sees women as conscious and self-determined members of society. To understand why a woman obtains a cosmetic procedure, it is important to explore her narrative in relation to themes of "identi-

¹ Social dialectics is the mediation of "taken for granted knowledge...This is the knowledge that is learned in the course of socialization and that mediates the internalization within individual consciousness of the objectivated structures of the social world" (Berger and Luckmann 1991:83). In other words, social dialectics represent the subject's internalization of "socially agreed norms, values, and beliefs" (Heggenstaller 2018:15).

ty,” “agency,” and “morality” (Davis 1995:11). *Identity* deals with how an individual engages her subjective sense of self, including how she perceives herself in relation to her appearance, and the perceived flawed body part (Davis 1995:11). *Agency* is concerned with how an individual understands her sense of self in relation to her social reality—how she gives shape to her lifeworld within everyday social constraints and interactions (Davis 1995:11). *Morality* is generally perceived as a concept dealing with right or wrong. However, in Davis’s study, “morality” focuses on a woman’s “action and choice,” which signifies that a cosmetic intervention can be motivated as a legitimate solution to overcome or re-negotiate emotional suffering and pain (Davis 1995:11).

Young (2005:35), on the other hand, views women as limited by their gendered body—in bodily movement, gesture, and posture. She uses the term *feminine motility* to refer to a woman’s potential for undertaking certain movements which are not, perhaps, associated with normative notions of “femininity.” To unwrap the complexities of feminine motility and gendered embodiment, she proposes a deeper appreciation of three key processes: “inhibited intentionality,” “ambiguous transcendence,” and “discontinuous unity” (Young 2005:36–38). The first modality, *inhibited intentionality*, explores a woman’s emotional insecurity with her own body in so far as how the gendered body “reaches toward a projected end with an ‘I can’ [attitude, but] withholds its fully bodily commitment to a self-imposed ‘I cannot’ [attitude]” (Young 2005:36). The second modality, *ambiguous transcendence*, is concerned with how an individual perceives her embodied sense of self while engaging with her social world. This implies that

a woman “often lives her body as a burden, which must be dragged and prodded along and at the same time protected” (Young 2005:36). The last modality, *discontinuous unity*, points to how the female body expresses a sense of disunity between aims and actions. This disunity results in a woman continuously trying to realign her self-perceptions with her everyday lifeworld (Young 2005:38). Therefore, “discontinuous unity” explores the female body as a “thing that exists [to be] looked at and acted upon” (Young 2005:39).

By incorporating the feminist frameworks of Davis and Young, the study analyzes both the *emotional*, as well as the *physical* consequences/limitations experienced by the individual. In other words, the study aims to bring new understandings of how body dissatisfaction and its associated emotional pain motivates a woman to permanently change or reshape her perceived body flaw or shortcoming by employing cosmetic surgery.

What Is Beauty?

There are a myriad of positions in relation to the long-debated notion of what is beautiful and what constitutes beauty. The challenge is often encapsulated in the saying: “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” (Margaret Wolfe Hungerford 1878 as cited in Kendall-Tackett and Klest 2013:63). If this is so, then beauty is constructed, negotiated, positioned, and experienced, for the most part, subjectively. Anna Rocco (2015:1) agrees:

Beauty is not objective; there are many definitions. It is the way that one expresses their passions, or the

way that someone can smile or laugh and light up an entire room...This is what true beauty looks like, and this is how we are supposed to redefine beauty, by bringing it back to the true form, which is open for every single person's individual beauty.

From a radical feminist perspective, beauty is seen as "a cultural practice and one that is damaging to women" (Jeffreys 2005:6). This cultural practice sees a woman adapting to and incorporating various beauty regiments into her everyday lifeworld. According to Bromley (2012:79), such practices "are prescribed by patriarchy [and include but are not limited to]...dieting, wearing makeup, hair styling, plastic surgeries, and shaving various body parts." Second wave radical feminists argue that such practices are symptomatic of women as "cultural dopes" (Garfinkel 1967:68). They maintain that a woman often thinks that she actively participates in her lifeworld and social reality, (falsely) believing that she has a sense of freedom via her "choices." However, these "choices" are a myth and, more ominously, a construction mobilized by the patriarchal system to control and oppress women. Jeffreys (2005:1-2) confirms this position:

beauty practices are not about women's individual choice or a "discursive space" for women's creative expression, but, as other radical feminist theorists have argued before me, a most important aspect of women's oppression...beauty [is] identified as oppressive to women.

In our study, this radical point of view is re-negotiated by considering an individual's unique lifeworld encounters, her agency, identity, and voicing of sub-

jective moments and motivations. Liberal feminism aims to understand the emotional consequences of an experience and does not practice a "one size fits all" approach where "men are the enemy" (Bartlett 2004:105; Jeffreys 2005:26; hooks 2015:78). Rather, third wave feminist thinking probes and unearths thoughts, feelings, meanings, as well as emotions that influence how an individual perceives her sense of self. From a liberal perspective, female "beauty" lies in and is emphasized via an individual's experience and sense of her "identity," "agency," and "morality" (Davis 1995:11). Therefore, feminine "beauty" is unique and reflects an individual's inner qualities and essence. Thus, the pursuit of beauty may not be predominantly about the suppression of women, but rather an expression of their own free will and liberation. It is from this perspective that the article develops and advances.

Feminist Thinking and Cosmetic Surgery

Since the 1830s the feminist movement has gained momentum and popularity. This is due to their success in re-negotiating patriarchal gender norms and advancing their feminine struggle, particularly for the political vote. The significance of obtaining the vote challenged conventional gender roles that were reinforced in common law, as well as in marriage vows. Up until then a woman was considered to be largely the property of her husband and her main duties were to serve and please him. Thus, for women, the right to vote was the first step to gendered empowerment in the form of social equality. It was within this context that *first wave* feminism was born.

Due to the persistence of deep-seated and socially sanctioned gender inequalities, the feminist movement grew into the *second wave* struggle of the 1960s. This saw progressive women protesting outside parliaments and redefining traditional gender norms by shaving their heads. It was also this outspoken class of women that drew the gender-based battle lines, positioning men as the cause and catalyst of inequality, and thus the enemy.

For feminists, the obvious and quite legitimate ideological “other” and enemy has been the quintessential dominant class itself—men. [Schacht and Ewing 2004:5]

Second wave radical feminists understand feminine beautification and cosmetic reshaping of the body as forms of patriarchal oppression. Women change their physical appearance—temporarily or permanently—to meet socially constructed ideals of beauty mainly to satisfy patriarchal norms and the male gaze. This perspective implies that aesthetically inclined women are nothing more than subservient individuals. It is this kind of female subservience Ira Levin (1972) had in mind when coining the term the “Stepford Wife”² and what is further elaborated on in Harold Garfinkel’s (1967:68) notion of the “cultural dope.” Cosmetic surgery is, therefore, overwhelmingly perceived as a demeaning and disempowering act, to the individual herself and to society as a whole.

² Stepford Wife—refers to “a married woman who submits to her husband’s will and is preoccupied by domestic concerns and her own personal appearance” (see: <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/stepford>. Retrieved October 11, 2016).

Liberal—or *third wave*—feminists challenge this stigmatized view by redirecting the focus towards understanding change in the everyday lives of women. This change engages notions related to gender equality and liberation over traditional patriarchal ideals (hooks 2000:44 and 47). The underlying aim of feminism is to empower women who are sexually exploited, oppressed, and deserving of equal rights. The philosophy within the liberal feminist movement is focused on gender equality and emancipation in order to move away from male oppression. Liberal feminists recognize that men too can have a feminist orientation and play an important role in bringing about gender equality. The following quotes illustrate that Kathy Davis and Iris Marion Young are not alone in their liberal views. Other feminist thinkers have also challenged the radical perspective:

Those feminist activists who refuse to accept men as comrades in struggle—who harbor irrational fears that if men benefit in any way from feminist politics, women lose—have misguidedly helped the public view feminism with suspicion and disdain...it is urgent that men take up the banner of feminism and challenge patriarchy. The safety and continuation of life on the planet requires feminist conversion of men. [hooks 2000:115-116]

...we do not want you to mimic us, to become the same as us; we don’t want your pathos or your guilt; and we don’t even want your admiration...what we want, I would even say what we need, is your work. We need you to get down to serious work. And like all serious work, that involves struggle and pain...you see, you have all of your work before you, not behind

you. We as feminists need your work...we need you as traveling companions into the twenty-first century. [Jardine and Smith 2013:60]

This inclusive and hospitable re-positioning of feminism not only offers men liberation from the imposition of the one-dimensional role of “oppressor,” it also re-positions women in relation to their own choices and actions, recognizing that they are not mere puppets, but *self*-actualizing beings. It is within this liberal view that we situate our analysis of participants’ experiences. This is in line with Davis’s (2003:110) notion that “cosmetic surgery [is] a way [for women] to take control over their circumstances over which they previously had no control.”

Liberal feminists such as bell hooks, Kathy Davis, Debra Gimlin, and Victoria Pitts-Taylor (2007) have opened our eyes to an alternative and renewed understanding of women’s rights. They have focused on issues such as body dissatisfaction, cosmetic surgery, identity re-negotiation, media icons, images, and the embodied experience (Snyder 2008). Kathy Davis sought to understand why women undergo a medical intervention for a purely cosmetic purpose. In her findings—not accepted by all feminists—she argues that women who rely on cosmetic surgery often do so to mirror their “true” sense of self or identity. The body becomes a conduit and means of reflecting positive aspects of how the individual sees and feels about herself.

Cosmetic surgery is not the expression of the cultural constraints of femininity, nor is it a straightforward expression of women’s oppression or of the normal-

ization of the female body through the beauty system...cosmetic surgery does, however, allow the individual woman to renegotiate her relationship to her body and, in so doing, construct a different sense of self. [Davis 2003:84-85]

Third wave liberal feminist thinking looks at an individual’s subjective experiences and emotionality. Accordingly, we examine the emotional incongruence, and even emotional pain, that is experienced when the physical body is not experienced as a true reflection of how the individual constructs her sense of self.

The Male Gaze

The objectification of women has long been of concern to feminists, one of which was Laura Mulvey (1975:4) who coined the phrase “the male gaze”—a “sexual imbalance” in how men view women. It also denotes the patriarchal dominance that pressurizes women to conform to physical appearances that please the male understanding of beauty. Mulvey (1975:4) elaborates:

In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Woman displayed as sexual object is the leit-motif of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to striptease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire.

From this perspective, the male gaze implies that the natural female body is inferior and in need of

modification—an idea which is firmly established in “propagating patriarchic values” (Wegenstein 2012:152). Furthermore, by remodeling the body, cosmetic surgery and bodily interventions are seen predominantly as “facilitators” to the male fantasy and desire (Wegenstein 2012:160).

The male gaze does not take into consideration a woman’s “identity” or own idea of herself. Rather, it typifies a simplistic physical sensibility which is aimed at pleasing the male senses (Mulvey 1975; Levine 2005; Kosut 2012). In short, she becomes a sexual object. Wegenstein (2012:152) suggests that through the idolization of celebrities and the insatiable need for fame, “the cosmetic gaze” became an offshoot of “the male gaze” and that this further exemplifies “disarticulated bodies” that are “sutured” together and presented, as well as “experienced as beautiful.” Cindy Davis and Melanie Katzman (1999:58) comment:

In Western cultures, girls are influenced by unrealistic “Barbie-doll” body shape and constantly told that this is beautiful, whereas boys are influenced by muscular images and told that they should be big and strong. Television, movies, and magazines provide constant messages about the ideal standard of beauty and how one should look and behave.

The message endorsed and reinforced by a plethora of media platforms is that a woman’s identity is linked to, and defined by, that of her male counterpart, who is the main protagonist of his, as well as her lifeworld (Kosut 2012:195). This very one-sided perspective is challenged by Zeisler (2008:7) who notes that it is crucial to reform women’s under-

standings of popular culture by integrating a strong feminist position into all media messages. Virginia Blum (2003:61) expands this point:

It is the image itself with which we are infatuated... the beauty of images symbolizes what is now experienced as their essential lure, and plastic surgery is the cultural allegory of transforming the body into an image, an allegory that is deeply linked to the effects of celebrity culture.

We agree that with a more noticeable feminist presence in the media, women who do not meet dominant norms of beauty can be motivated to view themselves more positively. This can build greater solidarity amongst women, promoting stronger satisfaction, as well as acceptance of the natural form. Furthermore, a stronger feminist point of departure may also emphasize that beauty is in the “eye of the beholder” and not a replica of a consumer image where women aim to reshape themselves to reflect a generic sameness (Kendall-Tackett and Klest 2013:63). Each individual is unique unto herself, in looks and character. What is deemed beautiful should not be dictated by a celebrity culture and the mediatization of thin, tanned models who enhance their sexual appeal to capture the male gaze. Women should rather strive to accept beauty as an outer manifestation of inner health and happiness.

Unfortunately for many women, this remains a utopian ideal. When the individual feels that her body does not accurately represent her sense of self, she may experience emotions of shame, anxiety, and disembodiment. Appearance plays a big role in how

women are perceived, judged, and accepted. George Eliot's injunction: "don't judge a book by its cover,"³ alerts us to the power, yet superficiality, of appearance in shaping everyday encounters.

A different dynamic can occur when an individual strives to obtain a cosmetic procedure under her own volition. According to Featherstone (Gimlin 2002:60), "the body does indicate selfhood, but the link between self and body can be renegotiated through work on the body." When an individual decides to have a particular body part reshaped, via cosmetic surgery, the intervention is used to "approximate an 'ideal' in a reflexive identity project" (Southerton 2011:367). For such an undertaking to have a positive outcome on an individual's lifeworld, it must be done purely for herself and her own self-esteem (Peacock 2013:1). If the cosmetic intervention is obtained to satisfy or please a significant other, the individual may experience an incongruence between her physical appearance and her true sense of self. This incongruence can fracture the bond between body and identity resulting in trauma, or worse, an identity crisis. A most interesting notion in terms of obtaining such congruence is that for some women the overall goal of cosmetic surgery may not be to become a beauty, but to become "like everybody else" (Davis 2003:77).

Methodological Notes

The study follows a qualitative design and aims to interpretively explore the lived experiences of

women who undertook cosmetic surgery for beauty purposes. More specifically, the research follows a narrative approach. Michael Bamberg's (2012:101) "narrative practice perspective" was incorporated to structure, guide, and situate the data collection and analytical processes. Narrative methodology is ideal for gathering data for this particular topic because the approach allows participants to tell their stories sequentially over time—with each story having a beginning, a middle, and an end. A narrative approach provides participants with a platform to tell their life-stories. For us, narratives were an entry point for in-depth insight into how participants perceive and interpret their lifeworld, their personal identity, and social reality. Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews, led by the interview schedule. The schedule was designed to probe particular experiences and thoughts and to reveal the various subjective and intersubjective positions embraced by the research participants as revealed in their personal and shared emotional meanings, verbal explanations, and word choices.

Interviews were audio recorded (with participants' consent). The raw data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed in accordance to Creswell's (2014:197) "six step model," that is, "organizing and preparing data for analysis," "reading through all data," "coding the data," "themes/description," "interrelating themes/description," and "interpreting the meaning of themes/descriptions." Both Bamberg's (2012:101) "narrative practice perspective" and Creswell's (2014:197) "six step model" contributed to ensure the value, validity, and trustworthiness of the study—in data collection, data analysis, and presentation of the findings. The study obtained ethical clearance

³ See: <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/444526-don-t-judge-a-book-by-its-cover>. Retrieved November 08, 2016.

from the Faculty of Humanities at the University of the Free State (UFS-HUM-2014-70).

The research participants are women from a middle-to-upper class White demographic, between the ages of 25 to 67, from the Free State Province, South Africa. This privileged socio-economic status gave the participants access to private medical care, and it was through a registered cosmetic surgeon that they were purposefully selected. Selection criteria were based on participants' undergoing an elective aesthetic intervention in either abdominoplasty, lipoplasty, blepharoplasty, breast augmentation, and/or breast lift. Interviews were conducted with ten women.

Presenting the Findings

The following discussion explores how the research participants negotiated (consciously, emotionally, and physically) their cosmetic intervention. We incorporate direct quotes, using the participant's voice, to illuminate why she opted for cosmetic surgery, and how she re-negotiated her feminine sense of self. Moreover, this enabled us to establish if and how her aesthetic encounter submitted to, or disrupted, notions of patriarchal obedience and the male gaze.

Why Rely on Cosmetic Surgery?

Given the negative connotations often associated with cosmetic surgery, a main focus of the study was to understand why women rely on a surgical intervention to reshape a perceived flaw or shortcoming. As second wave radical feminist thinking

is positioned in the understanding that women are pressured, mainly by men and society, to meet certain beauty ideals—where cosmetic surgery is seen as an acceptable method to gain social approval and appease the male gaze. However, as argued by theorists such as Kathy Davis, this is a demeaning way to look at how beauty is perceived by the women who rely on various modes of beautification to achieve the look they want. So, to explore this, we engaged the research participants directly to hear first-hand why they decided to obtain cosmetic surgery. In a comment broadly representative of all participants, Eleanor says:

You see, everybody has their own battle with their body...You are going to find a problem with something. And cosmetic surgery has made it possible to adapt and change the stuff that you do not like. [Eleanor—breast augmentation]

When a simplistic view of cosmetic surgery is used, women are often seen as “cultural dopes” (Garfinkel 1967:68) when they change the way they look in pursuit of meeting socially constructed beauty ideals. When probing further, our participants revealed that cosmetic surgery was used predominantly to correct a body part that could not be reshaped/minimized/enlarged through exercise, diet, or dermatological products. They saw their surgical interventions as a last resort, despite the associated dangers of a medical procedure and the inevitability of social stigma, potentially positioning them as vain, unnatural, and fake:

I was struggling to get to the point where I realized that something had to be done...For me, it was

a personal thing to get over this plastic surgery thing in my mind. Um...to do it not for the outside but for the inside, for me. [Georgia—blepharoplasty]

I just fixed something. I didn't change something, because I was not happy. I fix something, because it wasn't supposed to look like that. [Bridget—rhinoplasty and lipoplasty]

After the children it was the sagging breasts and the floppy tummy. They really stretched me like, till my limit...For 9 years it bothered me. So, now I am exactly the same...I am just maintaining. [Abby—breast augmentation, abdominoplasty, and lipoplasty]

I couldn't see anymore. The [eyelid] skin that's hanging here, I always looked as if I had some liquor in. [Hailey—blepharoplasty]

These extracts reveal that some participants rely on cosmetic surgery for health-related reasons (for instance, sagging eyelids impairing vision), while for others it is about achieving a body more in line with what they once had (reshaping the body after pregnancy) or to feel better about themselves (self-image). None of the participants' aesthetic motivations were about attracting a new relationship or *saving* an existing marriage/relationship, although some participants did mention a more positive sexual charge in their marriage after their interventions. Diane says:

My husband told me the other day: "Some men are boob men and other men are bum men," and he's a boob guy. He likes boobs. So, he loved it from the beginning. Since I've done this, the second procedure,

he can't stop giving me compliments. He says it every day...So, every day is like [makes romantic sounds]. [Diane—breast lift and breast augmentation]

The data show that there are many nuances and subtleties involved in women opting for a cosmetic intervention; they should not simply be labeled "cultural dopes" who strive for social desirability and acceptance within the patriarchal system embodied by the male gaze (Garfinkel 1967:68). In relation to participants who did speak of their partners' approval of their intervention, and the new sexual charge in their relationship, we ask: would it not be better to think of sexual partnership and sexual desire as being *mutually* constructed and not just a function of the male gaze and male sexual drive? We argue that participants are self-determined individuals who actively sought to change a perceived body flaw/shortcoming with the aim of experiencing a more embodied and congruent sense of self. Embodiment reveals how an individual perceives and engages her gender identity in so far as her sense of femaleness⁴ and femininity is concerned. Simone de Beauvoir (1956:65) summarizes, "a woman is a female to the extent that she feels herself as such."

Feeling Like a Woman

Having motivated why cosmetic surgery was a justifiable solution to reshaping their bodies, the research participants revealed how they re-negotiated their emotional sense of self. According to Robinson and

⁴ Femaleness "is defined by the apparent outward shape of the sex organs" (Tyler 2008:90).

Eid (2017:99), when cosmetic surgery is perceived as a surgical success, women are more likely to experience an increased sense of emotional “well-being, life satisfaction, and body image satisfaction.” This emotional re-negotiation further reflects how the individual experiences her femaleness and femininity. This is particularly evident when probing the physical changes of pregnancy:

I think it is very unfair for us, we have babies. Our belly grows 100 times from what it was and then after the babies we have to try get back into shape...After the children, my body went down and my breasts got saggy. I felt used! After the breast augmentation, I feel feminine again. So, cosmetic surgery does have everything to do with how you feel about yourself and your femininity. [Kim—breast augmentation and breast lift]

Feelings related to femininity play a vital role in how a woman perceives her sense of self and how she engages her everyday lifeworld. When the body is experienced as incongruent and not an accurate reflection of the self, the individual refrains from using her physical body—in movement, gesture, and posture—to its full potential (Young 2005:35). The body then becomes a burden and this influences how the individual experiences her identity as a woman, mother, and lover. Joanne says:

After children, you don't feel pretty. You don't have breasts and you don't feel like a woman...I didn't want to have sex because my breasts were hanging...I did my breasts, suddenly I feel pretty again and I feel I want to have sex...You feel sexy. I feel like a woman again, I have breasts. [Joanne—breast augmentation]

It seems that the mentioning of “hanging skin” often has a negative association *vis-à-vis* femininity. Hailey expands on this when describing her facial appearance:

I was always too shy to take my glasses off...It looks as if I was always drunk, really! [Hailey—blepharoplasty]

When a woman comes to the realization that her body displays a shortcoming or flaw, either with drooping breasts or sagging skin, she starts moving to a re-negotiation of her self-understanding in terms of beauty and femininity. This re-negotiation promotes the cosmetic intervention as a plausible and justifiable “action and choice” that could lead to rediscovering congruent gendered embodiment/femininity (Davis 1995:11).

After breast feeding, everything is sagging. You are just one big blob. You feel like this worn out person. You feel old. You're a mom now, you're a wife, and you really feel washed out. And after the surgery...I feel younger...It feels like I am finding myself again piece by piece. [Diane—breast augmentation and breast lift]

The study reveals that the inner quality of “self-confidence” is a key characteristic to unlocking a woman's sense of feminine embodiment.

What makes a woman beautiful is confidence! And with confidence you have confidence in your own body. I would say that if you are confident in your own skin, then the confidence comes out and that's what makes a woman beautiful. [Eleanor—breast augmentation]

Are beauty ideals socially constructed and promoted for patriarchal approval as exemplified by the male gaze or is the need to feel beautiful a subjective desire that influences how a woman expresses herself physically and emotionally? We should be hospitable to the possibility that when a woman *feels* good about her looks, it may also influence *the eye of the beholder*, which, after all, is receptive to more than mere outer beauty. If beauty and femininity are subjective, then it may be altogether plausible that beautification becomes a form of self-empowerment. We continue this discussion by exploring how the research participants experienced patriarchal oppression and how their reshaped bodies influenced their gendered perceptions, understandings, as well as daily actions and interactions.

Re-Negotiating Patriarchal Ideals

From a second wave radical feminist perspective, reshaping or beautifying the female body is seen as complying with the male gaze and with male supremacy as embedded in patriarchal ideals. In this view, women are seen as part of an oppressed class. Any form of beautification—from applying cosmetic/dermatological products to the enlarging/minimizing/reshaping of the female body—is done to enhance, and even benefit, men's lives. Thus, from this feminist framework, "men are the enemy." This point is reaffirmed by Redstockings (1969: point III), "all men receive economic, sexual, and psychological benefits from male supremacy. All men have oppressed women...We identify the agents of our oppression as men." However, third wave liberal feminist ideas were used to guide and structure this research undertaking. According to Heywood

and Drake (1997:2-3), third wave liberal feminism is "a movement that contains elements of second wave critique of beauty culture, sexual abuse, and power structures while it also acknowledges and makes use of the pleasure, danger, and defining power of those structures."

The study finds that sentiments, as expressed in the second wave radical feminist outlook, are not experienced by the research participants. Rather, these women emphasize a more open and equality-based relationship with their male partners. No participant reveals that her partner/lover used verbal intimidation, force, or violence to motivate her to cosmetically change her appearance.

I did this for nobody else. Not at all. [Abby—abdominoplasty and lipoplasty]

The participants are aware of the stigma attached to cosmetic surgery and how reshaping the body is commonly associated with a male partner's desire or even will. However, it was made clear that the cosmetic "action and choice" was a subjective and personal decision.

My husband just thought: "Why do you want to do it? You are still beautiful!" And I said: "I WANT TO DO IT!"...I decided for this a long time ago. You can't say: "No!" Because I am paying for it myself. I am not asking for your money. I didn't even ask his permission. [Cate—breast augmentation and breast lift]

He was like: "If you want to change it, then change it." But, it took him a while to get used to the idea of this. [Isabel—abdominoplasty]

In one of the cases, a participant went against her husband's will and support when deciding to surgically change her physical appearance.

My husband wasn't very supportive. From the beginning he said: "No, it wasn't necessary"...I wanted the breast augmentation, but he said he didn't think it was necessary! Why do I want to go for it? He thinks I'm fine like I am! He loves me like I am! [Kim—breast augmentation and breast lift]

When one of the participants decided to reshape a perceived flaw or shortcoming, her significant other/husband jokingly requested she *also* consider a breast augmentation. This can rightfully be interpreted as a negative judgment arising out of the male gaze. What a narrow second wave feminist view of women-as-object does not account for is the potential of women to resist such construction by disrupting male-domination and owning of their own power:

My husband said: "Okay, next thing, boobs!" I asked him: "What's wrong with my boobs?" There is absolutely nothing wrong with them! They are 48 years old. Even if my husband said he will pay for my boobs to be done, I will not do it...I decide what I do. [Bridget—lipoplasty]

This reveals that some men are aware of and, to certain degrees, are influenced by the stereotypical ideas commonly associated with the male gaze where beauty is directly linked to a generic notion of sexuality as "sameness." This verbalizing of his subjective desire is an acceptable part of the marriage relationship. Nonetheless, it is also coercive and as

such confirms that second wave feminist claims of male superiority and female oppression co-exist in complex interplay with more liberal manifestations of women's freedom to choose for herself. Given this complex interchange of old and new, of the ever-changing balancing act of gender power and (in)equality, it is important that cosmetic surgery is a topic that is openly discussed in a relationship, but that the ultimate decision to reshape/change the body is made by the woman herself. Georgia emphasizes this principle:

When your husband loves you or you have a boyfriend and he is true of heart, he won't ask you to do this. [Georgia—blepharoplasty]

Cosmetic surgery undertaken for the self brings a sense of self-empowerment to a woman's actions and choices. She actively pursues her own desires, sometimes overlooking her husband/partner's wishes, to experience a renewed sense of femininity and embodiment. The middle-to-upper class White South African women who participated in our research indicated that they re-negotiated the stereotypical notion of the mindless "cultural dope" who presents herself as the proverbial "Stepford Wife" (Garfinkel 1967; Levin 1972). By following their own wants and desires, the research participants re-negotiated their feminine position/status in a predominantly patriarchal South African system—as independent and empowered women.

The Journey to Empowerment

Key points associated with self-empowerment are: "choice," "subjectivity," and "motive." Depending

on how participants managed their emotional incongruence and pain, a cosmetic procedure can be, and in most cases was, undertaken as a “last resort.” Other temporary techniques were pursued, but with little to no success in changing negative perceptions of the body image and the self. In this context, a permanent solution is desirable.

I was exercising very hard. I was very confident in myself. Because I had everything that bothered me fixed by myself...The one problem, after doing a lot of exercise and losing a lot of weight, if I lie on my side, I had this budge moving around with me and when I bent over, it feels like my tummy is just falling out...The tummy tuck. It's after the children, it's a change in appearance that you couldn't have stopped beforehand. Now I'm just reversing it...not changing it. [Isabel—abdominoplasty]

When the cosmetic intervention was approached as a “last resort,” the participants knowingly or unknowingly started a journey towards self-empowerment. They began with the “research phase,” actively seeking additional knowledge on and insight into their desired procedure—by sourcing information from Google, family members, friends and mentors, a general medical practitioner, and/or a registered cosmetic surgeon. This process was termed “doing your homework” and revealed that the acquired information empowered the participants in “action and choice.”

Doing your homework actually makes you feel more comfortable and strengthened. [Georgia—blepharoplasty]

This led to the next phase “finding a cosmetic surgeon.” The participants continued to do their homework by finding a certified and registered plastic surgeon who they felt comfortable within terms of personal appeal and surgical skill. The last phase saw the participants “find the courage” to actively obtain the aesthetic intervention. The process entails: re-negotiating her emotional insecurities in order to experience her femininity and lifeworld with a more congruent sense of embodiment.

When a research participant decides to have her body cosmetically reshaped, social perceptions traditionally favor the understanding that the body work was done for or because of the input of a male counterpart. This view is commonly accepted by second wave radical feminists. However, by personally engaging women who experienced a cosmetic journey—and who perceived their aesthetic journeys as a success—an alternative perspective comes to the fore. Once the participants had decided to employ cosmetic surgery, they *informed* their husband/significant other of their “action and choice.”

I told him it was for myself...He said he didn't think it was necessary! Why do I want to go for it? He thinks I'm fine like I am...So, I went through this alone. He never watched or never helped or anything. [Kim—breast augmentation and breast lift]

“[Cosmetic surgery] is not for you, it's for me!” I couldn't care less if it bothered my husband, I would do it anyway...It is for me! [Cate—breast augmentation and breast lift]

What we see from these narratives is that negative notions related to body dissatisfaction prompt a disruption in an individual's sense of self and lifeworld. However, in each of the narrative accounts above, a unified and overwhelmingly positive experience emerges in relation to cosmetic surgery. These participants regard their aesthetic interventions as signs of courage and self-empowerment.

It [cosmetic surgery] empowered my mind and feelings. My procedure empowered me to be a woman again. [Joanne—breast augmentation]

These narratives illustrate that cosmetic surgery and self-empowerment are not one-dimensional but rather multi-faceted experiences that encourage a renewed sense of positive female embodiment, self-worth, and confidence. This challenges radical feminist frameworks that proclaim disempowering notions and effects of aesthetic surgery, and instead, brings evidence to show that cosmetic surgery can be an important way to discover and celebrate the self.

Conclusion

We find that when a woman decides to employ cosmetic surgery for herself (with or without her significant partner's approval), she empowered herself and challenged radical feminist perceptions associated with notions of an all-powerful male control. Confidence is the most prominent change in the participants' self-perceptions and forms the basis for all other "inner" re-negotiations and transformations. With a renewed sense of confidence, other qualities were transformed: qualities such as femi-

ninity, self-worth, self-assurance, gendered embodiment, and self-empowerment. Each of these inner qualities is vital to how participants perceive themselves. In turn, these qualities influence how they experience—physically and emotionally—their lifeworld and social reality.

Participants reported that their cosmetic procedure was a "last resort," and by following through with it they managed to overcome emotional incongruence in so far as renewing their sense of confidence. It also allowed them to experience themselves as "true"—enjoying an enhanced sense of gendered embodiment (femininity) and self-empowerment (self-confidence). This positions beautification via an elective cosmetic procedure as a *solution*—albeit potentially risky—to reshaping the rejected body. Undergoing a cosmetic procedure is not experienced as an oppressive act that strengthens ideals based on patriarchal views. On the contrary, participants' narratives showed that by undergoing their cosmetic procedures, they felt empowered to "action their choice." Irrespective of the surgical risks and complications, each of the research participants claims that she made the right decision to undergo a surgical intervention to change a part of her body that she disliked and rejected. Thus, this research makes a contribution by exposing the simplistic and stereotypical interpretations of the deep-seated motivations for undergoing a cosmetic procedure as being limited and limiting. A third wave feminist view assists in avoiding "othering" of women who regard cosmetic surgery as an entirely acceptable alternative to enduring an unwanted physical feature that results in them experiencing an incongruent sense of self. Participants in the study demonstrate

that cosmetic interventions are not just about the physical self—they are also, and perhaps even mainly, about an individual renewing her sense of femininity, confidence, embodiment, and empowerment as a woman, a mother, and a wife.

Second wave feminist literature suggests that women disempower themselves by physically altering their bodies to meet socially defined—and often male directed—perspectives of beauty. This feminist perspective is situated in opposition to patriarchal powers, where men are regarded as superior

and women as inferior. However, when considering this phenomenon from a *third* wave feminist perspective, focus is concentrated on the person-centered and subjective nature of the cosmetic experience. This makes it possible to appreciate cosmetic surgery as an “action and choice” that empowers a woman and aids her to re-negotiate her sense of self: to purposefully change her emotional experiences—her self-confidence, self-worth, and femininity. From this perspective, a cosmetic procedure is re-positioned as a means to re-negotiate gendered embodiment and nurture self-empowerment.

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Beauty and the Cosmetic Secret

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Abstract Cosmetic surgery is often linked to the perception that women who resort to cosmetic interventions to alter their physical appearance are vain, superficial, and narcissistic. Few investigations have acknowledged and explored the individual's personal motivations and experiences of her action and choice with regards to aesthetic surgery. By focusing on subjective experience, alternative insights can be gained on the cosmetic procedure(s) and on how their reshaped body influences an individual's lifeworld experience. The article explores the perceived benefits and consequences of reshaping, enhancing, and/or reducing a perceived flaw or shortcoming of the body. From this exploration the focus moves to the individual's subjective and intersubjective perceptions: how she motivates and justifies her physical transformation whilst keeping private, and at times hiding, her surgical intervention. Drawing on narratives from several women, we attempt to understand how they experience cosmetic surgery in terms of their personal sense of self and their everyday social reality.

Keywords Cosmetic Surgery; Beauty; Secrecy; Femininity; Embodiment; Self-Empowerment; Feminism; Phenomenology; Social Constructivism

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Feminine enhancements and female beautifications are taken for granted in today's world. Many modern women go out of their way to emphasize their looks and sense of femininity. Improving and accentuating the feminine appearance includes styling hair, applying make-up, and wearing designer or specially shaped clothes. These everyday routines, seen and accepted as desirable daily practices, constantly reflect current trends in the beauty context. Fashions and fads are socially constructed and underpinned by social constraints, norms, and ideals—continuously reaffirmed by the mass media. Media platforms convey constant reminders that beauty and attractiveness are commodities; they are projected as portals to a glamorous life-style, to success, and even to romantic love. Beauty and the groomed presentation of the body have become deeply integrated into the everyday woman's lifeworld. The neglect of physical appearance can lead to an individual being considered unattractive and even ugly. And this can influence how she performs in her occupation, her lifeworld, and even on her perceived level of sexuality.

Beauty has become an important matter for women in the socially defined route to success. Most women judge their looks against socially constructed norms and if they perceive themselves to be flawed, or even to be lacking in some way, they project negative feelings and emotions onto themselves. This often results in a woman experiencing herself as ageing disagreeably, as unattractive, undesirable, or even ugly. When negative self-judgments are experienced as true, they get integrated into the individual's lifeworld. At this point an individual may start to consider actions and procedures to address this negative self-concept by altering her body to meet what she perceives as socially approved criteria.

Cosmetic surgery implies an elective medical procedure—or procedures—that permanently reshapes and beautifies a body part that is perceived as flawed. Social beliefs and understandings harbored in society often view women who consider and obtain a cosmetic procedure as vain, superficial, narcissistic, fake, and resorting to the “unnatural.” As women interpret and react to their sense of self in

relation to their emotional encounters and experiences, most rely on temporary techniques and methods to enhance their sense of embodiment, femininity, and self-worth. But, when temporary changes and enhancement to the body do not work or no longer prove satisfactory, a woman may consider cosmetic surgery to permanently reshape, enhance, or refine her perceived flaw or shortcoming. The surgical intervention is pursued and ultimately obtained with the hope of experiencing a renewed sense of balance in her self-perception, her emotions, and her lifeworld.

Feminists have long debated the social, emotional, and physical effects of electively reshaping the female form and questioned the influence that the surgical experience may have on a woman's sense of self and her role in society. *Second wave radical feminist thinking*¹ views women who are inclined to resort to cosmetic surgery as fitting into and projecting a passive and dope-like mentality. This category of women relates her sense of agency to social ideals, celebrity culture, and male-directed desirability. The female body becomes a receptor of social meaning—revealing an individual's socio-economic class, as well as her cultural association—and thus a “symbol of society” (Douglas as cited in Shilling 2012:76). *Third wave liberal feminism*² challenges this submissive stereotype and proposes women as active agents in their lifeworld. The emphasis is on a woman's sense of self—her experiences, motiva-

tions, actions, as well as choices—in relation to the experience of her body and her decisions *vis-à-vis* her elective cosmetic surgery. Although large steps towards an open, accommodating, and gender sensitive society have been made, it is often the radical feminist perspective that dominates when discussing cosmetic surgery and women who opt for these interventions.

This article aims to explore and unwrap the complexities associated with cosmetic surgery and the influence of everyday social opinions. Emphasis is given to social perceptions, ideals, and stigmas; and how these influence the research participants' sense of the feminine self. Findings are illustrated with direct quotes from the narratives of ten women who talk about their aesthetic procedures. The interventions are blepharoplasty, abdominoplasty, lipoplasty, breast augmentation, and breast lift.

Theoretical and Methodological Underpinning

In terms of the study's epistemological points of departure, focus is given to the theoretical frameworks of Alfred Schütz (1967; 1970; Schütz and Luckmann 1973), Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1991), and John Creswell (2013; 2014). Integrating these authors' ideas allows us to employ phenomenological, social constructivist, and interpretivist lenses to understand female beauty, embodiment, gendered empowerment, and self-acceptance. Furthermore, against the backdrop of these theoretical frameworks we are able to explore gender related theories, particularly the *third wave* feminist perspectives of Kathy Davis (1995; 2003) and Iris Mari-

¹ See section *Feminist Thinking and Cosmetic Surgery* in the article “Reflecting on Female Beauty: Cosmetic Surgery and (Dis)Empowerment” in this volume of the journal.

² See section *Feminist Thinking and Cosmetic Surgery* in the article “Reflecting on Female Beauty: Cosmetic Surgery and (Dis)Empowerment” in this volume of the journal.

on Young (2005). This kind of theoretical integration is encouraged by Uwe Flick (2009:17) who states that “qualitative research is not based on a unified theoretical and methodological concept. Various theoretical approaches and their methods characterize the discussions and the research practice.” These theoretical frameworks are, therefore, brought together to guide and structure how the experiences of participants, and the way they give meaning to these experiences, are gathered, analyzed, and interpreted.

The philosophical assumptions of epistemology not only enable us to unpack what knowledge is. These assumptions also guide our understanding of how an individual’s stock of knowledge is influenced by social interactions, and how selected methodological approaches may influence findings. Ontologically, the study tries to unwrap the realities in the lifeworlds of participants by exploring the social construction of knowledge (intersubjectivity), subjective memories and recall, and the cultural restraints of voicing particular experiences and standpoints that differ from socially sanctioned master or dominant narratives. As an individual’s lifeworld relates to experiences, particular events can impact a woman’s self-perception and self-understanding, and, in turn, these events serve to re-construct how she perceives and interacts with her social reality. It is within the context of this ever-perpetuating cycle in the re-construction of knowledge, memories, and perceptions that experiences come to be reframed and where new narratives emerge.

The study explores narratives of the embodied experience of cosmetic surgery and of the medi-

calization of female beauty in order to reveal new understandings of these phenomena. The objective is to understand what motivates an individual to decide to undergo an aesthetic medical procedure to correct a perceived bodily flaw or shortcoming. We relied on a qualitative research design to collect narrative data through semi-structured in-depth interviews. The data are analyzed within the thematic structures proposed by Kathy Davis (1995) and Iris Marion Young (2005). These two analytical frameworks are applied to ideas about an individual’s *emotional* sense of self—her “identity,” “agency,” and “morality” (Davis 1995:11). At the same time, we take into consideration feminine motility, namely, *bodily movement*, as reflected in the concepts of “inhibited intentionality,” “ambiguous transcendence,” and “discontinuous unity” (Young 2005:35). Both Davis’s (1995) and Young’s (2005) frameworks are presented and critically discussed in another article in this same Special Edition, *Reflecting on Female Beauty: Cosmetic Surgery and (Dis)Empowerment* (cf. section *Theoretical Positioning of the Research*).

This study expands on existing knowledge and common perceptions of *beauty* by revealing the subjective voice of ten South African women speaking about their cosmetic experiences. Insights are gained on self-empowerment and embodiment, and how these concepts interface with each research participant’s perception of herself, her femininity, and her sense of self-worth. Emphasis is also given to how thoughts, feelings, and emotions—before and after the cosmetic interventions—impact their everyday lifeworld and the (re)construction of their proximate social reality.

Ethical clearance was granted by the ethics committee of the Faculty of the Humanities at the University of the Free State (Reference number: UFS-HUM-2014-70). The ten research participants come from the middle-to-upper socio-economic group. Because of their demographic profile, they all accessed and experienced the *private* healthcare system. The research participants all obtained their cosmetic procedure from a professionally certified and registered plastic surgeon in Bloemfontein. Criteria for participation included women undergoing specifically the cosmetic procedures of blepharoplasty, lipoplasty, abdominoplasty, breast augmentation, and breast lift. Narrative data were collected in semi-structured, one-on-one, in-depth interviews, guided by an interview schedule. The narrative approach allowed participants to expand on their lived experiences, subjective thoughts, intersubjective encounters, as well as their feelings and emotions. Interviews were audio recorded (with participants' consent) and transcribed verbatim. The narratives were thematically analyzed and mined to unearth the depth and richness of the participants' cosmetic experience.

The Socialized Body

People are social beings who rely on intersubjective relationships to maintain acceptance within the context of their everyday social encounters. From a social constructivist understanding the body is "shaped, constrained, and even invented by society" (Shilling 2012:72). Social constructivists see the body as central to an individual's life, and the value that the individual places on her physical self as predominantly determined by "social or cultural

structures" thereby rendering the body a "symbol of society" (Shilling 2012:72).

When looking at the body as a *symbol of society*, particular physical attributes of an individual lead others to evaluate her as either attractive or unattractive. How an individual presents herself to others can also reflect other social indicators such as her socio-economic class and her cultural associations. From these indicators the observer can evaluate where a particular individual fits into society and its structures. Gardner and colleagues (as cited in Fiske, Gilbert, and Lindzey 2010:876) term this the "sociometer." People possess a social monitoring system that is triggered specifically by instances in which people become particularly concerned with their acceptance or belonging (Fiske, Gilbert, and Lindzey 2010:879). As social actors, we often rely on forms of classification and stereotypes to see if the individual fits the parameters of our particular social group.

Fitting socially constructed ideals and norms features strongly in our current digital age. Gadgets such as mobile phones, laptops, and tablets open countless apps and links that allow immediate notifications, updates, and responses to a desired group, theme, as well as socially approved ideals and understandings. These devices have made communication convenient and effortless. But, with rapid media updates—from breaking news to beauty trends—an individual is often left overwhelmed. With daily advancements of technology and the ease of access to media coverage, women are bombarded by socially sanctioned norms and can quite easily become dependent on meeting them, which

can result in social, as well as personal insecurity. According to Roberts (2013:1):

Media can contribute to low self-esteem, even when we are not conscious of it...when we see perfected, altered images, it leads to anxiety and low self-esteem. It can even play a role in many mental health disorders, as it sets up an unrealistic ideal and creates feelings of "I'm not good enough."

This positions the media as an avenue that portrays unrealistic and even dangerous standards of feminine beauty: thinness is one example. Women are expected to adapt to these socially constructed ideals and norms to be considered attractive and beautiful (Serdar 2014). However, what media enterprises conceal from the public is that the images that are placed in an issue of a magazine, on a billboard, or integrated into a televised advertisement aim to project an image of perfection in order to create a reaction of desire—for the toned body, the latest fashion, or perfectly manicured hair and nails. Thus, women are encouraged by society to become more attractive through reshaping their physical bodies. This process can lead some women to turn to cosmetic surgery in the hope of attaining societal acceptance. As Shilling (2012:135) puts it, women mobilize their bodies as "physical capital."

The concept of *physical capital* views the body as a form of "social equity" that shapes and determines how an individual understands, interacts, and experiences her everyday lifeworld (Shilling 2012:136). By *social equity* Shilling (2012:135) is referring to the unequal

social class-based opportunities people have for producing symbolically valued bodily forms and converting them into other resources...Power, status and distinctive symbolic forms that...are recognized in social fields.

To achieve a sense of social acceptance and status, an individual relies on civilizing the body through a more "mannered, structured pattern of bodily conduct" (Howson 2013:87). The civilized body reflects a sense of feminine compliance to meeting socially constructed beauty ideals and, thus, reflects self-worth and even perceived bodily value—namely, physical capital and social equity (Shilling 2012:135).

Identity and Appearance

How an individual experiences her everyday life influences how she views and understands herself. Women are continuously exposed to various media images and ideals, which generally portray an overwhelmingly American and European perception of beauty. Women who are particularly self-conscious and sensitized about their appearance are more inclined to incorporate beautifying ideals and fashion trends in their everyday lifeworlds.

According to Lewis (1971) and Skeggs (1997), if a woman has a poor emotional self-understanding, she is more likely to experience feelings of shame when not meeting socially acceptable standards of beauty (Northrop 2013:211). These feelings of not fitting socially accepted parameters of beauty may result in an individual fracturing her sense of self (identity) from her self-perception (appearance).

Women, thus, re-negotiate themselves by accessorizing their bodies with designer clothing, jewellery, and make-up to experience a desired level of emotional acknowledgement or social approval. When these emotional or social cues are not experienced, the individual may turn to more extreme measures such as cosmetic surgery. The Nuffield Council on Bioethics (2017:6) expands:

People have modified their bodies and shaped the image they present to others through their clothing, make-up, and hairstyles, as well as through more permanent techniques such as tattoos, piercings, and surgery. This modification of the body and presentation of the physical self is an intrinsic element of life as a social being: it makes identities visible, marks boundaries between different groups and classes of people, and expresses personal senses of dignity and pride.

When an individual re-negotiates her sense of self via a cosmetic intervention, she indirectly reshapes her self-image. Pitts-Taylor (2007:89) observes that cosmetic interventions “fix broken relationships between the body and self, where the ‘real’ self came through by correcting the body...Cosmetic surgery is seen as a form of empowerment.” Thus, when the body is reshaped or enhanced through beautification techniques, the individual re-negotiates her attitude towards her body and, by association, her identity.

Surgical Interventions

The search for beauty has created an industry of consumption. This is fuelled by the constant re-

mindings on media platforms that beauty and social position are linked; and that they are important commodities. Through marketing strategies, trends are established. These trends promote a desired “look” according to which women re-negotiate their understanding of beauty and the body.

Cosmetic surgery is, therefore, presented as either tearing down the social morale and cultural values of the 21st century, or, alternatively, as a self-actualizing and liberating intervention that enables an individual to reshape her body in order to reflect her inner self-perception and identity (Frentzen 2008). Cosmetic surgery and beauty ideals are often attributed to vanity and superficiality. But, by casting aside these generalizations and by more deeply enquiring into why a cosmetic intervention is sought, Davis (2003:98) believes that we can reach a more empathic and enlightened view:

The problem with defining cosmetic surgery exclusively in terms of beauty is that recipients are easily cast as frivolous, star struck, or ideologically manipulated. In contrast, by treating cosmetic surgery as an intervention in identity, it becomes easier to take their experiences with their bodies seriously, acknowledge the gravity of their suffering, and understand why—in the face of all its drawbacks—cosmetic surgery might seem like their best course of action under the circumstances.

According to Dowling and colleagues (2013:7), by employing a cosmetic procedure to correct a perceived body flaw/shortcoming, an individual may improve her self-understanding and psychological well-being. This is supported by Castle and col-

leagues (2002); Honigman and colleagues (2004); Sadick (2008); and Fisher (2014), who agree that women who undergo a cosmetic procedure to enhance beauty can reveal an improved state of mind in relation to their bodies and social environments. Thus, to “maintain a positive identity” a cosmetic procedure can be justified (Gimlin 2002:50).

Presenting the Findings

The findings reflect some of the main issues raised in the narratives. We incorporate direct quotes to ensure that interpretation and discussion are grounded in the narrated segments and the research participants’ experiences.

Body as an Indicator of Economic Status

According to Adams (2007:7-9), Nash and colleagues (2006:495), Hua (2013:110), and Laine Talley (2014:3), the middle-to-upper class female body often reveals signs of beautification, self-maintenance, and modification—temporary or permanent. By reshaping and emphasizing the female form in relation to “social and cultural constraints” (norms, trends, ideals), additional value and worth is accorded the feminine body (Shilling 2012:72). This points to the relationship between social class (symbol of society; physical capital; social equity) and body appearance (Shilling 2012:72, 135). Adams (2007:8) summarizes the issue: “Class can be encoded on the body.” Beauty enhancement is often a “stratifying practice” by which an individual recreates her body to emphasize her status (Adams 2007:8-9). For the average middle-to-upper class woman, a high level of bodily maintenance is regarded as normal practice. Abby

reflects this when talking about the mothers at her children’s school:

You can sit in your car at school and you can look at the parents, at the mothers and you can see...They have got the money, so they gonna do it, cosmetic surgery. They show it off to everybody, so they become a form of capital. [Abby—abdominoplasty]

Economic status is emphasized by the adornments of jewellery and designer clothing, using expensive dermatological products and make-up, and being able to surgically change undesirable physical features. Jeffreys (2014:174) is of the opinion that the middle-to-upper class women accept these enhancements and alterations as part of their daily beauty maintenance. Beautification and cosmetic surgery are not seen as stigmatized acts, but rather as symbols of wealth and social class.

Cosmetic surgery is not something that is very expensive. In today’s day and age, you go for Botox or whatever...it is like a monthly thing, like going for a wax or going for your gel nails. [It] just becomes part of the regimen. And it is definitely an economic status... So, I think it has become a symbol. [Eleanor—breast augmentation]

Foo (2010), Balitaan (2011), Sepúlveda and Calado (2012), and Veldhuis (2014) agree that mass media do play a role in how beauty is perceived and negotiated. Social platforms have an impact on how an individual understands beauty norms and status. However, when probing this matter with the research participants, many emphasized that their cosmetic surgery was not an intervention to increase their

physical value or popularity. Rather, most participants' cosmetic procedures related to their identity and self-understanding—experiencing their sense of self as represented through their physical appearance. The physical value commonly associated with the cosmetically reshaped body does not seem to be predominantly related to vanity or narcissism, but rather reflects a re-engagement with the lifeworld, as a self-assured and embodied individual.

We found that the research participants seem to employ cosmetic surgery to reverse the negative effects of pregnancy and breastfeeding or ageing. This reveals that notions related to female beautification—to reshape the body to resemble something different—were often not their primary concern. Rather, the research participants pursued their cosmetic interventions to reverse and restore their body back to its perceived natural form, particularly after the negative consequences of child bearing. Isabel elaborates:

Like with the tummy tuck, it's after the children. It's a change in appearance you couldn't have stopped. I think if it [cosmetic surgery] betters your life, I agree you must go ahead and do it. [Isabel—abdominoplasty and lipoplasty]

Isabel's elective procedure was pursued to change her body back to her original, pre-childbearing, appearance. She did not use cosmetic surgery to redesign her body to meet a trend or fashionable shape. Rather, she had her cosmetic intervention to reshape her abdominal region back to its pre-pregnancy appearance. Other narratives reveal that most of the research participants who obtained

a cosmetic procedure in abdominoplasty or breast lift wanted to reshape their bodies after perceived negative consequences of pregnancy and breastfeeding.

Temporary Methods for Re-Negotiating the Body

Often the participants state that before their surgical intervention they employed various temporary techniques to redirect attention away from their perceived body flaw/shortcoming. These include padded brassieres, gel inserts, breast enhancing tablets and creams in an attempt to alter the appearance of the chest; elastic pants, loose fitting clothing, and micro-needling³ to hide the excess fat or reduce the appearance of stretch marks on the stomach; and shaded spectacles and hair styling to conceal sagging skin around the eyes, as well as aging facial skin. These techniques appear to give the participants a temporary sense of being satisfied and/or emotionally aligned with their bodies. When an individual attempts to improve her appearance by applying an enhancing/defining technique, she aims to temporarily re-negotiate her physical appearance in terms of her self-concept. But, when a temporary technique is not perceived as successful, the individual may experience an emotional fracture between her perceived physical appearance and self-concept. This emotional dis-

³ Micro-needling—also known as collagen induction therapy—“stimulates the body's own production of collagen, which is a connective tissue that gives skin its firmness and resilience. The procedure involves puncturing the skin multiple times with tiny needles to create a 'wound site' in the dermis layer which triggers the body's natural healing process. When the body perceives damage in the dermis, it generates new collagen which is then used to heal the original tear in the dermis that caused a stretch mark to appear” (Thérapie Clinic 2016).

ruption and incongruence can result in the individual experiencing feelings of shame and embarrassment that compromise her embodied sense of self.

Attempts at body shaping and appearance enhancement is no new/recent/foreign concept to the modern woman (Pearson 2008). A review of literature reveals a great number of journals and books dedicated to the subject. The search term “temporary enhancements to breast appearance,” when entered into the World Wide Web, returned 11 million results (Google 2016). These include sites featuring specialized boutiques for lingerie, self-help journals, blogs, magazine articles, electro-acupuncture, Eastern massaging techniques, and herbal remedies in the form of pills and creams. When exploring the concept of temporary breast enhancements with the research participants, they seem to be well-informed of popular trends. Diane begins by mentioning external ointments that she had come across in health stores and pharmacies:

There is, like, a cream that you can put on and it plumps it up. I know there are also pills that you can drink. You can buy it at Clicks or Dis-Chem...I don't know how long it has been on the market. I don't think it lasts. I think you need to keep on drinking the pills to have that effect that your boobs are fuller...but I never used it. [Diane—breast augmentation and breast lift]

Diane's hesitation regarding the success of these creams and pills is understandable, due to the continued need to ingest or apply the product to experience a temporary form of change and enhancement.

However, for Joanne and some of her friends, trying the tablets gave them a sense of temporary empowerment:

There was a certain pill on the market that you can drink and it will enlarge you. We went and we drank it, but it was not for long. We were desperately wanting a cleavage...But, the only thing that can help you with that [is] push up bras. [Joanne—breast augmentation]

Kim also tried an over-the-counter cream to enhance her breasts and restore an element of vitality to her chest and neck. But, with no visible change, she discontinued using it. This prompted her to revert to traditional brassieres, until she acquired additional knowledge about a more permanent solution:

The neck and bust cream, um...I used that, but it doesn't do anything...I used to wear the lift bra [traditional padded and contouring brassieres] and the Wonder Bra, but I only used the bras to overcome the problem. [Kim—breast augmentation and breast lift]

After she researched online literature, she went for her first cosmetic consultation to discuss her dissatisfaction with a cosmetic surgeon:

I told him: “I just don't want droopy boobs. I'm finished with droopy boobs [laughs]. I want the round boobs. I don't want to go too big because we are very active and I am just doing it for the lift.” [Kim—breast augmentation and breast lift]

Cate and Eleanor never tried creams or tablets. They relied on other methods to get the desired

effect. Brassieres were used as the main means of getting bigger, fuller, or firmer looking breasts. For Cate, the Wonder Bra was her way to enhance her appearance:

Most of these bras have that little insert. I would take all my other bras' inserts [gel pads] out and put it in the one bra. So, it could push it up better. So, the breasts you have are sitting here [indicating high, firm, and in position]. [Cate—breast augmentation and breast lift]

Eleanor's candidness allowed us to probe her experiences easily, and at depth. Speaking about a time before her cosmetic intervention, a particular memory recurs, namely, how certain family members jokingly focused on her small sagging breasts, calling her:

The one with *koei tieties* [Afrikaans for cow breasts]. [Eleanor—breast augmentation]

This experience impacted her negatively; she recalls the various attempts to rectify her perceived flaw:

[I would put] socks in my bra [laughs]. I also bought those chicken fillets [stick on gel pads]. I had those on and two bras at a time. I even considered getting that one [brassiere] from VeriMark. That one you pump up with air. But, I didn't get it because I was scared it would burst in a conversation or something like that...Tissues! Bandages! Duct tape! You name it, I did it. But, socks were the ones that I used most. Nice secret socks, you roll that into a ball and you put it this side [corner under the breast] and this side [corner under the breast]. [Eleanor—breast augmentation]

Each of these research participants exhibits emotions related to shame, embarrassment, and emotional pain. These emotions influence how an individual understands and experiences gendered embodiment, as breasts are seen to characterize femininity (Rome 2000; Dubriwny 2012; MacKenna 2013). Therefore, if a woman perceives her body as not being represented accurately or beautifully, her feminine ideals feel compromised:

You don't feel pretty...you don't feel like a woman. [Joanne—breast augmentation]

Some of the techniques that Isabel researched and used to reduce the appearance of her stomach were to incorporate a healthy diet and exercise into her daily routines. Her dedication resulted in weight loss, but her overall goal to reduce her tummy to its original form remained unsuccessful. This prompted her to use other techniques. One procedure was micro-needling. This procedure is undertaken by a dermatologist who inserts/derma-rolls needles into the skin, somewhat like the practice of acupuncture. In Isabel's experience, this procedure was painful and resulted in bleeding:

I went for the micro-needling with the extended needles...but the blood was so bad that I actually smelt the *yster* [iron in the blood]. You know that smell? And I'm not very fussy about anything, but I actually got this sick feeling. It was quite bad. [Isabel—abdominoplasty and lipoplasty]

Even as she continued the procedure in hope of reducing her stomach fat and reducing her stretch marks, there were no visible improvements:

It didn't change it that much. It [the stretch marks] appeared less, so it was a bit lighter. But, not hardly enough to be satisfied with the results. [Isabel—abdominoplasty and lipoplasty]

Isabel's decision to employ a cosmetic procedure is presented, by her, as a last resort. She went for her first cosmetic consultation and considered the information for a full year before deciding this step would be her only option to obtain what she desired. In this time of self-reflection, she continued her exercise regime and healthy eating and relied on body-contouring tights or loose-fitting t-shirts to hide her tummy.

Other research participants also saw cosmetic surgery as the only way to change the body part that was otherwise unfixable or regarded to be problematic. Bridget did not change her life-style to try to lose weight around her stomach:

I'm too lazy to do a diet. [Bridget—lipoplasty]

She did try specifically designed body shorts/tights to reduce the appearance of her tummy. Bridget believes that her cosmetic intervention would give her the results she sought without having to change her life-style:

I wore those panties that stretch up to here [to under her breasts], but it's just too uncomfortable...I will rather go for an operation and feel comfortable for years afterwards than for years wearing uncomfortable garments. I want a permanent fix for something like this. [Bridget—lipoplasty]

Bridget's outlook is shared by others. Abby agrees that excess stomach fat/skin should be dealt with

through the radical intervention of cosmetic surgery:

I would rather go for the surgery than go to the gym, and that's me. I would rather do the surgery and get over with it. [Abby—abdominoplasty and lipoplasty]

For Hailey and Georgia, their cosmetic intervention, blepharoplasty, was employed to correct some loss of sight due to the skin above their eyes losing its elasticity and impairing their eyesight. Hailey sought medical advice from her son (a general medical practitioner) who urged his mother to see a cosmetic surgeon. This course of action was also the one taken by Georgia, who was familiar with the signs and consequences of ptosis.⁴ She knew that her eyesight would inevitably be compromised. Her main desire was to prevent this condition from progressing:

My only thoughts were: How are we going to prevent this condition and become blind. [Georgia—blepharoplasty]

From these narratives, it seems that the participants take two contrasting courses of action when re-negotiating their self-perception. The first course of action sees women embarking on a variety of methods or techniques to temporarily transform their body to project a congruent sense of self. The second course of action is to have fixed, through a cosmetic surgical intervention, what is undesired. However, in each of these courses, the participants kept private how they re-negotiated

⁴ Ptosis refers to the "drooping of the eyelid" (Maharana, Sharma, and Kumar 2017:15).

their temporary body enhancements and reshaped appearance.

The Cosmetic Secret

Additional understanding can be reached on the topic of cosmetic surgery by exploring notions related to the *cosmetic secret*.⁵ In this enquiry, we want to see if an individual's sense of empowerment is influenced by revealing or keeping private her surgical intervention. We begin by unwrapping an individual's subjective understandings and views by asking: "Why is cosmetic surgery kept a secret?" By focusing on this, we try to obtain insight associated with subjective and intersubjective notions, as well as perceptions of cosmetic surgery.

Some of the research participants decided to keep their aesthetic alterations secret. This secrecy was not attributed to shame or embarrassment, but rather to wanting to keep their cosmetic journey private. This decision was sometimes taken as a result of the presence of perceived stigmas associated with cosmetic surgery, for instance, that it reflects vanity and narcissism:

It should be kept a secret because it is vain...it's for yourself. [Abby—abdominoplasty and lipoplasty]

⁵ The word "secret" generally implies to something that is "kept hidden or separate from the knowledge of others" (Collins Dictionary 2001:1360). To *keep hidden* is to purposefully conceal a thought, understanding, or physical change. However, as we are granted personal access to the research participants' cosmetic experience and lifeworld, in one-on-one contact sessions, the term *secret* is here used to describe how the participants engage and reveal their cosmetic experience and reshaped body to "other" select people. The term "other" refers primarily to family members (husband, children, mother), close friends, and the researcher.

Abby's secrecy does not extend to everyone; she clearly appreciated the support of her family and of a close friend. But, as Abby wanted to keep her surgical intervention quiet from others, she refrained from telling her son about it. Her 11-year-old son, being open and approachable, could have told people—even *outsiders*—of his mother's cosmetic intervention:

I have one friend, she knew about everything. She was in the hospital all the time with my husband and my children...I only told my daughter the truth because my son is a big speaker...He will tell the cleaner at school...He will tell every single body he speaks to...He will tell the world about it. [Abby—abdominoplasty and lipoplasty]

Another participant—Isabel—also believes that society's negative perception of cosmetic surgery projects a label of narcissism onto those who opt for it. For this reason, she prefers to keep her surgical intervention private. During our initial discussions she revealed that only her husband and her mother knew about her cosmetic surgery. However, as we gained additional depth and trust during our interviews, she disclosed that she did confide in a friend:

[Cosmetic surgery] goes along with a lot of judgment. So, depending on that, I think maybe you should keep it a secret...I told no one! I told one friend! [Isabel—abdominoplasty]

After our talks with Kim, we get to understand why she wanted to keep her procedure quiet. She contracted a staph infection that resulted in a year-long battle to regain her health. Kim's initial breast

augmentation, breast lift, and mini face-lift were intended to restore her sense of femininity and beauty. Her aesthetic intervention was, for her, not only employed to meet socially defined beauty ideals but to experience graceful aging. Her need to keep her procedures private was not because of the stigma and shame attached to cosmetic surgery, but the *pity* she would encounter from her family and friends. Initially, only her husband and daughters knew about her cosmetic intervention. However, after Kim contracted a staph infection in the aftermath of her cosmetic surgery, her health deteriorated dramatically and that resulted in numerous courses of antibiotics. In the end, Kim had to seek help and support from her mother, who was unaware of her daughter's surgical experiences:

[After the infection] the only one that knew was my mom. I told her because I got very, very sick and I had to go through antibiotics, um, a lot of courses. If I can count it was about 5 courses. It was really very, very bad. So, I told her and she came through, because my husband wasn't very supportive. Because, from the beginning, he said: "No, it wasn't necessary." So, he [only] took me with the kids to the center where they did my procedure. [Kim—breast augmentation, breast lift, and mini face-lift]

Throughout her ordeal, Kim was determined to recover from her procedure without risking being stigmatized for her decisions or having to worry about consoling others.

My sister, she's just older than me, you know! She's got boys and they are always very rude with people who did something in plastic surgery. They always used to

say mean things about women who do their breasts and so on. And then they will laugh at everything. That's why I didn't want to tell them and I didn't want them to know. [So] I haven't told my sister that I had this breast thing. I kept it to myself. [Kim—breast augmentation, breast lift, and mini face-lift]

What is evident in these revelations is the underlying stigma associated with cosmetic surgery. According to Foy and colleagues (2014:312), stigma is a process in which "external attributions are internalized." This means that what is experienced and perceived within one's social reality can influence how an individual identifies with and accepts her sense of self. An emotional fear of judgement often accompanies the decision to undergo a cosmetic procedure. Tam and colleagues (2012:474) affirm this by stating that "a stigma is still attached to cosmetic surgery patients" due to perceived preconceived judgments related to vanity and lack of naturalness.

For the research participants, a cosmetic intervention is largely employed to alleviate feelings associated with emotional pain and to realign the body to the perceived self-concept. However, it is very much a Catch 22 situation: to avoid cosmetic surgery and find a way to accept incongruencies between the perceived self and the physical self, or to obtain a cosmetic procedure and be stigmatized and categorized as acting in an unnatural, artificial, vain, narcissistic, frivolous, and fake way. All the research participants feel that some degree of secrecy is the best course of action to avoid being the victims of negative or emotionally harmful comments and actions. However, in contrast to these attitudes and actions, some research participants presented

different perspectives on how they approached the secretive nature of cosmetic surgery. They believed that openness and self-confidence aided them to re-negotiate their self-perception and sense of embodiment, and to engage with their social reality. Hailey illustrates this position:

I had a cosmetic operation! I am proud! Oh, look at my eyes! Have you seen my eyes? [Hailey—blepharoplasty]

Hailey's reaction also resonates with other participants' views in as far as a renewed sense of self-awareness is achieved, which prompts these women to embody a more open, congruent, and self-assured demeanor. This is reflected on by Diane:

I think if you are open about it, then people won't *skinner* [Afrikaans for gossip]. Don't hide it from everybody, because people will see if you had plastic surgery or not. People aren't dumb. [Diane—breast augmentation and breast lift]

Joanne expands on this by stating that by approaching one's cosmetic decision openly, one can contribute to changing societal norms:

I'm not shy about it. People are going to see, they are going to notice it. [Because] it must look different, otherwise you won't do cosmetic surgery. So, why keep it a secret?! Maybe if more people are open about their cosmetic surgery, then people will see it differently. Society will see it differently. [Joanne—breast augmentation]

Bridget shares this view. She avoided potential gossip in her workplace by openly telling people that

she is going for rhinoplasty to correct her nasal airways and to have her facial appearance readjusted. Bridget underwent a surgical procedure of rhinoplasty to correct a childhood injury when she fell and broke her nose. The medical practitioner treated her injuries, but never correctly realigned her nasal bridge, which resulted in a crooked appearance. Furthermore, this misalignment impacted her breathing, thus, prompting her to seek cosmetic surgery. By revealing her procedure to her work colleagues, she also emphasizes her self-empowerment over her perceived flawed appearance, negative self-perception, and resultant unhappiness:

I don't think it should be kept a secret. Like my eyes were blue for two weeks and there was no way I could keep it a secret. And I didn't keep that a secret, I told everyone at work that I was going: "When you see me again, I am going to have blue eyes, but I am going to have a straight nose." [Bridget—rhinoplasty]

This form of self-confidence can help women re-engage their lifeworld, but many still keep their aesthetic enhancements secret. Beauty therapist, Cate, believes this is due to the fear of appearing unnatural:

I listen to a lot of ladies, especially if they have had it done. They would say: "Don't tell anyone!" But, it's because they think they are going to fail in looking natural by themselves. It's similar to a diet. [Cate—breast augmentation and breast lift]

Cate takes position against this secretive stance by approaching her own cosmetic experience with transparency:

I don't care if they know...I encourage every lady [to better herself]. [Cate—breast augmentation and breast lift]

Irrespective of how open and liberal these expressions are, Eleanor tables an important point. She feels that women should be cautious of the ease of access to cosmetic surgery and be aware that cosmetic procedures are not a quick fix solution to body dissatisfaction and to meeting social trends. Rather, when relying on an elective procedure, care should be exercised and rational, personal reasons should direct it.

I don't think cosmetic surgery should be kept a secret, but it should be handled with care. I would recommend it any day. But, it mustn't be made cheap or the availability mustn't be like going to the garage and buying a chocolate over the counter. Because that is where the danger comes in. Money in today's day and age is not a problem; rich daddies and all. So, there still has to be careful handling to cosmetic surgery. [Eleanor—breast augmentation]

All of the research participants were aware of possible stigmas associated with body augmentations: judgments of being vain; narcissist behavior; and working towards a fake appearance. Such labels can and do prompt women to keep their surgical interventions confidential and private. When drawing together the concepts of self-empowerment and surgical disclosure, the focus is on the research participants' subjective understandings. All agree that a cosmetic intervention promotes a sense of empowerment, but that there is a dividing line when revealing the cosmetic act itself. Se-

crecy can be attributed to the avoidance of social judgment or a fear of common misconceptions and stigmas that position aesthetically inclined women as superficial and vain. For some of the research participants, revealing their cosmetic experience brought about a feeling of being negatively judged. It is for these reasons that the cosmetic journey is often kept quiet, even secret.

Concluding Remarks

As the study aimed to understand the lived experiences of ten South African women who obtained a cosmetic intervention, the analytical concepts of Kathy Davis's (1995:11) "identity," "agency," and "morality" and Iris Marion Young's (2005:35) "feminine motility" were well-suited to analyze notions related to subjectivity and intersubjectivity—particularly how the research participants perceived, negotiated, and expressed their cosmetic experience. Based on the narratives, it is evident that the women in the study did not view their aesthetic procedures as a means to mobilize physical capital so as to gain social equity (cf. Shilling 2012:135) or to emphasize their socio-economic status (see: Adams 2007:8). These women's well-informed decisions to pursue cosmetic interventions were not a mere vain attempt at female beautification; instead, their motivation was to rectify a perceived flaw and/or regain their pre-childbearing bodies. Far from exhibiting a poor emotional self-understanding (cf. Skeggs 1997), the women in the study showed agency in the way they re-negotiated their sense of self through cosmetic intervention—seeing it as a form of empowerment (Pitts-Taylor 2007:89).

By exploring the research participants' personal perceptions and experiences of cosmetic surgery, additional insight was gained to why some women keep their aesthetic interventions private. Some of the research participants indicated that social opinions do influence how the cosmetic intervention is perceived. This results in the cosmetic encounter being experienced as an action that is not always socially accepted.

The study found that the concept of cosmetic secrecy was not related to shame. Rather, by keeping the cosmetic encounter private, the research participants protected their sense of self (feelings and emotions) against possible negative comments, generalizations, and comparisons. Thus, stigmas and labels do influence how an individual perceives and even reacts to others' perception of the cosmetic act. However, the everyday experience of emotional incongruence and pain outweighs negative social censure—justifying the cosmetic encounter. Socially constructed perceptions are consciously explored and overcome by keeping the cosmetic experiences private in so far as only

telling a select and trusted few (family and close friends) about their motivations and surgical journey. This conscious decision if and to whom they would disclose information about the aesthetic procedure speaks, once more, to the women's agency.

As most of the research participants obtained their cosmetic procedure from Dr. Anderson (pseudonym) which resulted in surgical success, perspectives reflect a somewhat one-sided point of view. This points to a limitation of the research: due to the sensitive nature of the research and thus patient accessibility, this study mainly explores success stories. A need for further research is to include more women who had negative or unsatisfactory experiences of cosmetic surgery. This would allow for a more nuanced analysis of the secretive nature of the cosmetic act, as associated with feelings of shame, embarrassment, and even failure. Another possibility for research is to collect and explore narratives from less affluent socio-economic spheres of society, and from other ethnic groups.

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The Creative Process. A Case for Meaning-Making

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Abstract Since the beginning of time art-making has been a tool to express, preserve, and challenge the extant knowledge in society. Artists do this by finding or creatively constructing new understandings in society. An artist is able to do this through the medium he/she uses to relay the message of the artwork. The medium that an artist uses to express his/her artistic concept has an impact on the character that the artwork will take. The medium of expression forms but one of the many considerations that go through an artist's mind when creating art. In the process of art-making, an artist seeks to create new meanings or re-imagine old ones by organizing materials and concepts. In so doing, he/she discovers novel ways to get ideas across, and thereby creates new interpretations of social phenomena. In this article, attention is given to meaning-making as a conscious and iterative component of creating art. From a series of in-depth interviews, the authors analyze the inward processes that occur within six artists' creative praxes and how these lead their construction of meaning. Attention is also paid to how the artists manipulate concepts and how they construct and deconstruct their understandings of these concepts in the course of their creative endeavors.

Keywords Art-Making; Creative Process; Intersubjectivity; Lifeworld; Lived Experience; Meaning; Meaning-Making; Signs; Symbols; Typifications

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Art-making is an important form of self-expression. In our social world, people convey messages and share their experiences through the medium of language. As a means of communicating information, and a way of making meaning of experiences, language varies in its utilization and interpretation. The most ubiquitous application of language by human beings is verbal communication. Verbal communication is one way that people externalize their internalized modes of experience. The communication that occurs between people, whether it be two individuals or within a group, engenders an intersubjective and collective understanding of human experience in social reality.

Art is a particular kind of language used expressly by artists, and sometimes by crafters, in the service of advancing their ideas and those of humankind. The purpose of art-making to an artist is twofold. Firstly, an artist engages in art-making to satiate

his or her own desire to bring something (new) into existence. This desire is evident in the scores of artists who make art as an end in itself (e.g., *art for art's sake*). A large number of art-makers find themselves within this category of artists who put sheer art-making before profit-making. To these persons, creating art is akin to a spiritual endeavor, which is necessary for them to perform in order for their existence to be valued and validated. Secondly, artists partake in art-making to raise the consciousness of the people around them and of those in society. This is a more altruistic reason to create art and is one that is of vital importance to the collective consciousness.

Visual art is a sub-category of art and is the central focus of this article. Artists who engage in visual art-making produce observable signs and symbols that act as a repository for people's subjective interpretations. Signs and symbols are fundamental

to how a visual artist communicates meaning through his or her artwork. The use of signs and symbols enables the artist to transcend boundaries imposed on him or her by time, space, and other forces within his or her lived experiences. Signs and symbols are a significant part of the vocabulary of our stock of knowledge as human beings. That signs and symbols allow people to express their lived experiences in diverse ways (Dreher 2003:141-143) is especially true of visual art-making. The purpose of this article is to understand the role of meaning and meaning-making in the creative process of a visual artist. Another aim is to understand the connection that the artist makes between his/her subjective and objective experiences in formulating his/her personal interpretations of reality in art-making.

Towards an Understanding of Meaning

Meaning-making is essential to how people achieve understanding in, and of, their social realm. For meaning to be considered authentic, it has to emanate from some kind of social agreement between the parties involved. This social agreement is known in the social realm as mutual understanding. People foster understanding with one another when they share common experiences. Therefore, understanding can be seen as dependent on the intersubjective experiences and encounters that a subject has with others. There is a connection between an individual's meanings and another person's meanings. This connection is a pivotal one because it is how people fundamentally make sense of social phenomena and of each other in their social reality (Koppl 2010:221).

The meaning that people make in society does not occur arbitrarily, it goes through a complex and iterative process that social constructionists refer to as "negotiation of meaning" (Berger and Luckmann 1966). This perspective argues that meaning is negotiated consciously and unconsciously during intersubjective interactions. An individual takes his or her subjective lived experiences and externalizes them—primarily through interchanging them with others' subjective lived experiences. From this exchange of information, meaning is negotiated and social understanding is reinforced or challenged. The sedimentation of the meanings that people make over time leads to an accumulation of stocks of knowledge. These stocks of knowledge are transmitted from one generation to another and are, therefore, available to the individual in his/her everyday life (Berger and Luckmann 1966:56). People use stocks of knowledge to make sense of their emergent experiences and of phenomena that take place in social reality.

The intersubjective generation of meaning in society relies on typificatory schemes that underlie all human thoughts and actions. Everyday social life is composed of typifications that make it possible for people to apprehend and deal with face-to-face encounters (Berger and Luckmann 1966:45). Such is the consequence of typificatory schemes that they stimulate reciprocity of interaction between members of society who are in communication with another. As stated earlier, language is an important means by which people share ideas and meanings—within the body of language are rules that govern the use thereof. These rules that govern the use of language operate around a set

of typificatory schemes that individuals must comply with if they want to be understood. How people create meaning in society is influenced by the typifications that are unique to, and are over time crafted by, the members of that society. Meaning is constructed iteratively in the on-going encounters that people have with one another; encounters that have objective conditions such as typifications as their framework.

Meaning-Making in Art

The making of meaning is a decisively integral component of art-making. Meaning-making in relation to the creation of art serves a symbolic and a practical purpose. On a symbolic level, the essence of meaning-making is highlighted when we encounter works of art that are of an abstract nature. In these works of art, the artist uses unrelated concepts and arranges them in such a way that a story can be constructed, emerging from the composition of these elements. The story that the artist is telling is a symbolic one in that he/she creates a representational space for the audience to decipher the meaning of the artwork. The artist methodically positions the meaning within the artwork and leaves it to the viewers to derive their own understandings from it. It sometimes happens that the audience concurs with what the artist is saying in his or her artwork. In such circumstances, viewers of the artwork are endorsing the relevance of the artist's voice and its expression *vis-à-vis* his/her artwork.

A more utilitarian expression of meaning in art-making can be seen when artists give titles

to their artworks and write motivations for their pieces. It is sometimes necessary for the artist to do these two things in order to orient or direct viewers of the artwork. The artist makes the viewers' experience of his/her art less intimidating and encourages the viewers to engage with and respond to the artwork. A viewer's perception of an artwork is shaped by the signs and symbols the creator assigns to the artwork, and that give the artwork its import. This is a starting point for the conversation that occurs between creators and viewers of art. The viewer's role in this conversation is predominantly passive. However, the degree of a viewer's passivity in this dialogue depends on the imprint the artwork makes on him/her, and on the degree to which the viewer engages with the work when he/she internalizes and then subjectively (re)interprets the meanings being conveyed in the artwork.

The meaning that lies at the core of an artwork precedes what is ultimately art and artists' *raison d'être*. Art and art-making's bearing on social life can be linked to humankind's primordial fascination with storytelling. Stories have not only been vital to our survival as a species, they also underpin our urge to create—"to reshape the world as we wish it to be for our own purposes" (Rand 1957:7). Christopher Vogler (1998:299-300) in his book, *The Writer's Journey*, asserts that stories "can help us deal with difficult emotional situations by giving us examples of human behavior, perhaps similar in some way to the struggles we are going through at some stage of life, and which might inspire us to try a different strategy for living." Storytelling is a big part of art-making because stories provide

space for meaning to be constructed and deconstructed, lived and re-lived. Abstract concepts are converted into realizable experiences when they undergo storification.

Operational Account

The aim of this article is to arrive at an interpretive understanding of the lived experiences of visual artists during their creative process. To facilitate this, a narrative approach is applied as the guiding methodology for data collection and analysis. The widespread idea held by narrativists is that every individual, family, organization, and group possess their own narratives (Spector-Mersel 2010:205). The narratives approach is an optimal way of representing and understanding the experiences of people because people understand their lifeworlds primarily through a narrative-based framework (Clandinin and Connelly 2000:17-18). Narratives have an enormous influence on how people conceive and shape their reality; they are instrumental to how people chronicle their individual lives, their life stories, and the way in which they represent their past and future (Spector-Mersel 2010:208).

Although multiple authors were involved in shaping the research and this article, the main (male) author was primary investigator and the only one involved directly in data collection. It was important for a researcher of creativity to approach his own work in a reflexive way, similarly to how visual artists approach their artworks. This is because the researcher participates in a creative project or venture of his own and must critically examine not only the nature of the research but also his role in

the research processes. The role of the researcher's reflexive thinking and practice is intricately interwoven into the fabric of narrative inquiry (Hickson 2016:381). With a reflexive understanding of his actions, as well as the actions of others, the researcher must then organize events into a meaningful whole and more clearly interpret the consequences of events and actions over time (Chase 2005 as cited in White and Hede 2008:24).

Uwe Flick (2009:283) stresses that the narrative approach is similar to the creative process in that it is a *Gestalt* in its own right—an organized whole that is more than the sum of its parts, and therefore loaded with more than a series of statements or recorded facts. Thus, inside the stories that an individual tells lie all the meanings that are necessary to understand that particular individual's lifeworld. Narrative inquiry is dynamic and in a perpetual state of development; this compels the narrative inquirer to be constantly wakeful and reflexive (Clandinin and Connelly 2000:184). Another reason why narrative methodology was chosen is because the relational context of storytelling creates a hospitable environment for the stories of ordinary people to be heard and retold.

Drawing an appropriate sample is crucial in fulfilling the aims of the research. In this study, the target population was young Black (African) South African visual artists between the ages of 25 and 35. Initially, we set out to get a total of six participants for this study, three male and three female. However, due to difficulties locating female visual artists, we had to work with six male visual artists.

Two forms of non-probability sampling were used to identify participants: purposive sampling and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling allowed us to target and select specific artists who would form part of our study's core group. Snowball sampling—where we asked participants in our core group to refer us to one or two of their fellow visual artists (O'Leary 2004:110)—helped to overcome difficulties in locating additional participants. The participants were all based in and around Bloemfontein (Mangaung) at the time the fieldwork took place.

In the fieldwork stage of this study, semi-structured interviews were used as the conduit through which the researcher explored how participants create meaning out of their experiences and interactions with the world (Hickson 2016:382). During the interviews, emphasis was placed on the dynamic between interviewer and interviewee. In the context of a conversational, narrative approach, the interviewees were free to divulge the full scope of their stories. An auxiliary research technique was the application of visual methodologies in the form of photo-elicitation and photo-documentation. These pertain to when a researcher "(a) takes a carefully planned series of photographs to document and analyze a particular visual phenomenon, and (b) asks research participants to take photographs which are then discussed in an interview with the researcher" (Rose 2012:298). Utilizing both of these techniques yielded interesting insights into the artists' lifeworld experiences.

Participant observation, the ethnographic technique of extended fieldwork where the researcher

shares the same experiences with his or her research participant(s), was the third research technique utilized during this study's data gathering processes. Carrying out participant observation proved fundamental to the research because it improved the main author/researcher's ability to combine subjective and objective interpretations that arose in the process of conducting fieldwork. The principal author/investigator also participated in an art-film by way of more directly experiencing the creative processes of one of the research participants of this study. The aim was to experience how an idea is taken from conception and elaborated on by the visual artist into a final product. In this process, the principal investigator used observation to understand how the artist goes about creating stories through the application of his visual medium, and what influences arose during this process.

Before starting the research, ethical clearance was obtained from the University of the Free State's Faculty of Humanities Ethics Committee (Ethical Clearance Number UFS-HSD2016/0345). No deception was used at any stage of the research to manipulate the participants. Written, informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participants were assured that they were free to withdraw at any point in the study if for any reason they no longer felt comfortable participating. Participants were reminded of their right to withdraw any statements that they made during our encounters. The permission of the research participant was sought at the onset of the research to use an audio-recording device during the interview, as well as to photograph his work-space (environment),

artworks, and whatever else was deemed necessary to this study. The participants were ensured that their faces, and any other identifying information, would be handled with utmost care and confidentiality. They were offered the option of providing pseudonyms of their own choice, and these are used to represent them in this article. The polite gender form he/she is not appropriate to participants in this study, who are all men, so from here on mainly the masculine form is used in relation to quotes and experiences.

Creativity as a concept, and the creative process as an experience or action, are difficult to assess. Different research methods (in-depth interviews, visual methodologies, and participant observation) are, therefore, used to gather and triangulate the data, interpretations, and analyses. Personal reflexivity was a key method used by the primary investigator as an instrument to maintain his awareness of the effects that his presence may have had on the research and its findings. Each individual research method contributed constructively in eliciting in-depth, consistent responses from the research participants. The use of different kinds of methods helped the researchers towards better understandings of particular phenomena (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2009:86). Analyses brought together the data gathered from the in-depth interviews, the photographs, and the observations.

Meaning-Making through Creative Storytelling

The findings presented in this article are illustrated by verbatim quotes from research participants.

The purpose of the quotes is to provide the reader with a glimpse into the subjective and intersubjective sense-making processes that form part of the participants' experiences during the creative process of art-making. In addition, at the core of this article is an epistemological assumption that knowledge emerges from the active collaboration between researcher and research participants. It is for this reason that the primary investigator's reflexive interpretation and understanding of the narratives received from the research participants is acknowledged as a factor that shaped the study's findings. Lastly, as espoused by interpretive sociology, the presentation of this study's findings features "thick descriptions" that provide a rich account of the research participants' experiences.

One of the most fundamental aspects of the visual arts is to tell stories. Our creativity, as humans, and our ability to transpose our individual and collective experiences into meaningful stories have been vital to our human development and survival. The way we understand ourselves is enriched through storytelling, and art performs a critical role in the telling of stories that all human beings are able to identify and to connect with. Art-making is essentially about telling stories, communicating messages, and conveying meaning. Visual artists utilize visual platforms to express themselves, as well as to communicate and convey meaningful experiences to others. Art-making is spawned from a love of story-telling and the yearning of society, at large, to hear and be told stories.

The way in which people interpret social experiences varies from person to person—this is also

true of artists. The many ways in which visual artists express themselves are nuanced in terms of two dimensions: the medium that the artist works in (e.g., photography, painting, film) and the stories he wants to tell. Kaizer summarizes the essence of being an artist:

I love stories, and especially I love short films. I love stories. I just love stories of people who are trying to: I don't know. People who are just trying to make it every day. [Kaizer]

Modalities such as the artistic medium and the interpretation of internal or external experiences are shaped by the typifications in the artist's social and personal world. Typifications refer to embedded practices or thoughts that are widely held in society. A person's thoughts and actions are influenced by his/her typifications and, as a result, we have multiple understandings of social experience. Visual artists base their creative works on their own intersubjectively formed typifications. Therefore, the stories that artists tell are intricately interwoven into their lifeworlds. Whether it is communicating a message or giving a phenomenological experience meaning, the artist performs these things most effectively when using a storytelling format. Kaizer acknowledges the central place of storytelling in art when he says:

Not sympathy. Because just to tell a story, I feel like maybe as humans we are...[storytellers]. Stories are so central to our lives that we sometimes understand something if it is a story. That is why as children; it is like the fables we are told. These fables are told to us to try to guide us morally. Like stories are so central

to us...It is like the story of Jesus' fables. Even Jesus told stories in fables. Like he would say in parables. It's like the parable of the...what's that guy? Who was...everyone passed and he was injured? The Good Samaritan! So, then it's like: who is the good neighbor? But, we had to tell that story so that when you think: "Oh, my God, like, yeah, man!" I feel like sometimes we make stories for us to actually connect to something. Actually, we do [it] to understand something or to see something. It's like you have, yeah, you see, whatever you have—something. Like something bothering you or something that you just felt. And you feel like: why isn't anyone seeing this? So, you feel like: maybe if I tell a story, maybe that is when people will realize this. [Kaizer]

Visual artists' penchant for storytelling comes from a desire to give form to their own interpretations of their lived experiences or from the stories and experiences of others from whom they derive inspiration. Artists formulate concepts or themes, which constitute the narrative(s) they seek to articulate through their work. Malik's work is inspired by people in his environment:

It's always just best that as an artist, that your work has a body. Therefore, sometimes it derives from a theme. I play around with themes a lot. I really do just conceptualize most of the time in terms of my work. Sometimes themes are not executed the way they were envisioned. [Malik]

Malik took a series of portraits of street dwellers who he sees society as having little regard for. He embarked on this work to draw attention to the lives of these individuals who are often regarded

as “undesirables” within their own communities. By documenting the individuals and the intersubjective lived experiences of these individuals, he constructs a theme or concept around their experiences and around his understanding or interpretation of them. In doing so, Malik gives his audience a glimpse into the lived experiences of these forgotten members of society. Through his art he strives to render them see-able, and to bridge the relational divide between the viewers and the street dwellers. For Malik, photography is a powerful medium to draw attention to socio-economic issues. He employs photography as his art medium because it reflects realism and engages the viewer in the process and manifestation of the story that he wishes to convey.

Malik’s use of photography illustrates that the artist wants to depict meaning, and how he wants to do so depends on the choice of medium to express a particular story. Faceless, another participant, is a multimedia artist and he plays with the modalities of medium and concept:

I will make a painting out of it. Where with the painting the colors become more expressive of what I am trying to say about you. So, yeah, my key medium is concept. The whole idea of conceptualizing. But, if I had to pick a medium, I would say photography. If I had to pick the traditional mediums, I would say photography because it’s spontaneous. [Faceless]

Painters use specific techniques and tools to give varied expressions to the stories they want to tell through their artwork. Haile makes use of differ-

ent creative devices such as the different textures available to him, paint mediums (oil and acrylic), and how he employs the paintbrush when painting:

Here I want to show the corporate world and what it does to kids. Because here it is sweet manufacturers. So here is the mould of the sweet. The guys are making the sweet and throwing it into the big pan where the sweets are going to be formed. Instead of putting sweets here, I have put kids. And this kid looks like a kid that is scared, but still it is not a normal kid. Because this kid was formed by a sweet and the end result of it is not finished yet. The kid is going to end up as a sweet. It is not going to be just a human being—to show that these capitalists are shaping the character of kids because they are getting disorders that are brought on by flavorants that are poured inside sweets. Because they are not healthy, but still they are alright for business. All those preservatives, they are not alright for us. So, that is why I have made these guys into sweets because they become what they eat. They get attention disorder and they cannot focus. They also get a temper that is not healthy for a child. So, my context is a nursery. So, you know that a nursery where plants are grown and kids are akin to plants? Because that whole thing of children is derived from Chi. Chi meaning tree. So, children [are] small trees: the shades and the dark areas. Yes, I actually wanted to find kids who are hyperactive. I wanted to show that this is a disorder. It is not a natural thing. [Haile]

So much of what we understand about ourselves collectively and as individuals is symbolically linked to stories we have been told:

I think I connect because it is a story that my grandmother used to tell me. And because of my studies—in my studies, I talk about traditional narratives of South Africans and how nowadays traditional narratives are not being given any attention like before. And I searched why in South Africa do we have traditional narratives. And it is said that traditional narratives preserve norms and values of us as a Black people. Back in the day, Black people did not go to school. They were not...They did not know how to read and all those things. [Prince]

Prince is referring to an anecdote that was told to him as a young child by his grandmother. In South African and broader African culture, it is customary for children to be taught important lessons of morality and the value of *Ubuntu*¹ through allegorical narratives that pertain to social life. Prince grew up among such oral storytelling traditions, and presently in his artwork, he seeks to replicate and preserve these traditional narratives by means of visual art:

When I was young, I was raised by my grandmother. My grandmother would always tell us the story of Mellita. Mellita is a child who was conceived by her own sibling. The story is about a mother who doesn't have daughters; she doesn't have girls, only boys. She then sent her one child to his uncle's house to ask for medicine, which is going to make it possible for her to bear a female baby. When the boy got to the uncle and got the medicine, on the way back he drank the medicine. You know how kids are when parents

send them to do something, like buy something, like water or something; we would drink the water along the way. So, the boy drinks the medicine and eventually the boy gets pregnant. He then gives birth to a female child and he calls that child Mellita. I learnt that nowadays when our parents send us somewhere or tell us to [do] something, we do what we want to do. We do not do what our elders tell us to do. I think that is a metaphor there in the pregnancy of the boy. This is the mistake that we as the youth fall into. We don't listen to our elders; eventually, we fall into bad behaviors. When the story goes on, the mother of the boy supports the boy; she supports him. His friends told on him to his mother and his mother got angry. And also, when I thought about it, when I looked at how Mellita was loved by this boy. In this story, we see how the young boy, who doesn't have the power to care for Mellita, tries by all means to take care of Mellita. [Prince]

Artists compose stories that speak to different and various components of their lifeworlds. The artistic or creative concept is gradually crafted into a story by the artist who uses his skill to make it happen:

People tell different stories about Soweto or the townships, to tell you the truth. They think it's all hunky dory. They send out the good side of the township and not showing the bad side of what's happening. And that's the type of things you see in social media. I don't know any artist—or, well, heard thus far—I haven't spoken to even one who takes pictures while walking around in the township and taking pictures. Because to them: that's kind of like a risk too. They feel like: "I am in a township. Someone might just take my camera and [I] get robbed."

¹ "Ubuntu refers to behaving well towards others or acting in ways that benefit the community" (Thought Co. 2017).

Sometimes I fear that too. But, I try to shoot without any fear, 'cause you know I was raised there and I feel like I can fight back too when I do get attacked. It's more like a self-defense type of thing. And, since I want to portray these stories, I might as well do it without any fear and just spread the message. But, the township is very...it's shaky in a very strong way. But, I am doing it to spread a message, because people don't really know anything about the hood [neighborhood or township]. [Natural]

It is commonplace for artists such as Natural—in the extract above—to turn the communities they grew up in, and the realities within these communities, into central themes of their artwork. In Natural's case, the motive is to give new interpretations of old understandings of social life and of social reality as a whole. The way to do this is to tell different stories from the ones that were told before. People's understandings of social reality are influenced by the stories they are told about phenomena, stories they accept as being true. Natural wishes to re-story reality, to influence the way people see the township and so to enlighten through his art.

An artist will take an experience, a memory, an emotion, or a thought and find the meaning that underpins his sense of self. To find meaning, the artist has to unwrap or excavate it from the experience or phenomena he interprets in the work. This process usually culminates in the artist producing his own interpretation of the phenomenon, which then becomes the story that the artist presents as his artwork. Haile elaborates on this:

You see the way the woman's body has been created. Like the body shapes that you see: it's like the depictions you have seen especially of Black women. Like you see round shapes. Then you see straight lines and then it goes around again. Do you get it? Whereas, when it comes to males: you see that he is rigid. So, I love those variations and the softness. Because we need women; without women there is no life. We are the fruits of their hearts. It wouldn't be heavily conceptual because it obviously needs to reach people. I like things that can put the message across in a simple way; not too literal but at least have a lot of meanings behind it. When you speak about it, I find it interesting because I think I am a person who has [a] really strong memory. That is the thing that I would say God blessed me with. Even though I do not have words but the image I have. I can remember old things from as early as two years. [Haile]

Kaizer discusses a recent film project he was working on, in which storytelling draws attention to a societal issue:

So, it is like a big reservoir where it's like these rivers of water are now being reserved in one place. And then the water is being sold to South Africa and it can also generate electricity. But, right now, we are selling water to South Africa. But, then the problem is that when you are trying to conserve that water into one space, then the water keeps piling up. But, where the water was, there used to be villages. So, they moved people from villages to make those hydro dams. And some of these people were forcibly removed because we have to make this. This is for the good of the country. So, I was inspired by that...and I felt like, and I had a story, man, who...

of a young boy and his mother who were moved, but their father's grave was in a village that now they were moved from. But, he keeps dreaming of his father. But, then he finds an old man who has a small hut by the water's edge and the old man says he refuses to leave. This is all he knows. But, the old man has a chicken and the old man is like: what's important was blood. Not cow's blood or whatever; any blood. And right now, if you give the young man the chicken and he is like: "The blood flows into the river, the river will carry the blood into the grave." So, he cuts the head of the chicken and then the blood spreads into the water and then that in a way satisfies his father's spirit. Ah yeah! So, that's the story. The struggles, the pains of people and just showing people, what other people are going through. This is real for me. [Kaizer]

Artists manage to construe seemingly mundane phenomena into meaningful stories. They do not create social reality anew; their artworks are second order and sometimes third order representations of social phenomena. In the act of creation, the artist merely provides his or her interpretation, inviting the viewer to view reality in a different light. Artists also wish to capture their life stories and the lives of contemporaries in a historical moment of time. Faceless aptly sums this up:

My artwork is about history. It's about now...it's about now for tomorrow. For tomorrow's kids, for the next generation. I am hoping that future artists or future society will look back at my work and read into it what was happening now. That, okay, a student could live the way I live; also reflecting on other students, also reflecting on relationships

that people have. In a way, it tries to also draw comparisons to relationships, previously in generations that have passed. And hoping that whoever is going to look at the art is gonna draw comparisons from the present time to the time in the future. So that's why I am trying to make art that can last a hundred years. The type of mediums that I use, the type of paper that I use, the pencils that I use, photography, how I preserve my work—are put in a way that even when I am dead. Hopefully, it will be easier for someone to just crack the code, okay. Because I file things a lot—I will make a file. That file maybe will be today. So, with me doing: that is me trying to keep record. Recording everything: just keep on recording. So, my art is for the future. [Faceless]

Malik sees his duty as an artist in similar light:

They have a major role to play. We record history. We record history and we record it somewhat in the purest form. We know it through your art and we see it. And it lived. Here it is, you know what I mean? And I just think with photography—it's even more detailed. Because I capture moments in time, man. And these moments possibly last forever. [Malik]

Meaning-making and storytelling are inseparable and integral components of art-making and the creative processes that go into it. Artists base their art-making around these two fundamental pillars of human understanding. To create artwork that is driven by these two concepts requires the artist to have an epistemological grasp of meaning-making and of storytelling. The artist

accumulates such an understanding of inter-subjective, subjective, and objective phenomena through his own lived experiences and unique perspective of social reality.

In Conclusion

Meaning is the cornerstone of human understanding. The transfer of information, whether represented orally, in writing, or visually, relies on the existence of a foundational understanding of the meanings of, and from, the source. Artists are able to create new meanings and understandings from old, even archaic, and current social practices and ideologies. The new understandings that emerge from the art-making processes of an artist can create new ways of thinking, of perceiving oneself and the world around us. Artists skillfully

re-imagine and capture social reality; their novel interpretations of past and present realities add to the social stock of knowledge. In so doing, artists are influencing society.

As creative thinkers, artists take ordinary social experiences and interpret them in a creative manner. The creative process is the process of interpretation and reinterpretation that the artist grapples with on his/her way to the final art-product. As illustrated in our findings, storytelling is a means whereby artists express their emotions, concepts, and opinions about social issues and worldviews. Expressing themselves through art-making requires artists to possess sensitivity, to perceive below and beyond the surface, and to articulate themselves in ways that are skillful, novel, and creative.

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Online Social Networking, Interactions, and Relations: Students at the University of the Free State, Bloemfontein

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Abstract Online social networking (OSN) is an activity performed through social network sites (SNS) such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram. OSN has become a dominant interaction mechanism within contemporary society. Online platforms are woven inextricably into the fabric of individuals' everyday lives, especially those of young adults. We present a mixed-methods study—conducted at the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein—that analyzes how students reflect on their everyday experiences of OSN. The key theoretical frameworks guiding this research are phenomenology, existentialism, and reflexive sociology. These theoretical lenses collectively assist in broadening our understanding of the students' experiences that reveal the complexities associated with their interactions and social relations via SNS. From their narratives we learn how the students make sense of their engagements on SNS, how these engagements have an impact on their social interactions, and how OSN affects their self-presentation.

Keywords Online Social Networking (OSN); Social Network Sites (SNS); Social Interaction; Identity

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The end of the 20th century and the dawn of the 21st can be regarded as an important watershed in the history of the world. This period brought the heightened inventions of various technologies. Amongst the flood in contemporary technologies came an explosion of *social media*—a term used in this article to refer mainly to websites and Internet applications that allow users to create and share content through various online social networking (OSN) platforms. These online platforms enable people from all around the world to share their thoughts and ideas via the media of digital text, pictures, video recordings, and voice.

With the aid of modern small-scale, portable computers such as smartphones, tablets, and laptops, individuals have the ability to engage in online interactions through forms of social media known as *social network sites* (SNS). SNS refer to web-based “communities” that allow users to create profiles and virtually interact with other members (Henson, Reyns, and Fisher 2011:254). These online platforms have become the places and spaces where a large

part of mundane socializing activities within present day society takes place. The absence of the time-space element of OSN makes it possible for high levels of interaction between individual users of SNS. OSN is used to refer to the processes of engaging with SNS such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp. The capacity of SNS to overcome the restrictions of time and space means that the interactions between individuals are no longer constrained within traditional geographic boundaries of neighborhoods, educational institutions, or recreational areas. OSN transpires beyond these physical parameters.

Tertiary education students have been identified by previous studies as a social group that is most particularly active in OSN. Previous studies (Thompson and Hickey 2005:126; McCuddy and Vogel 2015:169) found that students spend a large amount of time socializing with each other. This article aims to cast light on the impact of OSN on a group of tertiary education students’ sense of self, their lifeworld experiences, and on social

reality as the emergent product of interacting with others.

Theoretical Points of Departure

This study is positioned in the theoretical frameworks of interpretivist thinking. According to this school of thought, reality is the world as we perceive it and we understand the fundamental nature of the social world at the level of subjective experience (Burrell and Morgan 1979:28). The key issue in an interpretivist approach is therefore to engage oneself in empathetic understanding to comprehend reality from the unique point of view of an individual. As such, a social scientist would strive for what Max Weber terms *Verstehen* (Babbie and Mouton 2001:31). To achieve *Verstehen*, we collect, analyze, and interpret narratives with the aim of discovering depth and meaning in as far as our research participants' experiences of social reality. The process of interpretation of the narratives to achieve empathetic understanding is related to *hermeneutics* (Babbie and Mouton 2001:30-31; Neuman 2006:87). Hermeneutics focus on the words, the intentions, and the actions of research participants to bring us to a better understanding.

The theoretical frameworks that provide context to this study consist mainly of ideas within phenomenology, existential sociology, and reflexive sociology. Phenomenology aims to understand the social world from the viewpoint of the actor and not of the social analyst (Overgaard 2007:21). Phenomenologically focused research is, therefore, oriented at the everyday lives of ordinary people who coexist within a given lifeworld—"the mundane, everyday

world in which people operate" (Inglis 2012:90). People share aspects of the same culture, language, and a set of meaning structures that allow them to negotiate their daily lives (Farganis 2014:245) and to construct reality within their lifeworlds. OSN represents the specific focus of people's lifeworld in this research and the aim is to determine how the research participants experience their everyday lives within the context of OSN.

In addition to these basic ideas of phenomenology, existential thinking explores the self, as well as the continuous conflict between the self and society. The self is regarded as a central point of all aspects of being, such as values, principles, and emotions (Kotarba 2009:149). An individual is an active social actor who endeavors to overcome and to conquer everyday dilemmas by seeking meanings and ways of action that help in dealing with the challenges that might be faced (Kotarba 2009:151). This theoretical perspective provides insight into how users of SNS assert their identities whilst operating within OSN.

As a third theoretical context, Pierre Bourdieu's reflexive sociology attempts to reconcile the seemingly contradictory dimensions of the objective and subjective aspects contained in social reality. Bourdieu argues for a bi-dimensional approach, combining *social physics*—a term used to refer to methods of observation used by structuralists to perform social inquiry—and *social phenomenology*—pointing to constructivists' inquiry based on meaning (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:7-9). In essence, reflexive sociology rejects any sociological paradigm that overemphasizes the importance of either the objective or

subjective dimension of phenomena while the other dimension is downplayed (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:10; Harrington 2005:221). Within the scope of this study, both the objective and subjective aspects of OSN were explored to broaden our understanding of the phenomenon under study. This was achieved by firstly analyzing available information found in literature on the usage of SNS globally and in South Africa. In addition to this aspect of the research, a survey consisting of closed-ended questionnaires was conducted amongst students of the University of the Free State (UFS) to generate statistical data. With regards to the social phenomenological and qualitative part of this study, in-depth interviews were conducted to establish a subjective dimension of the research participants' lifeworld experiences. A triangulation of these two different research approaches (qualitative and quantitative) positioned the study within the domain of mixed-methods research.

Online Social Networking and Social Network Sites

All people form part of social networks. A *social network* can be described as "a configuration of people connected to one another through interpersonal means, such as friendship, common interests, or ideas" (Jin 2015:503). Because of our social networks, we get to fulfil many of our social roles as social beings. In contemporary society, social networks consist of the relationships that exist both in physical contexts and environments, as well as in online platforms via electronic and digital media. Any member of society can have relationships with his/her consociates (family, friends), contemporaries

(classmates, lecturers), and other people and groups with whom he/she chooses to have contact (Thompson and Hickey 2005:126; Jin 2015:502-503).

Those who are involved in OSN are part of an *online community*, which can be defined as "a group of people who may not meet one another face-to-face, and who exchange words and ideas through the mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks" (Rheingold 1994 as cited in Preece 2000:11). As members of online communities, individuals are capable of forming and maintaining their relations and interactions with their consociates, contemporaries, and other people via online platforms. For OSN activities to materialize, the individual has to join SNS—the "web-based 'communities' that allow users to create profiles and virtually interact with other members" (Henson et al. 2011:254). To gain access to SNS, the individual must create a public or semi-public profile within a particular online platform. Once an individual has created his/her profile, he/she becomes a member of the selected online community and can begin networking with other members or *friends*.¹

A study (Statusbrew 2017:1) found that Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp are popular SNS for South African Students. *Facebook* is an OSN platform that focuses on keeping people connected. Statistics show that, as of 2018, Facebook consists of more than 2 billion users worldwide. This OSN site had approximately 16 million active users in South Africa in 2016 (Hunter 2017:1). Already in 2014 Muniene Mbodila and colleagues (2014:117) estimated

¹ Friends: a list of one's contacts on a social networking website.

that between 85% and 99% of tertiary students use Facebook. This finding suggests that Facebook seems to be the most popular SNS for tertiary students by far.

Twitter is regarded to be more amenable to constant public dialogue than Facebook because it is mainly a micro blogging platform that enables users to share their ideas, thoughts, and information. Even as Twitter is positioned as an open online news portal—via interactive Tweets—it does allow the user to also communicate privately with others (Junco, Heiberger, and Loken 2010:3; Johnston, Chen, and Haulman 2013:202). It is estimated that in 2018, Twitter consists of 330 million monthly active users globally (Statusbrew 2017:1), with around 8 million users in South Africa (Hunter 2017:1). *Instagram* is predominantly used to capture and share digital photos and videos (Hu, Manikonda, and Kambhampati 2014:1). Users record videos and capture photos from their mobile devices to upload these materials onto their accounts. This SNS enables its users to connect and share their life moments with the broader online community (Herman 2014:1; Hu et al. 2014:1). By some accounts, Instagram has attracted already more than 800 million users globally—with an average of 95 million photos being uploaded daily (Statusbrew 2017:1). The number of Instagram users in South Africa purportedly amounts to 3.8 million users and, as is the case with other SNS, membership seems to continue to grow (Hunter 2017:1).

WhatsApp is a messaging application that can be downloaded onto any modern portable electronic mobile device such as a smartphone, iPad, or tablet to send instant messages to other users with com-

patible and Internet connected devices (Hedlund 2013:1). In contrast to traditional text messages sent using SMS or airtime, WhatsApp uses Internet connection to send text messages and media files. It is rated to be the most globally popular SNS application after Facebook with 1.3 billion active users in 2018 (Statusbrew 2017:1). According to Statista (2018:1), WhatsApp is the most popular application in the Android, Apple, and Windows applications stores and was used by 49% of South Africans in 2017.

Motives Behind Online Social Networking Activities

There are numerous reasons why people are involved in OSN. Previous studies show that individuals are driven by common social forces that motivate them to use SNS (Placencia and Lower 2013:617; Beneito-Montagut 2015:538). In physical contexts, individuals usually form and maintain social networks for functional reasons: among others, the advancement of their careers, social support, and the promotion of personal needs and interests (Thompson and Hickey 2005:126; McCuddy and Vogel 2015:169). In the same way as in offline contexts, OSN interactants build relationships by making friends, participating in social organizations, and engaging in some of the most trivial interactions and exchanges such as gossiping (Jin 2015:501; Tang et al. 2016:103).

Moreover, studies reveal that young adults often maintain interpersonal relationships with people that were already part of their social system prior to their online interactions (Sponcil and Gitimu 2013:4;

McCuddy and Vogel 2015:171). SNS have become the platforms that most young adults and students use to keep in touch with their consociates in a convenient manner (Placencia and Lower 2013:617-618; Sponcil and Gitimu 2013:4). Staying in touch with pre-existing social contacts in offline contexts is not the only use of SNS. *Open SNS*² such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram allow users to meet strangers online whilst maintaining contact with their already known acquaintances and followers. Online platforms such as WhatsApp are mainly used to maintain pre-existing social networks. This platform is, therefore, positioned as a *closed SNS*³ in so far as allowing the user to participate in a direct one-on-one conversation with another active user.

Digital Social Network Sites and the Sense of Reality

Small-scale mobile computers that are connected to the Internet have become increasingly ubiquitous, at least in settings such as the social environments of the students who were interviewed. In these lifeworlds, computer-mediated communication has not only come to shape social action and understandings profoundly, it has differentiated the actors' sense of "reality" in at least two interconnected ways: it has added another variation to what Schütz (1945:555) has called "worlds of phantasy" and it has changed the spatial organization of the everyday lifeworld (Schütz and Luckmann 1974:41).

Building on William James' analysis of how sub-universes are implicated in our sense of reality, Schütz distinguishes different types of reality: inter alia the reality of the everyday lifeworld, the worlds of phantasy, and the world of dreams. Each of these constitutes "finite provinces of meaning" (Schütz 1945:551), each characterized by a specific tension of consciousness, a specific *époque* (the suspension of doubt), and a specific form of experiencing the self (among other dimensions along which they differ). At any given moment, individuals perceive these dimensions as real "upon each of which we may bestow the accent of reality" (Schütz 1945:551). With reference to Kierkegaard, Schütz describes the switching between these realities not as a gradual process, but as a "leap." Of these manifold worlds, the everyday lifeworld is the paramount reality. As the reality that is socially shared and in which we interact and communicate with others, its reflection of reality is typically the strongest. Individuals return to this reality after "waking up" from the world of dreams or after putting aside a novel they were reading, having been immersed in the phantasy world of the narration.

Interconnected computers may simply add another world of phantasy. By accessing Internet services such as reading emails or websites, individuals leap into these realities as they would when reading a novel or watching TV. In contrast to conventional phantasy worlds, activities such as gaming, for example, immersing oneself in the "Fortnite" universe, or joining virtual worlds such as "Second Life," may generate an even stronger accent of reality, since they demand more active input from the user. To the extent, however, that these phantasy worlds are

² *Open SNS* allow the interaction between multiple users to take place and access to the posted media files is public.

³ *Closed SNS* allow communication to take place between two or more users. Access to the posted media files is private and generally controlled by the user.

shared with other (interacting) users—and Internet services such as SNS belong to this category—they constitute technologically mediated extensions of the *everyday* lifeworld.

SNS enable establishing contact and communication between individuals, as well as a range of methods for individuals to represent themselves, their understandings, and their activities on the corresponding platforms. By allowing actors to engage in technologically mediated exchanges (in principle similar to writing letters, making telephone calls, showing photographs to others, etc.), they change the way in which actors are co-present. It is not only through the physical presence in a shared zone of manipulation or world of actual reach (Schütz and Luckmann 1974:42) that co-presence is established but computer-mediated communication technologies allow for real-time face-to-face interaction that effectively constitutes co-presence as an “endogenous” variable (Campos-Castillo and Hitlin 2013:168), albeit in a reduced form as various senses are not registered technologically. Thus, while interacting in the everyday lifeworld in non-mediated ways, students increasingly have the ability to constitute co-presence through their computer devices. Technically, switching between mediated and non-mediated communication may be regarded as a “leap,” but increasingly, students are simultaneously co-present in both ways, incorporating the mediated communication into their non-mediated communication. The students who were interviewed in this project do, however, still aim to make a distinction between their bodily and materially experienced everyday lifeworld and the technologically enabled representation of themselves and others, as many experien-

tial dimensions they consider “real” are not real or are inadequately “transposed” into the digital medium. When they speak of their “real self,” they typically refer to the flow of experiences and processes of meaning constitution within their corporeal boundaries. Not only do they speak of difficulties to convey their subjectivity in adequate ways but they typically adhere to an empirical notion of “reality” that is in line with Schütz’s analysis: they still regard the non-mediated experience of the everyday reality and who they are within that reality (i.e., who they are able to convey to be) as “more real” than what they can convey in and through computer-mediated digital spaces.

SNS do constitute, however, phantasy realities in the sense that they are *not only* used to engage in communication with other individuals but as opportunities for entertainment, education, and playful interaction and representation. By acquiring specific knowledge of how to display themselves on these platforms, actors may not only take the liberty to represent themselves in ways they would not in their embodied everyday lifeworld. They may also be uncertain of whether or not another “figure” engaged in these SNS represents a “real” person or is a “fictional” character and to what extent the online representation of this person corresponds to how they would perceive this individual—should this individual have been present in a non-mediated embodied form. This possibility does not take into account that some of these “figures” may in fact be “bots” (i.e., software agents) and thus may not relate to any specific human actor. Thus, while leaping into these technologically constituted realities by focusing their attention on the user interfaces of

the corresponding devices, the boundary between the everyday lifeworld on the one hand and the world of phantasy becomes blurred; the experience of a leap between realities becomes much less distinct compared to the more conventional media. In their narrations, the students convey different ways of how they deal with the increasing blurring of boundaries between these realities. Although many students perceive the non-mediated reality as having the strongest accent of reality, the blurring of boundaries increasingly fosters both a sense of reality and a sense of the self that are not decisively lodged in only one of the manifold realities of the actor's lifeworld.

Social Interactions and Relations

SNS serve as the platforms through which a high level of *social interaction* and building of social relations take place. Social interaction, as defined by Panos Bardis (1979:148), refers to "the way in which personalities, groups or social systems act toward and mutually influence one another." SNS are channels in which online interactants realize their communication and interpersonal needs. Even traditional sociology—long before the advent of OSN and SNS—acknowledged five basic patterns of social interaction existing among groups, organizations, and societies, namely, exchange, cooperation, competition, conflict, and coercion (Gouldner 1960 as cited in Thompson and Hickey 2005:129).

Exchange is based on the norm of *reciprocity* in expectation of gifts, love, and other courtesies. These exchanges are generally taken for granted until people fail to meet others' expectations. Regarded as

basic to human survival, *cooperation* is said to maintain social order. Without cooperation, life would be next to impossible. Thus, in this type of social interaction, individuals, groups, and societies work collectively to achieve common goals. Another pattern of social interaction is *competition*. As in the case with cooperation, individuals and social groups strive to achieve common goals when involved in competition. In competition, individuals or groups contest to achieve valued goals, acknowledging that benefits or rewards that societies have to offer are limited. *Conflict* is characterized by disputes and disagreements among individuals or social groups. This pattern of interaction is common in open SNS such as Twitter and Facebook. These conflicts can be related to issues such as politics, religion, and racism. *Coercion* involves the realization of the threat or force that those with power usually use to achieve their ends. Although coercion is not usually present on SNS—since users are able to control who they want to interact with—instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp, where private chats between two users take place, can allow for coercion to occur.

From the brief introductions to these conventionally accepted patterns of real life social interactions it is clear that these interactions do contain similarities with the patterns of social interaction that take place in SNS. We refer to the conventionally accepted patterns of social interaction in real life, as well as in SNS, to emphasize that OSN displays resemblance with our mundane everyday social interactions and relations. Because of these similarities, OSN easily provides an alternative lifeworld and everyday reality.

Identification, Self-Understanding, and Online Social Networking

Identity is one of the central concepts in social sciences—including sociology. In this article, identity is thought of as “the traits and characteristics, social relations, roles, and social group memberships that define who one is” (Oyserman, Elmore, and Smith 2012:69).

SNS can be regarded as platforms where people—particularly young people—experiment with their identities. A study by Patti Valkenburg and colleagues (2008 as cited in Leung 2011:382) revealed that over half of adolescents and young adults pretend to be somebody else when interacting on instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp. Creating a false identity is not limited to instant messaging applications⁴; it can also be done on open SNS such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. This straightforward dichotomy in as far as the concept of identity is concerned—between “real” and “digital,” or between “true” and “false”—cannot easily be upheld. For this reason we differentiate between “false identities” in those cases where online participants claim the authenticity of a non-existent person; “multiple identities” in those cases where an individual in a playful manner portrays different characters; and “concealed identities” in those cases where online participants use pseudonyms to protect themselves. In addition to the use of text and language, young people often spend considerable amounts of time posting photos, videos, and

personal information on SNS (Ahn 2011:1438; Leung 2011:382). The progress made in terms of Internet technology makes it possible for OSN to have evolved to a point where it gives people the opportunity and ability to present different aspects of their identities. This is due to an individual having ample time to figure out and to socially construct, via virtual reality, how he/she wants to present him-/herself online (Leung 2011:382; Sponcil and Gitimu 2013:5-6).

Moreover, one’s online identity formation is also molded by self-presentation on SNS. Self-presentation is “the process through which individuals communicate an image of themselves to others and is a central element in the construction of one’s self and efforts to establish a reputation within a social context” (Yang and Brown 2016:402). It can also be seen as “a specific and more strategic form of self-disclosure” (Yang and Brown 2016:402). Young adults often disclose personal information—thereby revealing their identities and preferences—on their SNS profiles (Ahn 2011:1438). Their profiles contain the summaries of how these individuals see themselves and how they intend to be seen by others. In addition to presenting themselves in a particular way, SNS enable users to actively accept or reject friends or other members. They, therefore, emphasize purpose, power, and autonomy over the people they would like to associate with and would like to disclose their identities to (Ahn 2011:1438).

Methodological Notes

OSN as a contemporary social phenomenon can be studied quantitatively or qualitatively depending on

⁴ Instant messaging applications refer to types of online chat that offer real-time text transmission over the SNS where messages are typically transmitted between two parties (or more).

the research questions and objectives of the researcher. It can also be studied utilizing both quantitative and qualitative approaches when the researcher's intention is to learn about more than one aspect of the phenomenon. This study adopts a mixed-methods approach—using quantitative data on students' OSN patterns to better understand their experiences of SNS. In the section *Theoretical Points of Departure*, we refer to Pierre Bourdieu's attempts to reconcile the seemingly contradictory dimensions of the subjective and objective aspects contained in social reality. Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant (1992:7) assert that the world in which we live exists in the forms of objective and subjective dimensions of the life-world—commonly referred to as the “double life.” In an endeavor to come to a better understanding of the effects of OSN dynamics on the research participants, both quantitative (objective) and qualitative (subjective) approaches are used to collect data and to structure and guide the study. Mixed-methods approaches often serve to achieve the following outcomes—triangulation, complementarity, development, initiation, and expansion (Greene 2007:100; Combs and Onwuegbuzie 2010:2; 2011:4). For the purpose of this study—to understand how a group of university students reflect on their social interactions and relations—the principles of *complementarity* and *development* are foremost elements of our mixed-methods approach. In *complementarity*, we seek to elaborate, illustrate, enhance, deepen, and broaden the overall interpretations from one analytical strand (e.g., quantitative aspect) with the results from another analytical strand (e.g., qualitative aspect).

With *development*, the researcher's intention is to use the results or findings from one analytical strand to

help inform another analytical strand. The rationale for adopting a mixed-methods approach is, therefore, to utilize quantitative data to contextualize the qualitative data. The collection of data was sequential—the first phase of data collection was quantitative, whereas the second phase was qualitative. The rationale for gathering quantitative data first (via the survey) was to identify suitable candidates for the one-on-one in-depth interviews (the qualitative data). Through an examination and scrutiny of the quantitative responses provided by the respondents, we were able to recruit the candidates with relevant exposure to and suitable experience of SNS. A mixed-methods approach in this study, therefore, means that the data were collected, analyzed, and interpreted employing both quantitative and qualitative dimensions via a survey and one-on-one interviews. These data collection methods lead to a better understanding of the studied phenomenon—by uncovering its different facets within their context and in terms of meaningfulness.

The study uses two main ways of analyzing the data. Firstly, a few socio-demographic variables, as well as frequencies related to OSN and SNS usage—obtained during the survey phase of this project—are presented in quantitative format. Secondly—and more importantly—students' perceptions, experiences, and feelings are expressed using their narratives. EvaSys (Education Survey Automation Suite)⁵ was used to produce a few visual illustrations of the quantitative

⁵ EvaSys is used by universities, colleges, and training providers to carry out all necessary steps of a survey which include questionnaire construction and data evaluation. One can reach a target population in various ways including a paper-based, online, or hybrid survey (which is both online and paper-based).

data obtained during the survey. For the qualitative part of the research, the research participants gave us their consent to voice record each interview session. These digital recordings were then transcribed into written format, thematically coded, and analyzed. Thematic analysis involves the process of identifying themes in the data that carry meaning and that are relevant to the research question (Willig 2014:147). In this sense, thematic analysis assisted us to identify patterns in the data.

The target population of the study was identified as the undergraduate students between the ages of 18 and 30. The sample is inclusive of both the variables of gender and race. Non-probability *convenient sampling*⁶ was used to recruit 100 students of which 97 questionnaires were captured. Three questionnaires were incomplete, therefore, not incorporated into the analysis. For the individual in-depth interviews, *quota sampling*⁷ was used to select six participants from the 100 respondents who participated in the survey. We opted for this sampling to maintain a representation of variables such as sex and race. The six suitable candidates were systematically chosen to participate in the one-on-one interviews—a total of three males and three females.

The study was given ethical clearance by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of the Free State (UFS).⁸ All research partic-

ipants signed a consent form explaining the aim of the study, the applicable ethical considerations, the data collection process, and the measures to guarantee participant anonymity. The participants were assured that all information obtained from them would be used without revealing their identities and would be kept in a secure location.

The Survey

SNS are forms of social structures that influence their users and mould their experiences. To embody this notion, the study describes a few objective facts concerning the participants and their online interactions.

Initially, a predetermined percentage (50%) for each gender category was set to ensure an equal number/ratio of respondents for both genders. Slightly more than half of 97 respondents who completed the questionnaires turned out to be males (50.5%). Almost two thirds (61.1%) of the questionnaire respondents are African, followed by White respondents consisting of 17.9%, and Colored respondents with 16.8% in total. A small percentage (4.5%) of the respondents are Indians. The proportions of respondents in terms of racial groups depict roughly the same demographic composition of the total student population at the UFS.

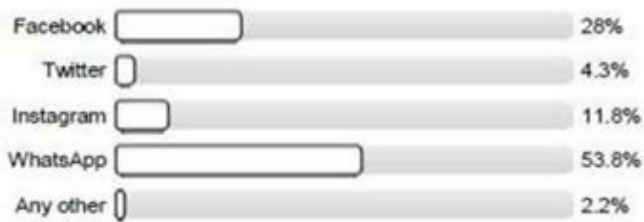
In addition to the demographic particulars mentioned above, the student profiles from the survey participants also indicate how much time the participants usually spend online and which SNS are perceived as more popular, accessible, and conducive to students' needs.

⁶ The primary criteria for "convenient sampling" are to select the cases that are conveniently and readily available (Neuman 2012:147).

⁷ "Quota sampling" is used when the researcher wants to gather a pre-set number of cases in each of several predetermined categories that will reflect the diversity of the population (Neuman 2000:197).

⁸ UFS ethical clearance number UFS-HSD2016/0324.

Figure 1. Social Network Sites which Provide Most Satisfaction.



Source: Self-elaboration.

Slightly more than half (53.8%) of the survey respondents obtain most satisfaction from WhatsApp. This figure is followed by their satisfaction with Facebook—where the level is 28%. Coming after Facebook is Instagram with 11.8% and Twitter with 4.3% as levels of satisfaction. Other SNS include Pinterest, Snapchat, Skype, Tumblr, Badoo, LinkedIn, BBM, and Mxit, but these sites appear to be providing low levels of satisfaction. Aspects of these results are affirmed by the *South African Social Media Landscape 2016: Executive Summary Report* (Fuseware 2016:2), which states that WhatsApp is regarded as the most used SNS in Android, Apple, and Windows online application stores with Facebook as the runner up.

Figure 2. Time Spent on Social Network Sites by Respondents on a Normal Day.



Source: Self-elaboration.

The figure above reveals that almost half (46.9%) of the survey respondents indicate that they spend more than 3 hours a day engaging in OSN activities. Those respondents who indicate to be spending 2 to 3 hours a day on SNS make up a proportion of 13.5% of the sample. This validates the findings of several studies which report that individuals who own modern Internet devices spend a large proportion of time on SNS (Tazghini and Siedlecki 2013:827; Tang et al. 2016:102).

Narrating OSN Activities: The Social Construction of Reality

The qualitative—and more important part of this study—entails the personal narratives of the research participants in relation to their experiences regarding online interactions. OSN has become part of the social reality in which members of the online community live. This is the social reality where these people live their daily lives and where they construe shared meanings created during the processes of relation formations and interactions. An important question is: “How do participants make sense of this constructed reality?” This question is partly answered by exploring the meanings participants attach to OSN:

Ehm, I would say it [OSN] means everything because lately, like now, that's where we get our information, you know. Not all of us read newspapers because we're lazy to read newspapers. So, online social networking is the closest [source of information]. And technology has improved, as you know. So, it's better 'cause you go online and see stuff. It's much easier than reading a newspaper! And every-

where you go, social networking on your phone... You know. It's everywhere—it's accessible; in simple terms. [Pretty]

What does it mean to me? It means, ehm...a chance to learn, a chance to engage with other people, a chance to ehm...to express what you feel. Like, you know, that sometimes it's sort of difficult to engage with people that you have in real life. That you're surrounded by and then, ehm...Yeah, for me, I've always took it as something...sort of ehm, a learning curve for me. [Lesegeo]

Online social networking is everything 'cause most of the things we...everything. Like when I'm bored, it's online social networks. When I'm having fun, I have to go on social network sites to update my friends so that they too can do what I'm doing or get hooked on what I'm doing. So, it's like...it's... everything that's "trending" [popular activities or topics on SNS]...Whatever you do, it's trending. So, [online] social networks, yeah! I can't live without them! [Millions]

What is salient in participants' narratives is the importance of SNS in facilitating communication between themselves and other people. OSN as a form of dominant technology in the current era is seen as a reliable and accessible source of information. Equally important is the role of SNS as tools of self-expression, thereby facilitating sociability.

The research participants in this study belong to Generation Z—the generation cohort which was born in the mid-1990s to early 2000s (Tulgan 2013:1).

They were born into the age of social media. The online environment as an intrinsic part of social reality is strongly integrated into their everyday lifeworld. Although they realize that the online world is not part of their natural world, they renegotiate it and often experience it as natural. To them SNS are a *paramount reality*—"the lifeworld seems like a completely unavoidable sphere in which one lives" (Inggris 2012:96). To emphasize this point, the research participants proclaim that, should they discontinue engaging with SNS, their lives would change dramatically:

Drastically, I think. Honestly, us as students or as sort of teenagers or young adults, you know social media...like, we grew up with social media, basically...From adolescence to early adulthood, we grew up with that. That is all we know, honestly. Life would change drastically, I think, yeah. It would almost be...I know it's weird to say this, but it would almost be impossible to live without social media. [Katlego]

How would my life change? I think I will be...There was a time a few years ago where my phone got broken and I couldn't use WhatsApp, I couldn't use Facebook, nothing. I was like in a...you know, that feeling when you get trapped!? That's a feeling I got when I think I can't use them anymore. That feeling of: "I want to communicate with these people, but I can't." And if online social networking can just stop for everybody, I think everybody will feel that something is missing. I can't explain it. It's just... you feel trapped. I feel trapped if I'm not using online social network sites and I feel like everybody is just "out there," but I can't get to them. [Wonder]

According to the participants, life without SNS is unimaginable. They view OSN as a phenomenon which is hard to escape. Some even make an analogy between stopping to engage on SNS and experiencing the withdrawal effects when an addict discontinues using a substance:

It was, like ehm...You know that feeling when...the people that got addicted to drugs and stuff and then they need to get over it. That feeling of needing to attack the addiction, but at the same time you need to fulfil it. That's the feeling you get when you stop using social network sites. [Wonder]

Within phenomenological thinking, it happens that individuals “create large-scale social forces” that are products of their own interactions, but which in turn seem to be beyond their own control (Inglis 2012:94). In this sense, humans create social reality. Online social networks are products of human creation and humans use these sites to pursue their interactions. However, SNS are experienced by the users as real and objective.

Narratives on Social Interactions and Relations

SNS serve to facilitate the interpersonal relations amongst members of the online community. Through OSN individuals get to develop and maintain a form of *social capital*⁹ that acts as an important resource that complements their social

relations (Lu 2011:52). Because of the ubiquitous nature of SNS, users often have more extended online relations and interactions—something that is rarely the case in the physical environment (Julien 2015:365). This theme explores the extent to which OSN interactions and relations feel real and intimate. The concept of *tie-strength*—the amount of connection a user has with his or her online friends—captures this process. To determine the tie-strength between the participants and their online friends, we focus on the description of the type of people participants interact with. We also look at the motives behind including those types of people into their social circles:

I'd say I interact with everyone because, you know, nowadays even family members are on online social networks. On WhatsApp, for example, I have family...I have my parents on WhatsApp. I have my friends on WhatsApp. I have lovers, classmates, and even strangers on Facebook. Yeah, I'd say I interact with everybody on these social media. [Katlego]

Even though Katlego interacts with a broader online community, he is dedicated to interacting with his consociates—partners and friends. Rasala, too, interacts mostly with people who he regards as close to him, but he also spends time interacting with other individuals—acquaintances and common associates—who are part of online chat rooms. He realizes that these online interactions allow him to experience a sense of belonging through an ongoing interaction with these people:

Okay, online I interact with mostly my friends. The ones I went to high school with, those from around

⁹ Lin (as cited in Jin 2015:503) defines social capital as “an investment in social relations on the part of individuals through which they gain access to embedded resources to enhance expected returns on instrumental or expressive actions.”

varsity, and my girlfriend. And others are just group-chats where I'm involved in. Some stuff like church stuff and the choir. That's the people I communicate with, on my online platforms...I feel like they are closer to me and the breakdown in communication with them will just draw us apart if we don't keep communicating; we just gonna go apart. And then with them, I have a sense of belonging. We can relate when we communicate to each other. We can relate. We could have something to talk about. [Rasala]

While interactions with consociates are valued and prioritized by most of the participants, some of the female research participants disapprove of interactions and communications with online strangers. This disapproval is connected to previous experiences:

Everyone. But, on my side, I don't like talking to strangers. So, most of the time I talk to my friends and family...I'm avoiding trouble. Talking to a stranger, you don't know the risks. Okay, we can say it's 50/50 because you don't know if this person means good or this person means bad. But, I try to avoid that all the time because I'm a sweet person. I would think this person means good, *kanti* [whereas] this person means bad, you know. So, I just don't want to talk to strangers because I don't wanna find myself in trouble...Strangers, I just ignore. [Pretty]

I interact with family members, friends, lovers, and... besides them...okay, classmates, ex-classmates...that's it. I don't interact with strangers. You're a stranger, I don't know you. I just...I don't entertain strangers because you never know what the intentions of that

particular person are. So, if that person wants to talk to me, he/she would have [to] make some sort of efforts, sort of coming to me like face-to-face rather than on social media. So, strangers, I don't talk to them. [Lesego]

Ehm...my family, my friends and my fiancé—those are people I interact the most with. I don't trust strangers; I don't interact with them. Ehm...those are people who are closest to me. Like I said, I'm a social butterfly, at times. I want people who are closest to me to be in my life and online social networking provides that. [Wonder]

Even though Wonder does not reveal her experiences of interacting with online strangers, the following narrative reveals an experience that impacted her negatively. She indicates how some SNS such as WeChat and ToGo can create a platform for inappropriate and sometimes aggressive sexual advances:

In WeChat you can communicate with people around you, yeah! And that's crazy because WeChat you don't control it. ToGo too. ToGo is also a social network site; you can communicate with strangers around you. And if this stranger, let's say he's 50 years old and I'm 22...Let's say he's a psychopath and everything, that is scary [shivering voice]. And I don't say all guys are like that. But, most guys, in my experience. They only want one thing on WeChat, on ToGo and everything. They want this...“sexual vixen.” I'm not interested, I have a fiancé. I don't want that! [Wonder]

The narratives reveal that the research participants maintain strong ties with their partners, family

members, and close friends. SNS are instrumental in fostering social cohesion and bonds with people who are already part of the research participants' lives, particularly in those cases where a connection/relationship was established outside the online spaces.

Narratives on Identity and Self-Presentation

OSN, according to Sponcil and Gitimu (2013:5-6), offers young people the opportunity to explore their identities in so far as how they want to express themselves. Thus, OSN provides them with ownership and agency over identity formation, contributing to how an individual wants to be perceived in the virtual spaces. In this sense, an individual's online interactants are similar to a mirror, reflecting back the created image. A sociological concept which captures this process of self-presentation is Charles Cooley's *looking-glass self*. According to this concept, people align their images with what they think other people see—they imagine how they must appear to others and resultantly act in terms of this assessment (Cooley 1902 as cited in OpenStax 2013:92). In this line of thought, self-presentation as performed by users of SNS can be seen as directly linked and influential to identity construction. The meaning of the concept "identity" as used by the participants can be classified into two distinct categories—identity as *self-understanding* and as a notion of *commonality*. Self-understanding refers to the way in which a person defines who he/she is (Fearon 1999:20), whereas commonality describes subjective, experienced, felt, and perceived sharing of (some)

characteristics amongst members of the group (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). Based on the complexities associated with the concept of identity, we probed how the research participants perceived and projected their online sense of self as opposed to their offline sense of self:

When I'm not on social network sites, I think I'm more quiet...Yeah, I think I'm more quiet! I'm always alone. I don't talk that much [laughing] like when I'm on social network sites...Because offline, I'm more with myself. I talk to myself a lot. I feel like that's when I think a lot and that's when I get to go online and share all the stuff. But, when I'm offline, I don't really get to engage with people. I think I'm a bit emotional when I engage with people because people don't wanna accept your view and they want to force their viewpoint on you. That's why I just keep everything to myself [when engaging with people in real] and rather share it [online]. I won't be standing on the podium preaching or something. No! [Rasala]

Rasala describes himself as somewhat of an introvert when he is offline as opposed to resorting to projecting an extrovert self when online. Even though he seems to harbor two different identities, they complement each other—online platforms afford him an opportunity to externalize the thoughts and perceptions that he feels constrained to communicate in his offline environment. SNS afford the user time to figure out how they want to articulate their sentiments, views, thoughts, and perceptions (Leung 2011:382; Sponcil and Gitimu 2013:5-6). While Rasala feels that SNS grant him an opportunity to express himself, Wonder believes

that the disembodied nature of SNS makes it hard for her to express her true sense of self. The lack of face-to-face interactions and the inability to see and experience everyday micro-expressions are serious limitations of SNS:

On social network sites I think I'm really constricted. Because if I talk to a person face-to-face, they know exactly what I'm thinking, they know exactly what I'm feeling. Online platforms are really constricting me into being...I'm more proper on social network sites than I am in my real life [pause] more like a "proper lady," I can say. I'm more proper on social network sites than I am in my real life. [Wonder]

Oh, online? I'm all fake. Nah-nah, not all fake, a bit fake. Because some things, I fake them, you see. So, I lie a bit, twisting things around just to make myself look cool. Because I can't come second best all the time. It's just that sometimes you need to win, you know, stay winning. That's it. So, my personality is different from my actual self. I'm loud on Facebook, but all you see is typing. There's a line! Even if you can read it and you find it hilarious. But, if I say it to you in person, it's gonna be funnier. So, there's this thing that sets Facebook and my real personality apart. [Millions]

Millions re-negotiates his sense of self and portrays an alternative (fake) identity online. This *loud self* is driven by the need to be socially acceptable and a desire to be competitive on online platforms. In the process of interaction, people find themselves in situations where they have to compete with one another (Thompson and Hick-

ey 2005:129), and the presence of this competition is at the basis of the restrictive and determinist nature of OSN and SNS. However, this view is not accepted by all research participants—some feel that their offline identities are consistent with their online ones:

What they see on social media, what I post on social media represents me; whether I like it or not. So, hence I'm saying: I don't post naughty things 'cause I'm not naughty. So, what they see on social media is what they see when I'm not on social media. [Pretty]

Upon being asked to describe his identity, Katlego says:

[Laughs] Can I relate it to sort of my own online profile? For example, Facebook, they ask the same sort of question: Who are you? And based on who I am on Facebook and who I am in life in general...I actually wrote that I am the "African dream"...I shed light on a lot of problems that we have as Africans. I believe that we are still in a state of slavery; which is mental slavery, you know. So, I said to myself: that is the African dream. 'Cause I believe that our people can still be freed from these ideologies; from these thoughts that they have in their minds. [Katlego]

When talking about the question of: "Who I am?," Katlego describes himself as an "African dream" and it suggests a collective identity. Furthermore, he uses the "we" pronoun to polarize his identity or group membership from that of non-members. Katlego identifies himself with those who are

similar to him and who share a common social reality with him.

Conclusion

The narratives suggest that OSN has become part of the everyday mundane activities of most of the research participants. As such, they find it hard to imagine a life outside these online platforms. OSN is an important part of the social reality in which the online interactants experience their mundane everyday lives. In these online spaces, individuals get to negotiate their daily lives and construe shared meanings created during the processes of forming relations and interactions. OSN provides easy access to general information and is also seen as a symbol of effective and efficient communication and interaction.

SNS hold value to the participants' daily experiences and lifeworlds—they re-negotiate their *real* sense of self by projecting and engaging their online environment with an alternative, or even *alter ego*, identity. A recurring narrative that emerged is that online identities allow participants to exercise more autonomy and self-expression than real life settings. According to existential sociology, an individual constructs her/his *self* within the complexities of social and cultural contexts and is active in exercising her/his will and agency (Kotarba 2009:142-143). As such, online platforms are instrumental in assisting participants to exercise their agency. However, for some participants, OSN is restrictive in terms of expressing themselves. This is due to the disembodied nature of SNS: these participants are unable to externalize

their real selves. SNS appear to mould the manner in which these users express, as well as present themselves online.

Given that SNS appear to be intriguing and inviting to student participants, questions arise: "With whom do students interact and form relations?" and "Who is most valued in these interactions?" The findings reveal that the participants maintain and develop social capital in two different ways—by interacting with people they meet online and those who are already part of their lives. For the majority of the participants, maintaining interpersonal relations with significant others such as families, relatives, and friends makes their online interactions worth their while. Although the participants prefer to interact with their consociates, they also interact with people that they come across online—these people are usually strangers. *Open* SNS such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram make it possible for users to interact with anyone, including strangers. Although the idea of meeting new people online seems to be exciting and thrilling, some of the participants show disapproval of developing interactions with online strangers. This attitude towards online strangers often relates to undesirable experiences. Online strangers are often linked to traits that include dishonesty, discourtesy, and opportunism. On the whole, OSN, taken granted as it is, can be seen as an everyday lived experience that is perpetuated through intersubjective interactions by members of the online community. As much as these online platforms are social spaces where participants continuously construct their reality, SNS influence and determine how the research participants experience this reality.

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Online Gamers, Lived Experiences, and Sense of Belonging: Students at the University of the Free State, Bloemfontein

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Abstract Individuals who partake in video games are often regarded with prejudice. It is an activity that is perceived to be mainly related to senseless leisure and teenage entertainment. However, many diverse people make video games such an important part of their lives that they become passionately engaged in it. Video games and online video gaming offer the player immersive experiences unlike any other forms of media. A phenomenological and interpretive exploration is undertaken in order to gain a deeper understanding of the narratives of online gamers and their experiences of a sense of belonging to the associated online communities. Through the use of in-depth interviews, the article explores various aspects of the life stories of a group of eight South African university students. It attempts to show how online gaming has become a part of their lifeworlds. The aim of this article is to present the narratives of online gamers as rich and descriptive accounts that maintain the voices of the participants. Various aspects of the lifeworlds of online gamers are explored. Firstly, an exploration is undertaken to gain an understanding of what it means to be a gamer. It focuses on how a person can become involved with gaming and how it can evolve into something that a person is engaged with on a daily basis. Secondly, it explores how video games influence the perception of reality of gamers. Immersion in video games can transfer a player into an alternative reality and can take the focus away from the real world. This can lead to feelings of joy and excitement, but can also lead to escapism. Lastly, the article shifts attention towards how online video gamers experience online communities. Players can have positive experiences with random strangers online, but because of the anonymous nature of the online environment, it can also lead to negative and isolating experiences.

Keywords Phenomenology; Interpretive Sociology; Online Video Gaming; Lived Experiences; Sense of Belonging; Immersion; Socialization

Video games have grown into a worldwide phenomenon becoming part of international culture and entertainment. Initially, these games were perceived as a leisure activity for mainly male teenagers, but as the focus on video games increased incrementally over time, diverse individuals now partake in gaming. This activity is no longer considered a predominantly teenage male activity. The number of people playing video games increases every year, showing no signs of slowing down. One reason for its growth in popularity is the perception that a video game is a richly expressive and creative medium, offering individuals an immersive experience unlike most other forms of media. This article aims to understand how people become involved with

online gaming and how it evolves into an important part of their everyday life.

We subscribe to the video game definition of Salen and Zimmerman (2004:94): “A game is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome.” Rules are used to provide structure in video gaming, while the quantifiable outcome proposes that games should have goals that can be reached—leading to winning or losing. Since there are goals resulting in an outcome, an element of conflict arises in a video game, however, because some of these goals require teamwork to complete the game, an element of co-operation may also arise. Therefore,

these games achieve more than simply providing entertainment for players. Video games enable the fostering of a community and even allow friendships to be formed.

What sets video games apart from other forms of media is their ability to stimulate, in a convincingly real manner, interaction and bonding between players (Lundmark 2015:58). They offer creative ways for individuals to interact with other players and with the gaming environment by allowing these players to make unique choices that generate different outcomes in substantial ways (Salen and Zimmerman 2004). In addition to offering players opportunities to interact and make choices, video games combine functionality with aesthetics, art, and science to further their appeal (Borowiecki and Prieto-Rodriguez 2015:239). People from all walks of life seem to enjoy taking part in this action and it has become a part of their daily life, influencing their cultural interactions (Culig et al. 2013; Lorentz, Ferguson, and Schott 2015).

With these capabilities, video gaming has grown to become one of the most popular forms of media (Salen and Zimmerman 2004; Boulton and Cremin 2011; Clarke 2013). Millions of people play and interact with other players on the Internet (Badrinarayanan, Sierra, and Taute 2014:853) on various platforms and devices (Borowiecki and Prieto-Rodriguez 2015). Widespread online gaming also occurs in South Africa. Estimates of the gaming industry in South Africa project that it earned 1.6 billion South African Rand in turnover from October 2007 to October 2008, out-performing other media such as movies and music during that period (Blyth

2009). However, even though gaming is a popular activity in South Africa, not all South Africans are exposed to it. Having access to gaming platforms is closely related to the income level of a household, and because of this, commentators suggest that on-line gaming is mostly found in White households in the higher income brackets (Walton and Pallitt 2012:348).

One of the aims of the research is to understand why people allow video games to become a big part of their lives. Several motivations seem to exist for people to partake in online gaming. On the surface, it appears that people become involved with gaming in order to relax and to escape reality (Billieux et al. 2013:108). However, often players become very passionate about gaming and more complex motivations influence their participation in online games. Main motivations to play relate to socializing with others, to gain a sense of achievement, and to be immersed in an alternate reality (Badrinarayanan, Sierra, and Martin 2015). Other motivations also exist, such as stimulating competitive needs, coping with stress, developing leadership and communication skills, as well as indulging in fantasy and recreation (Fuster et al. 2014).

In online communities, social contact and communication with other players often lead to the creation of friendships and interpersonal growth (Granic, Lobel, and Engels 2013; Badrinarayanan et al. 2014). Essentially, providing players with immersion influences the social construction of reality of players. Although interaction in the game may not be considered *real* and may not have consequences in the physical world, the actions in which players are

involved engage parts of the human consciousness and, therefore, the choices and consequences are often experienced as real for the players (Berger and Luckmann 1991; Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2012; Latorre 2015).

One of the end products of playing online games—combined with the immersion and constant social contact—is the development of a sense of belonging for players in online communities. Players strive to be part of a larger online community and they try to make an impact on these communities. Carpiano and Hystad (2011:606-607) offer four key components of a sense of belonging that can explain how players achieve this sense of belonging. The *first component* refers to membership of the community. This is a central component and relates to the feeling of connectedness or feeling of a sense of personal relatedness. The *second component* is when a sense of belonging is fostered and the individuals feel their actions matter and can make a difference (Carpiano and Hystad 2011:606-607). The *third component* in experiencing a sense of belonging is integration and fulfillment of needs (Carpiano and Hystad 2011:607). In order for players to feel that they are part of the online community, they should be considered as valuable members of the team and should feel that the community fulfils their needs. This will lead to the player feeling a sense of personal relatedness towards the community. The *last component* of this sense of belonging is the sharing of emotional connections (Carpiano and Hystad 2011:607). This component relates to how members are committed to each other and believe that they share a history, common places, and similar experiences. Personality also often plays a role in how

a person interacts with his/her environment. If the player is extroverted and open towards new experiences, he/she will most likely become more involved with online communities (Park and Lee 2012). With interconnectedness and involvement a form of culture is established over time. If the community is safe and inviting, and passes on valuable information to its members, the culture will thrive and more players will join the online community (Haigh, Russell, and Dutton 2015).

Theoretical and Methodological Context

Narrative research is always interpretive. The aim of the study is to gain insight into the world of online gamers and to indicate how these individuals experience their world on a day-to-day basis. “Narrative research...[therefore] strives to preserve the complexity of what it means to be human and to locate its observations of people and phenomena in society” (Josselson 2006:8). The stories of the gamers are interpreted in order to understand the meaning that they attribute to online gaming (Goodson and Gill 2011). People construct, reconstruct, and internalize their own realities through storytelling in order to make sense of their lives. However, how people interpret, digest, and recount their own experiences and the experiences of other people is subjective. In this project, the narrative approach is used by focusing on how participants construct their own stories. The aim is to break open the meaning contained in the perceptions and in the stories of the gamers and to attempt to reconstruct their views of reality (Packer and Addison 1989; Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2012). These realities are reconstructed and retold in order to help us to understand the narratives of online gamers.

Because of its interpretive nature, a qualitative research design is appropriate for this study, since the goal is to obtain thick descriptions of the lived experiences of online gamers and of how they achieve a sense of belonging in the virtual communities of the online world (Palinkas 2014). Qualitative research strives towards obtaining an understanding of existing perceptions. It also seeks to establish an interpretation of phenomena related to online gaming from the point of view of the individuals experiencing these phenomena in their lifeworld (Jacobsen 2009; Palinkas 2014). Therefore, the phenomena are studied in the context within which they take place (Silverman 2011). In other words, online gaming is investigated in the context of online gamers portraying their lifeworlds through their narratives. With this in mind, the research relies on the theoretical foundation of phenomenology to understand how individuals make sense of the perceptions they have of the world. In this regard, we accept that practical consciousness is the foundation for action and interaction (Burger 1977; Inglis and Thorpe 2012). The intention is, therefore, to pull online gamers out of their practical consciousness and natural attitudes in order to allow them to consciously contemplate their habits of online gaming. By allowing them to recreate their lived experiences through stories, they open up their lifeworlds in order for us to get a clearer picture of the phenomenon.

In order to identify research participants, the following criteria are set: a participant has to be active in personal computer (PC) gaming or must have been active at a certain point in his/her life. Additionally, participants must have engaged in some

form of Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs). Participants of any race or gender are allowed to take part in the study, provided they are students at the University of the Free State, Bloemfontein. Purposive and snowball sampling are employed to select research participants. Purposive sampling is an ideal method to find suitable candidates because the participants must be unique cases that contain specific informative criteria and that can offer in-depth information (Neuman 2000:198; Maxwell 2012:93). The first participant is recruited through purposive sampling, ensuring that he/she fits the criteria. After the recruitment of the first participant, a snowball method of non-probability sampling (using available participants to identify new participants that fit the criteria of online gamers) is used to find other suitable candidates (Neuman 2000). All participants turned out to be White South Africans. Students of different races were approached to participate in the study, however, it was not possible to find participants satisfying all the inclusion criteria. The composition of the sample confirms views in the literature that suggest that, due to the income inequality of South Africa, mostly members of households in higher income brackets are able to engage in online gaming—the profile of South African online gamers has been alluded to earlier (Walton and Pallitt 2012).

The data collection method for this study is in-depth interviews. It offers an opportunity to gain insight into the lived experience and subjectivity of a person's life (Seale et al. 2007:15). Data collected by in-depth interviews can identify meaningful themes in the lifeworld of research participants which relate

to their online gaming experiences (Kvale 2007). During an interview, open-ended questions are used, providing the participants the opportunity to respond freely and to discuss their experiences in detail without inhibition (Royse 2008:183). The conversations are recorded verbatim and also transcribed verbatim (Caplovitz 1983:102). Follow-up questions allow the narratives to be expanded on in order to create a clearer picture.

Any form of research contains challenges that need to be considered and handled in accordance with existing ethical codes and standards (Neuman 2000; Seale et al. 2007). Ethical issues that are prominent in the study are consent, confidentiality, and trust (Neuman 2000; Seale et al. 2007). The study also received ethical clearance from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities from the University of the Free State—UFS-HSD2016/0330.

Eight participants are recruited by means of purposive and snowball sampling methods. In-depth interviews are used for establishing a clear narrative of the experiences of online gamers. All research participants are young adults ranging from 18 to 25 years of age. At the time of the interviews, they were all enrolled as students at the University of the Free State. Participants study towards a range of degrees: industrial psychology, information technology, education, history, arts, and accounting. Each participant offers a unique perspective into the world of video gaming. Thematic analysis and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) are employed (Riessman 2008; Pringlie et al. 2010; Grbich 2013). The findings of the study present a deeper understanding of what it is like to be an online gamer

in the associated online gaming communities. To protect the privacy and identity of the participants, pseudonyms are used.

The Online Gamer

All participants recall that they became involved with online gaming at a young age. In most cases, family members and friends introduced them to video games, particularly older siblings and cousins. Where no family members or friends provided the introduction, research participants were often lead by their own curiosity and interest, where exploring computers and video games lead to a more longstanding interest in video games.

Playing with other people is an often-occurring motivation to become involved with video gaming. Participants recall that initially they partook in LAN (Local Area Network) events. At these events, gamers brought their own computers and played together. However, over time, video games evolved and re-established themselves as predominantly part of the *online* community via the World Wide Web. The widespread availability of the Internet provides players with the option to connect and interact with each other online. In this way, video gaming is made easily accessible and increasing numbers of players shift towards online gaming (Boulton and Cremin 2011:341).

The research participants express that the shift towards online gaming initially was difficult, as a few years ago (in South Africa) Internet access was relatively unknown in most households. As a result, participants were, at first, “outsiders” from the

online gaming experience. The idea of being an *outsider* in as far as the online gaming world was concerned was frustrating to participants who felt that they were missing out on the largest part of what gaming has to offer.

Upon gaining Internet access, participants narrate that they start to play video games more regularly, with gaming becoming a part of their everyday life and routine (Jacobsen 2009:97). Their narratives reveal how video gaming increased in importance in their lives. They feel a passion towards gaming, with one participant incorporating it into his career-life. Stephen, an industrial psychology student, explains:

I'm so passionate about this that I even started my own company because of online gaming. So, like now, other gamers also feel the joy of online gaming. [Stephen]

The passion people have for online gaming can lead to two types of behavior. They can either be obsessively passionate about gaming or have a harmonious passion (Fuster et al. 2014:293). Participants state that they have learned to maintain a balance between playing video games and actively participating in other parts of their life. While obsessively playing video games at some point in their lives, most participants realize the need for a healthy balance, particularly as it relates to their studies. Ben, who studies information technology, explains how he started to understand the importance of not becoming obsessed with video games.

A few years back it was a very big part of my life, because it was my biggest hobby. It's like it was my

sport...I was basically living online. Currently, I'm not so much playing games. I'm more just trying to sort my life out. Just getting all the building blocks together at the right place. Because I don't want to make a stupid mistake and then having lived my regret... There's always a space for it...I like having a diverse life. I love having different things and stuff. I don't want to go in my small box. I want to experience a lot of things. I think if this current semester is over, I will play a lot again [online], like when it's holiday. [Ben]

Passion is an essential dimension to the understanding of why video gaming is such an important part of a gamer's life. Likewise, exploration into what causes a person to become passionate about gaming is also necessary. Socializing with others and competitiveness stand out as the two main driving forces motivating a person to play online video games, becoming an online gamer.

Online games create an environment to participate in activities and to socialize with others without being in the same location (Badrinarayanan et al. 2015:1046). Some participants indicate that they would only play online games with friends they know in person. While socializing with friends can add to the satisfaction players experience in online gaming, most acknowledge that playing with strangers can also be an entertaining experience that can lead to establishing new connections. Eric, who studies education, maintains that the aspect of socializing with strangers can enrich the experience of playing online.

It's definitely something that I enjoy—meeting new people—but on a different level than you usually do. You

can really socialize a lot, learn a lot from other people. More than one would expect. And there was actually so many people you can meet online. And all of them have the same interests as you, because they're also playing the same game as you're playing. So, I really enjoyed meeting people online, especially in games. [Eric]

wall and kick stuff. I used to be: react in very bold and outrageous ways. But, then I realized that: this is not right. This isn't right to react like this. And like: if I'm going to become like this, I don't want to then play, because it takes the fun away. [Emily]

Competition between players presents diverse experiences for participants. People want to achieve the best outcomes and win most of the games they play online. Social comparison presents one explanation of why people are competitive. Social comparison arises the moment a person observes others in domains related to achievements, interpersonal relationships, and health (Ozimek and Bierhoff 2016:272). In the case of online games, players compare themselves to others in so far as the domain of achieving the game's goals are concerned. Wanting to be as good, if not better, than your friends, or other players, motivates you to try to play better. Participants explain this as something in the human nature. Emily explains that—while competitiveness can enrich the gaming experience and allow a person to play passionately—too much of these competitive feelings can have a negative impact on your gaming experience and sense of self.

That's sadly the thing. I don't become too competitive. And if I find myself becoming too competitive, I try to remove myself from it, for a while. Just to like cool my head. And then I go back. I would say because I don't like it. [Emily]

I didn't use to be like this. I used to be much more competitive and angry. I used to break the controls and almost throw the remotes against the

Constructing Reality

Video games offer an immersive experience that is distinct from other forms of engagement with media (Culig et al. 2013; Lorentz et al. 2015). Unlike books and films, games allow you to become the center of an interactive story. It is able to draw your focus towards another world and reality. In the social construction of reality (Berger and Luckmann 1991), the notion is brought forth that individuals construct their own realities by using human consciousness. Although video games provide a virtual reality for players, the stories produced by events within the games often are real stories to the players—becoming a part of their reality (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2012). When players immerse themselves into a game, they allow virtual reality to become a part of their own realities. Consequently, when a person immerses himself/herself into a game, the game becomes a part of his/her narrative. For the participants, being immersed means you become the character that you are playing. You start to live in that moment of playing video games and it occupies your full attention. You play more intensely, become more competitive, and feel attached to the character. Research participants narrate that becoming immersed in a game allows for a more genuine (authentic) and enriching experience.

I literally immerse myself with a character. Let's say my character is so hungry and I finally find a tin can of beans in a deserted house on the map...I would be actually happy because my character is surviving. Same goes [for when] there's a firefight. I would be stressed as hell. It's like real life, you don't [know] if someone's behind you or not. So, you would be so paranoid as hell and scared as hell. So...it would feel literally like real life. [Stephen]

Stephen illustrates how video games can have an effect on a person's emotions and thoughts. Players are able to put themselves in the place of their gaming characters and the realities of their characters—it becomes their reality. However, becoming too immersed in these games can contribute to gamers losing track of reality and, in some cases, causing them to turn towards gaming as a means to escape their everyday lifeworld.

When a player starts to prefer the game's reality over his/her own reality, it becomes a form of escaping reality with the aim of avoiding the demands of the real world (Clancy, Arvola, and Gjaerum 2015:8-9). During the interviews, most participants indicate that they feel a sense of immersion and safety in their video games. A few participants share their viewpoints on escaping reality and how it can become a part of life. In Zoey's—an accounting student—case, escaping her reality is not because of how these games pull her in but rather of how her home environment pushes her more towards immersing herself into video games.

When I started playing, there was a lot of stuff happening in my house. My dad was having an affair

and everything...And then, it was so easy: to just go and play games, and then everything is gone. And...then afterwards I would be so sad to return to this, this life. And...so, yeah, I think that's the main reason. Because there was bad stuff happening, and then I played and then I feel nice. And afterwards it's so...ugh!...So, then I started comparing [life] to gaming...Because then I'd rather play the whole time and never return to life that's so hard at that moment. [Zoey]

Zoey's narrative reveals how games are able to provide her with an escape from her circumstances. In real life, she feels constrained and also realizes that being able to do the things she wants to—such as travelling and seeing the world—requires money and time. In games, people can do different things and go to different places without money. Gamers are able to manipulate their virtual world in order to receive the most benefit from it. This often contrasts with the reality in which players find themselves—a reality that cannot easily be changed or manipulated. When a person finds himself/herself in such a reality, he/she is able to escape that reality through gaming (Martoncik and Loksa 2016:127-128).

Another aspect of video gaming that provides gamers an opportunity to immerse themselves into another reality is decision-making. When players are provided with freedom to decide, they feel more motivated to partake (Rapp et al. 2017:113). In role-playing games, players are provided with many choices. One of the choices players can make is the sex of their game character. Gender swapping—being able to play the role of a different sex—opens opportunities to encounter unique experiences (Song

and Jung 2015:435). Female gamers sometimes play as male characters—using male avatars to hide their female identity from other people in the online game world (Isaksson 2012). Research participants indicate that it offers a different experience and allows the player to be placed in unique situations.

I don't think it's something bad, no, because it's interesting. It's interesting to see how a man would react in a certain situation. If I think of a role-playing game now, of an RPG, yeah. It's interesting because I have done it. I have played a male character just to see how...I don't know, myself as a male character [would] react...Yeah, I don't think it's bad. I just don't like it when...like guys do it on purpose. Like they would then play a female character on World of Warcraft and tell everyone they are a girl. I don't like that. But, if you're just interested in, like...seeing...not seeing other people's reactions, and also just experiencing that. I don't think there is anything wrong with it. I think it's quite fun. I think it's a possibility that games have given us that we didn't usually have. [Emily]

Experiencing Belonging

A sense of belonging can be conceptualized as a feeling of connectedness with the community (Carpiano and Hystad 2011:607) and feeling that the community is supportive towards its members (Le, LaCost, and Wismer 2016:126-127). The four key components of a sense of belonging are: membership, influence (members' contributions matter and their actions make a difference in the community), integration/fulfillment of needs (a member is con-

sidered as a valuable asset whose needs are important), and sharing of emotional connections (members are able to share history, common places, and similar experiences).

Feeling a part of the online gaming community is something that varies from player to player according to participants of this study. For some players it is possible to feel a sense of belonging when entering a "foreign" online community and they have little problem in becoming friends with strangers. Other participants explain that while they feel a sense of connection with the online community, this sense of connection is something different to what they share with their real life friends that they interact with face-to-face. If they play an online game on their own, they do not really feel a part of the online community without physically having their friends at their side. It is also possible for players to feel no sense of connection with the community at all. For some, it is only possible to feel a part of the group if the members of the group are your friends in real life.

David, an education student, expresses that it is easier for him to become part of gaming communities than it is to become part of social groups in real life. He says that he is able to make friends in gaming communities with ease and has made close friendships through his online games.

Other than the friends I've already made, I'm still busy crafting new relationships on a day to day basis...I really enjoy meeting people. Obviously, I wouldn't go out on a limb, meeting a complete stranger on my own. [David]

David feels a sense of belonging, as described by Carpiano and Hystad (2011), by being able to make friends and have an emotional connection with them. Participants reflect a sense that even though you feel part of the gaming community, caution always has to prevail. David's comment above alludes to this and Emily's narrative explains this idea more fully:

It can be with strangers. I think it takes longer with strangers, but definitely it can be with strangers. Obviously, there's threats and people who lie. I see most of these people I've met online who said they're a girl are not—[or rather] that's just a guess. So, there wasn't a specific occurrence...I think a lot of people who play online games are guys pretending to be girls just to get stuff [laughs]. But, I did make a very good friend. A guy who lives in P.E. over World of Warcraft. And I think the big thing is, it takes longer because you are quite cautious. You don't want to just say your real name online and stuff like that. But, it takes longer, but then also there's a reward in it. You gain friends which you never would have met in real life. Which also has a certain fun quality...It's a good experience. [Emily]

Participants bring up the notion that games create an environment within which it is possible to become personally involved with someone. In online gaming, it is possible to become close friends or even become romantically involved with another player. Spending time playing games with friends leads to deepening friendships as in most cases participants describe gaming as an activity similar to any other pastime you perform with friends.

During the interviews, gaming is often associated with sport, where people spend time together doing something which requires communication and teamwork. Online gaming and sport create an environment for people to become friends, but playing online games does have certain benefits over sports. Gamers are able to play from the comfort of their homes (Fuster et al. 2014) and playing online is more convenient than having to make an effort to meet in person. Salen and Zimmerman (2004) point out that playing games can extend for longer periods of time without having the physical strain of playing sports. This results in more time spent together on playing games, developing friendships, and meeting new people. Players have stated, however, that they feel that friendships developed during gaming do so at the same pace as friendships formed through playing sport or other activities:

It's definitely something that is possible during online gaming because you meet people that you would probably never have met in real life. Because you meet people from all over the world. So, yes, definitely that, and it grows much more...Because you're playing the game together, and then you just build on top of that. It's not like you're meeting someone in a bar and you don't know if you have anything in common at all. You kind of know already: "Okay, this person is into games." So, this person plays and might play other games and might also be interested in Anime [a style of Japanese film and television animation]. And...like you already, you know that person is already kind of part of this sub-community. [Emily]

Participants agree that an effort needs to be put into maintaining new friendships formed online. A per-

son needs to keep playing with the new friend and sometimes needs to interact more than just playing games. Most participants confirm that gaming cannot be the only aspect of the friendship, and that it would not last if there are no other common interests. It is with this notion in mind that Peter, an information technology student, expresses that he does not find it worth his effort to befriend random online players. He explains that, if you only have that one game in common, it is not enough to make a lasting connection with someone. He continues by saying the chances of meeting the other player in person are very slim. Thus, Peter persists on developing his friendships with people he knows in person. For him, gaming is something that helps existing (face-to-face) relationships to grow.

I can basically think of like, it's like at a book club. And then they talk about the book. What we do is we've all finished the game and then we talk about the game. I love doing that...like every second weekend we get together and *braai* [have a barbeque] and talk about game endings and how fun it was.
[Peter]

In the players' narratives, different perspectives on how gaming influences friendships are given. For most gamers, it is possible to befriend a person online and become good friends. However, maintaining an online friendship through playing games is not sufficient. Participants express that people must have more than one interest in common, and that they prefer to also bond in person. Sharing the lived experiences of fellow online gamers can lead to the possibility of gamers experiencing a shared emotional connection with each other.

Most respondents state that sharing personal information and intimate details of their lives should be kept at a minimum. Stephen summarizes this view by expressing that he does feel an emotional connectedness with his friends by sharing his passions for gaming and for overcoming obstacles in games. However, he does not easily share something online with someone he does not know, and he keeps his gaming accounts private.

I would only like to disclose this to people I would know for like years and stuff. I wouldn't give away private stuff within like seconds...With international gamers I would like say: "Hey! From which country are you? Oh, you're from Australia. I'm from South Africa," and stuff like that. But, I wouldn't go like personal stuff that could be to my detriment. I would only share stuff that would not invade my privacy. So, like I said, if I'm friends with the person, like a real friend. And I have him on Facebook, because of the gaming and stuff. I would then share a little bit more intimate details of my private life. [Stephen]

Only after adding them as friends and spending more time with them does Stephen begin to share personal details. But, the shared information remain mostly about where they live and what they do for a living. Only after he has met them in person, the friendship starts to grow. Aaron, a history student, builds on this viewpoint by explaining that he feels gaming is not a platform where a person can share personal details or deep emotions.

I don't think gaming is a place to share personal feelings. It's just weird...When I play with my good friends online, we will ask like each other personal

questions, but we know each other. But, I will say if we were not playing the games, we will still ask each other the same questions, like: “No, man, how’s it going with that girl you like?” Or something like that. But, I don’t believe like gaming is the platform, is the place to share more deep emotions. [Aaron]

He elaborates that you can talk with a personal friend about what is going on in your life, but you can do that at any location if it is a close friend. Aaron continues that he cannot see online gaming as a platform where a person meets another, they become close friends, and share such personal information. If it is to happen, it will take a long time.

I can’t see how when I play with someone, met someone randomly online, and we start [becoming] friends...It will take me at least like 6 months to, on my own, to opening up. [Aaron]

Concluding Thoughts

This study seeks to gain a perception of what video games and online gaming entail. A context of current insights into the phenomenon of online gaming is provided to move the focus towards understanding the everyday lifeworlds of online gamers. People can become gamers from an early age through introduction to gaming by family members or friends. What motivates them to continue playing are driving forces such as socializing with friends and strangers in an online environment, as well as feeling a sense of well-being and accomplishment in a competitive environment. Passion also plays a role; having a passion for something can be an important motivator for a person to participate.

Existing literature on this topic agrees that online video games offer an immersive experience unlike many other forms of media. Players are provided opportunities to grow and to allow games to become a part of their identity. Immersing into one’s own lifeworld and escaping reality are two dimensions of *The Social Construction of Reality* within video games. In the participants’ narratives, they express these feelings. People project themselves onto the gaming characters that they encounter in video games. The realities of their characters coincide with their own.

From the narratives it is clear that online gaming is no longer only a recreational or passively executed leisure activity. Video and online games have become distinctive activities which require a substantial amount of agency. The article, therefore, explores the lifeworlds of online gamers and provides insight into why gaming becomes such a large part of their lives. Experiencing a sense of belonging to online gaming communities is an important reason why gaming becomes a part of participants’ lives. For some players, it is possible to instantly feel a sense of belonging upon entering a random community, and they find it easy to become friends with strangers. On the other hand, some players may only feel a sense of connection with real life friends who play with them online. It is clear that through online gaming friendships and bonds can be forged. However, most participants express that they do not feel that video gaming is a platform where people are able to share intimate information with each other.

Future research can aim to explore the female gamers’ experiences. Throughout the narratives

of the participants, the stories told by the two female participants portrayed significantly different experiences than that of their male counterparts. Female participants voiced that they face more stigma and prejudice because of their gender—mainly from male gamers who feel that the world of online gaming is a male domain. Additionally, female gamers appear to face stigma and prejudice from other females who do not play video games.

Future research can elaborate on gender equality in online gaming, and whether female gamers find gender equality a necessity. It can also explore the role of gender swapping in gaming. In the study, females find it easier to immerse themselves into the gaming reality and find it harder to separate themselves from their moral beliefs. Further research is required to investigate and understand these standpoints.

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A Shock to the System: HIV among Older African Women in Zimbabwe

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Abstract HIV remains a threat to the ordinary everyday life of older woman in African society. In what can be called “a reality shock,” HIV challenges most of the ordinary everyday endeavors in conservative African societies as it imposes new Western prevention, treatment, and health-management methods over long-held African traditions. The reality of the “Western” HIV epidemic, and its impact on the “African” ordinary everyday life, demands that the infected undergo a paradigm shift in order for them to live harmoniously within their society. This calls for a re-examination of traditional values and a strong sense of responsibility, courage, and determination to remain relevant and not be considered odd in one’s community, especially as one grows old with the virus. The study, which focuses on the experiences of women from the Manicaland Province in Zimbabwe who are aging with HIV, observes that growing old with an HIV infection fosters forms of inner strength and wisdom that enable the infected to disregard some of the unquestioned traditions and employ effective ways of living well with the life-threatening condition.

Keywords HIV; Lifeworld; Older Women; Reality Shock; Paradigm Shift; Zimbabwe

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An HIV-positive diagnosis unleashes all sorts of emotions as the person struggles to take in the reality of living with an incurable condition. It most certainly triggers a sense of disbelief and shock. More so, it is a huge cultural shock for Africans in predominantly conservative African societies because it is widely assumed that HIV is a direct threat to African traditions, and is a foreign, modern, Western epidemic. Still persisting in traditional, conservative African thinking are the perceptions and images of the first publicly reported cases of HIV and AIDS in America where homosexual males were dying from compromised immune functioning. The result of these perceptions and images is that HIV penetrated large parts of the public

thinking in Zimbabwe as a “repugnant” epidemic that affects men who engage in “illicit” homosexual activities. For a long time, many heterosexuals, and especially women, lived under this misunderstanding and got infected with HIV unsuspectingly. Many died as a result and cases were often regarded as misfortunes related to practices such as witchcraft. A common assumption in most African societies is that untimely death can be attributed to witchcraft or unhappy ancestors or retribution from God. This builds on the belief that any natural occurrence such as sickness can be effectively combated by traditional and spiritual means relevant to African ways of being (Mbona 2012). In this context, HIV has been thriving and destroying silently.

In the case of a society holding onto norms, practices, and cultural beliefs without feeling a need to generate alternative reasons for why things happen the way they do (Kain 1994), it becomes common practice to apply meanings to conditions such as sickness that are consistent with age-old practices that are “tried and true” in that particular society. However, in the face of a “foreign” infection such as HIV, it is likely to be more acceptable to incorporate “foreign” factors to deal with the impact of an exposure. In such a situation, common meanings of sickness and ways of dealing with it are likely to be reformed, and borrowed meanings from other cultures are likely to be deployed. Kain (1994) calls this process cultural diffusion. Thus, Western ways of healing, prevention, and management of HIV were implemented within an African context to deal with a problem which is seriously disturbing the traditional lifeworld.

The appearance of a “foreign” infection such as HIV rattles the known reality. The willingness to allow in the strategies, management, and preventative actions coming from the *origins* of the infection does not occur without disruptions. This results in what Holzner (1972) calls a reality shock. Everyday thinking and acting is confronted by feelings of limitations and of looming crisis that create anxiety and uncertainties. Schütz and Luckmann’s (1973) view is that, in the lifeworld, actions can be oriented and rationally motivated to suit the demands of a situation. Experiences then cease to be ordinary and obvious. They now become subjectively analyzed and understood to have a self-fulfilling and meaningful life of their own. At this point a person’s consciousness is awakened and directed towards an object

that disturbs the ordinariness of the everyday. He/she now thinks and acts with a rational motive or intention to create and maintain order.

Plummer (1994) discusses this notion of creating social order as reordering the ordinariness of the everyday through a change of values, beliefs, and experiences arising from new exposures. He mentions that, for people to adapt to change—current and future—there must be a shift where the usual way of doing things has to be re-appraised and re-examined because new exposures demand new meanings. Thus, when confronted with new realities or challenges, rationality becomes focused more on preserving life than on satisfying the demands of the status quo at the expense of life and good living. In this article, we interpret the narratives of the group of older African women living with HIV in the context of their attempts to understand their new situation and adapt to the demands of the changes brought to their lifeworlds.

Methodological Account

For social scientists interested in human behavior, meaning in context (Merriam 2014) is at the core of the exploration of the research participants’ experiences. So, we opted for a qualitative exploration of research participants’ experiences, and situated this exploration in their own environment. This study gathered narratives on the experiences of growing old with HIV from eight purposely selected HIV-positive women aged between fifty and sixty-one years who are living in the province of Manicaland in Zimbabwe. The study focuses on a sensitive issue, namely, HIV, as well as a hard-to-

reach population, namely, *older* women living with HIV. For these reasons, we decided to work with a small set of participants in order to get a deep understanding of the different meanings and contexts that influence their experiences. As Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) note, rich data are more likely to be gathered when one engages in-depth with a small number of participants.

We subscribe to all the ethical considerations requiring researchers to act ethically during the engagement with the research participants. The study was formally approved by the University of the Free State's Humanities Faculty Ethics Committee (approval number UFS-HSD2015/0345) and by the Zimbabwean Medical Research Council (approval number MRCZ/B/931). Ethical protocols included acquiring written informed consent from the research participants prior to their participation. All interviews were audio-recorded. Appropriate measures were taken to mitigate any kind of harm and risk to participants related to this sensitive study. All interviews were conducted without any incidences of emotional breakdowns or withdrawals.

Data were collected using semi-structured conversational interviews with open-ended questions. As a phenomenological study interested in the experiences of their lifeworlds as narrated by research participants, interview questions started with general questions aimed at gathering background information and moved gradually to questions probing more personal and subjective experiences. In this way, the interviews managed to access progressively deeper levels of the participants' lived experiences and their struggle with the reality of

growing old with HIV. They were encouraged to express themselves freely and give voice to their own points of view. The data were analyzed thematically; some codes were deduced from the data and literature, while others emerged more inductively from the data.

Philosophical Reflections

The Schützian definition of the lifeworld proclaims that everyday ordinary experiences are central to the constitution of human thought and behavior in a society (Gurwitsch 1962; Schütz and Luckmann 1973). This suggests that ordinary people's experiences of reality and their taken-for-granted interactions in the lifeworld occur naturally and shape their reality quite fluidly. But, in addition to this, every society has its own and sanctioned ways of doing things—a lifeworld that people fit into without thinking or questioning its validity (Overgaard and Zahavi 2009). The everyday is also considered as the unnoticed (Jacobsen 2009) because its activities are mainly obvious and not much attention or reflection is given to these actions. Following this, the way in which sickness is perceived, treated, and managed in a particular society becomes part of reality to the extent that remedies for certain ailments are not interrogated: they are simply known and implemented. If, in a traditional society, a certain sickness is perceived as being caused by witchcraft—as was the case with most research participants in this study when they started to experience HIV-related symptoms—part of the common practice will be to consult a traditional doctor or herbalist for treatment and/or for removing the root cause of events.

The research participants' experience of everyday life, their constitution of meaning, and their social interaction with other members of their society will actively contribute to the way in which they live their everyday life and to the way they perform in their society according to what is expected of them as women. Firstly, this points to the fact that a person's ordinary reality or immediate experience is subject to, and influenced by, his/her interaction with others. Secondly, it indicates that everyday experiences involve shared meanings, as well as a shared consciousness underlying the collective understanding of phenomena (Sokolowski 2000). This connectedness is termed intersubjectivity. These women—the participants in this study—are to a large extent, bound to meet and satisfy the demands and expectations of societal norms in order to fit in and be accepted as an authentic part of a whole. Their experiencing of social reality takes place within a socially delineated collective identity. Thus, we contextualize the narratives of female research participants within their larger social environment.

Their gender determines their conduct, persona, relations, and thoughts—all of which are intersubjectively constituted and confirming the “commonness” of their lifeworld. Reality in this lifeworld—which we can call a gendered lifeworld—is imposed and accepted as natural (Schütz 1962). An assessment of the research participants' narratives indeed finds that they feel largely disempowered to act individually and to engage in other forms of agency against HIV infection. This is because the social reality in which they find themselves expects them as married women to be subservient. The research participants' societally imposed

inferior status as women means that they could not question husbands if they suspected them of risky sexual behavior, nor were they able to impose preventive methods to avoid an HIV infection or re-infection. These women's powerlessness with regard to sexual matters and their ultimate inability to influence their husbands' risky sexual behavior is embedded in a shared reality that they have internalized through socialization as part of their everyday experiences. This is confirmed in the following statement by one of the participants:

There was nothing you could do. But, you will know that when he comes, you will know that he is my husband. You will just meet [have sex] like that. We did not have an opportunity to say: “No-no-no, let us use a condom...” NO, it was not something that was expected to be done because a man cannot be challenged by a woman and a woman cannot tell a man what to do. It is still happening even today. So, when it comes to prevention, we never had that chance to do anything. Sometimes you would know that my husband has a girlfriend, called this. You could even clearly see and know that this is what my husband is doing. Even sex, we never enjoyed it when it was like that because you would know that here I am being given a disease, but there was nothing that we could do. So, as a woman you would just keep quiet.
[Grandma Mecky]

The acceptance of socially constructed ways of doing things leads to normative behaviors becoming embedded in human understandings and being considered as natural. In phenomenological terms, this is called typification (Overgaard and Zahavi 2009). So, there are typical actions that are governed

by typical motives and deployed in typical situations with typical consequences (Flick, Kardorff, and Steinke 2004; Overgaard and Zahavi 2009). But, typifications are never entirely rigid and unchangeable; an actor can adapt certain ways of doing things in order to resolve a problematic situation. Alfred Schütz argues that typifications are indeed prone to revision, especially where expectations and needs are not met (Overgaard and Zahavi 2009:105). People can be exposed to situations/conditions that are out of the ordinary, and in these situations, they can also act with rationality in an effort to deal with social reality. So, in response to the familiar and the less familiar, as Alfred Schütz points out in his analysis of the lifeworld (Overgaard and Zahavi 2009:105), typifications are driven by “because” and “in order to” motives.

When applied to this study, we argue that a woman living and growing old with HIV in a traditional African society does not typify the common actions of others. She adapts an attitude that makes it possible for her to deal with her situation and to live meaningfully with HIV. Most of the narratives indicate that the ultimate aim of participants is to manage their condition and to preserve their lives. The narratives indicate that when a woman with HIV is on anti-retroviral (ARV) treatment, she adapts her motive: “I am not using traditional herbs to treat HIV ‘because’ ARVs are proven to manage the virus effectively and they are working well for me.” Or, she can argue: “I use ARVs ‘in order to’ live longer and healthily with HIV.” In both cases, rationality takes center stage over the shared traditional meanings surrounding sickness and its connection to spiritual and traditional heal-

ing. This study’s participants are taking ARVs “because” this treatment restored their health, which had deteriorated:

Myself, to tell the truth, from the beginning I was not well. I was sick before taking the pills [ARVs]. So, when I started taking the pills, I don’t get sick anymore. But, previously my hair used to fall off [and I had] ringworms all over my body. [Grandma Jessy]

That time I was not even able to walk on my own, people would lift me up. Then I started to take the ARVs and started to get myself up and walk. And then I realized that the tablets are helping me, up to now. [Grandma Vicky]

I can say in the first days—those first days, that is, when I say I got so thin. Ehm, the first days before I knew that it’s the disease [HIV]. But, when I started to take the ARVs, I gained weight, getting really fit and strong. [Grandma Shelly]

A further dimension of the philosophical framework for this article can be found in existential phenomenological thinking, which assists us in unpacking the research participants’ experiences of living with an “uncommon” condition. Living with HIV is a deeply existential issue that impacts the self and how an individual responds to changes in his/her everyday experience. It has to do with how our HIV-positive, older women live, feel, and respond to situations that confront them: how they experience changes to their bodies, challenge cultural norms, and interpret new social signals from their environments. From the narratives of participants it is clear that all these changes and challenges contribute

to a reality shock. Existential phenomenological thinking, therefore, assists our analysis in that it highlights the individualistic nature of existential aspects in its relationship to acquired expertise, conformity, and the broad cultural reality of society (Kotarba and Johnson 2002).

From this study's findings it is clear that most of the women were emotionally affected by their HIV-positive diagnosis. Their first thoughts were—in line with common perceptions in their society—that HIV is so destructive that nothing meaningful can come out of it. Their narrations capture the feelings of shock, hurt, and death-related ideation that most of them experienced after being diagnosed with HIV:

To tell you that I did not say anything when I got home [from the HIV testing center]. I was very angry and confused at the same time...I was thinking that it is better to die than to live a life of a sick person. Because it was being said everywhere that this disease cannot be cured. Once you get it, you have it for life. So, I thought of suicide... [Grandma Maybe]

I was hurt and I said: "How am I going to support these children that were left to me." I was hurt and I cried...I even wrote a will... [Grandma Mecky]

Later, they all altered their perceptions and tried to counter their negative assumptions by seeking life-saving treatment and support. They achieved this by existentially engaging with the collective myths, beliefs, and misconceptions surrounding HIV in their society. By taking up this position, they allowed their existential self to act outside their socially constructed cultural context.

Creating New Meanings

Their HIV-positive diagnoses clearly caused great trauma to the research participants. This reality shock, in the view of Holzner (1972:11), coincides with an unexpected change or occurrence in the everyday reality of a person where traumatic feelings are experienced as a result of extreme disappointment and disbelief. Holzner (1972:11) argues that the feelings take on an unreal character because these experiences are completely unrelated to their shared natural attitude. From the narratives it is clear that an HIV-positive diagnosis was not only traumatic but also entirely unanticipated. With the exception of one, all the research participants claim that they never engaged in sexually risky encounters that might have exposed them to an HIV infection. This following quote is broadly representative of what all the other participants say about finding out that they are HIV-positive:

Ehm, I was hurt. I felt hurt because I never imagined that situation to happen to me. Because I was married to my husband when I was a virgin, and I was very honest. That is the truth. There was nothing [risky sexual behavior] that I did, yes. So, it was hurtful to me that today I am now told that I have HIV. I did not go around looking for other friends [sexual partners]. [Grandma Jessy]

A reality shock of this magnitude clearly heralds a turning point in life where the everyday must be re-evaluated and new ways found to deal with the situation in order to save one's life (Baars and Philipson 2014). Holzner (1972) further points out that a reality shock creates doubts about the ordinary

ways of doing things and often calls for a reconsideration of reality, causing most of the natural and existing reality to collapse. New meanings must be found to readjust priorities in order to live a meaningful life. From the narratives we can see that participants renegotiated their notions of reality. Initially, they tend to blame the deaths of their spouses on witchcraft, and thought of themselves as healthy and not infected by the virus. They later changed their views and took steps to manage HIV:

...myself, before I got treated, I also thought that I was bewitched. Even when my husband passed away, I also thought that he was bewitched, yes. But, now I know that it is HIV. [Grandma Rose]

After confirmation of their HIV statuses, by means of clinical testing, the research participants adapted new perspectives enabling them to deal with the disruptions caused by HIV and their lifeworlds. The ways in which they deal with the hurt and humiliation accompanying their HIV status reveal a shift in the participants' identities. They become more directed inwards and strive to value self-fulfillment, inner satisfaction, and better quality of life. Although often despised and labeled—and even isolated and discriminated against—it seems these women do not allow these issues to get in the way of them managing their HIV status:

Ah, they call us...There is someone who once gave me this name, calling me *Zhing Zhong* [laughs] [*Zhing Zhong* is a nickname most people in Zimbabwe give to cheap Chinese products that are not durable]. Ha-a-a the *Zhing Zhongs*, you see...But, we never put that into our minds because you can see that it is better

because there is treatment for us. Even if we are the HIV people like this, we actually see that we are the same with those people who have sugar [diabetes] those with what, Asthma. [Grandma Shelly]

Ehm, people would talk, even today they still say many things—names, nicknames we are given. *Masofa panze* [sofas outside—to signify a funeral; meaning that the HIV-positive people are destined for death] or *vari kunojusa* [they are going for a re-charge—collecting ARVs at the clinic]...Ah, these days I no longer care. I am now well; what can trouble me? Let them say what they want, but myself I know that I am taking my medicine and I am living. [Grandma Vicky]

The narratives also indicate that some of these women began advocating for condom use—something that they never did before they got infected with HIV. Grandma Tamar, who is living with an HIV-negative husband, discloses that they started using condoms after learning that she is HIV-positive and she encourages other women to talk about condom use with their husbands:

...then you must use that condom. You then agree on that. When you are going to Sissy Grace's place, go with it in a pocket so that you don't do what? Take Sissy Grace's disease and bring it here to me. [Grandma Tamar]

New meanings and actions are constructed in the face of a phenomenon such as HIV that is understood and experienced as coming from outside of the normal cultural life and demands new ways of dealing with reality.

Rationality in the Face of HIV

Calls for rational action are by no means confined to our times. Rationality is rooted in enlightenment philosophy where reason and empirical knowledge are presented as superseding traditional beliefs. A significant part of this study pivots on issues related to individual reasoning versus collective culture. For most participants, it appears to be a matter of inner compulsion responding to internal health needs, as well as external social judgments, that drive the impulse to re-fashion their views and experience of reality (Gellner 1992). The research participants are handling HIV in what can be considered as reasonable ways. They shifted their mindset from believing that the sickness and the resulting deaths of their husbands were a result of witchcraft, towards viewing HIV as a medical condition that needs to be managed with clinically-proven Western treatment and not by only consulting traditional healers and diviners.

Living with an HIV-positive status, trying to come to terms with it, and striving towards a better life knowing that you must grow old with this condition require a rational approach and a fair share of level-headedness. In this regard, Western medical intervention is a given. But, this realization—that a future life will coincide with disciplined taking of medication—does not come naturally. Realizing the full impact of living with HIV and making rational choices goes hand-in-hand with having access to knowledge about the disease and its effects. The research participants in this study went beyond common sense to acquire knowledge of the problem (HIV) at local clinics and at HIV/AIDS support

groups: they decided not to follow blindly the common assumption that HIV equals death. They did not give up on life but chose to enroll in HIV programs, even though some already displayed symptoms associated with AIDS—the more advanced stages of HIV infection—and realized that they might die as a result of HIV. Their decisions to start with anti-retroviral treatment went together with the rational acceptance that this particular treatment regime is the best option available to them.

Other noted rational actions taken by these women—besides seeking effective treatment—include embarking on a healthy diet and refraining from any actions that might fuel the spread of HIV. In many cases, the research participants—supposedly because they believe that they got infected by their husbands and now prefer celibacy—indicate that it is important for them to take care of their psychological well-being.

I control myself [being faithful to one sexual partner]. Even the food that I eat: I do not eat things that are too sweet plus I do not eat food that is too oily. I eat traditional vegetables like pumpkin leaves and black jerk leaves. [Grandma Tamar]

Ehm! [Laughs] What for? [Getting a sexual partner]. Ah, not again. NO, I cannot start again. What for? [Laughs] I only want to focus on living now. I have my children and they now have their own children, what else do I need? [Grandma Shelly]

To just live without thinking about it. Yeah! Not to think too much about it every time; that everywhere you are you think about it, no-no. Don't get concerned

by it—that this AIDS; when is it going to end? [Grandma Tamar]

Although each one of the eight participants has her own subjective experience, there are similarities in the way they manage their condition. It seems that they create a modified lifeworld characterized by the everyday experiences that revolve around HIV and managing it. Even their relationship experiences are shaped by HIV:

I don't have a friend that I can say I talk to, but for these friends of mine in the [support] group that I am with. Like these ones that I take tablets [ARVs] with. We can talk to each other without any problems because we are all the same. And it is easy for me to talk to them because what they have [HIV] is the same as what I have. So, there is no one who says: "I don't have the disease" [HIV]. [Grandma Vicky]

Yes, someone [sexual partner] who is also in the program [ART] because your [social] network is not, not a problem. Partner, let's take a condom. You are now: What now? Using a condom. Partner, today it's like this. He understands because he is living in it. [Grandma Tamar]

A New Openness

The narratives of the research participants reveal that some of these women consider themselves as experts in HIV issues and are even conducting HIV counseling and advocacy activities with little shame. They believe that they will be listened to because of their age. They give their personal testimonies to encourage others to know their HIV status

and to get the necessary help—though they realize that many in their society despise people with HIV. HIV is often associated with younger people in their society and HIV related issues (especially when discussed with members of the opposite sex) are seldom discussed because of the sensitive link between HIV, sexual activity, and the body. In the case of one of the participants, a son noticed that his mother was infected with HIV, but could not tell her. He waited to broach the subject when the mother later disclosed her HIV status to him:

...he told me that: "Mother, I saw it long ago that you are now sick [HIV-positive]. But, as a child it was not possible for me to tell you first"...It was not possible for him to tell me that this is what is there. So, he talked to his father when I was away in South Africa: that he must go and get tested. [Grandma Maybe]

This poignant story is a testimony to the need to break through cultural, gender, and age barriers to health. Participants' boldness in going against the socially accepted norms and advocating for rational choices in terms of lifestyle and treatment are doing just that. Their advocacy can be partially attributed to the maturity and social status that age brings, but it is mainly due to the fact that they have lived long with HIV and are exposed to positive HIV discourse through their involvement in support groups.

New Everyday Practices

It is documented that the older a person gets, the more self-control and care he/she exercises in as far as his/her health (Emlet, Tozay, and Ravies 2010). The older women in our study decided to embrace

life by choosing to treat themselves with the recommended and prescribed medication for HIV and AIDS, namely, ARVs. They even chose a specific time to take their pills to ensure strict adherence as reflected in this narrative:

I take them [ARVs] at 7 [o'clock] before I go to bed. 7 [o'clock] everyday, that's enough. Then the next day I do the same as usual. Why did I choose that time? Because I am a person who goes to [work in] the fields. I might forget [to take the pills] at times when I am in a hurry to get there... [Grandma Tamar]

Their ARV treatment ensures that they are ageing well with HIV. As members of a society with socially defined ways of handling sickness they report that they initially sought healing from herbs and traditional alternatives. But, when this trusted ally failed, they embraced a new solution:

Myself, I no longer use such things other than ARVs. I once used that stuff. What do we call it? Moringa [plant consumed for its nutritional medical value]. I would eat it...I later realized that: "Hey! Even the doctor told me that you are mixing things and you are damaging your body." [Grandma Kate]

Myself, no-no-no! I do not use those things [traditional herbs] and I do not encourage it. That is why I feel sorry for those people who refuse to take ARVs and prefer to drink traditional medicines. [Grandma Jessy]

Ehm, herbs, a-a-h no! We just use ARVs; just eat our food. The food we are encouraged to eat—black jerk, pumpkin leaves, dried vegetables, what-what...Yes, AND FISH, yes! This beef is the one that we are not

encouraged to eat. It's [the] red meat that has problems. But, if you want to eat it, make sure it is well cooked...Those herbs N-O-O. [Grandma Shelly]

Driven by their own motives, preferences, and interests—all related to survival—these women act in the face of a threat to their everyday reality. This leads to a re-evaluation of traditional meanings regarding everyday life experiences. One such re-evaluation relates to the notion and practice of hospitality in their society. The custom of visiting others and of sharing a meal with the host is highly valued in most African societies. In the Zimbabwean context, desirable social connectedness involves checking upon one another and sharing whatever food is available with visitors to one's homestead. There is even a Shona proverb: *Hukama igasva hunozadziswa nekudya*. It translates literally to: "Relations are half fulfilled unless one has eaten the food offered by the host." The participants—who now follow a healthy diet—actively defend their health rather than compromise it with practices that may be detrimental to their condition:

Don't let other people force you to eat things that are not good for you [as an HIV+ person]. Because when I visit, those spices, we are not allowed to eat them. But, others will eat spiced food because they are shy. Don't be shy. [With] these things [HIV] you cannot be shy. You need to be open. That personally, ehm, things with spices, I do not eat...And if you see that it is difficult for you, don't go there. Stay at your place because you know that this is what I am [HIV+]. [Grandma Tamar]

In a remarkable turnaround from traditional *collective* cultural norms to a much more individual-

istic approach, participants decide not to jeopardize their health by eating the food of kinsmen. Interestingly, cultural norms also support this new brand of individualism: the boldness shown by these women is enabled by the fact that older people are often better positioned to stand their ground and live life in terms of their own needs—no matter how out-of-the-ordinary their actions might appear to others.

From Collective to Individual Orientation

Clearly participants get to a point where they become less bothered by what the collective says or does. Another example is participation in traditional beer-drinking ceremonies common in Zimbabwean society and where traditional beer is used as a medium to contact the ancestors in times of need. Women prepare traditional beer at sacred places in mountains, mainly at the beginning of the rainy season. When the beer matures, people in the community gather and share it amidst the singing of traditional songs and dances. During these ceremonies a portion of the beer is spilled on the ground in request to the ancestors for rain. Attendance and participation are traditionally mandatory, but some of the research participants—who stay connected to their rural roots—claim that they now abstain from these ceremonies. They are—as people who are living with HIV and who are on anti-viral treatment—aware of the adverse effects of alcohol on their health. As a result of their age and maturity they also feel more inclined to challenge the previously unquestioned ordinary everyday norms. Some of these sentiments are reflected in the following:

Even beer, that beer that is brewed in rural areas for traditional purposes, I don't do such things. At times you are told that everyone must drink it and if you refuse, they say: "H-e-e, she is refusing to drink the traditional beer. Who does she think she is? H-e-e, she must be punished." [Grandma Kate]

There are also challenges to traditional practices that fuel the spread of HIV. Some research participants discourage the tradition of "wife inheritance" and refused to get inherited by their husbands' brothers. This practice is part of the culture in Zimbabwean society: to meet the needs of the widow and to have a "provider" for the deceased's family:

Myself, when my husband died, I was still very young [28 years old]. But, some relatives did not know what had caused the death of my husband. They wanted me to be inherited by someone else, but I am the one who said it is not possible that I get inherited because the way my husband died. The way he was sick and then his death certificate [I suspected that] there is something related to this modern disease [HIV and AIDS]. So, I did not agree to be inherited because of that. [Grandma Mecky]

...our views are different, but myself I saw that, ehm, I did not like wife inheritance. H-a-a! Inheritance! I refused it...That's how the disease [HIV] spreads, that's how the disease spreads. You will be spreading it to another man together with his wife. It's a big sin to do. When you know that you have the disease, just stay like that. What else do you want? Just live on your own. [Grandma Shelly]

Ehm, I can say that inheritance is not a good thing. Yes, because you can spread the virus to that person

who inherits you. But, if it was possible for the man who inherits you to understand, you would just say: "Let us use condoms." [Grandma Vicky]

A prominent part of the research participants' lifeworld is the high value placed on the role of a grandparent in taking care of grandchildren—even when the child's parents are still alive and capable of taking care of the child. The custom of being an engaged grandparent stems partly from the need to combat loneliness in old age and it also enables grandparents to pass traditional knowledge on to younger generations. The grandparents introduce grandchildren to traditional values, practices, and the overall culture of their society. The increase of orphans due to AIDS-related deaths of parents has also brought about a condition where grandparents are forced to become primary caregivers of orphaned children. This situation poses challenges to grandparents who are themselves living with HIV because of the expanded roles and duties that come their way. One of the research participants narrates how she had to send away a grandchild who was staying with her because of her HIV-positive condition. She says that the child's behavior caused her constant stress. Knowing the requirements related to her condition—that stress is not good for her immune system as an older person with HIV—she acted against the ordinary and everyday practice in her society and refused to take care of her grandchild. This grandmother was not prepared to risk compromising her immune system:

I once stayed with one of them [grandchildren]. So, she started to get very mischievous. So, as a grandmother I saw that my CD4 [cells] will decrease. [Grandma Rose]

Another example of research participants changing their behavior and actions relates to the way they limit their roles as grandmothers owing to their HIV infections. Traditionally, a grandmother prepares solid food for babies sometimes by way of masticating it before feeding the baby. But, with HIV, they cannot do this because of their fear that the child can get infected with the virus:

When it comes to food, I know that I am sick [HIV-positive]...It is no longer possible for me to bite and spit for my grandchildren. [Grandma Maybe]

I now know that it is no longer safe to do that. Or that I suck a *freesit* [ice lolly packed in a plastic sachet] and spit it into her [small child] mouth. Or even a sweet, a lollipop that I am sucking. If she asks me for it, I cannot give her. [Grandma Kate]

In their culture, mothers are expected to be carers and overseers in the family to ensure that the family is well cared for. Some realize that overworking their bodies to meet their socially defined roles can be detrimental to their health as older women living with HIV, hence:

Some of the work that I used to do, big jobs, I have left them. I saw that I cannot carry those heavy bags anymore to go and sell in South Africa. I cannot do it anymore. I am old now. It was possible before then. [Grandma Vicky]

...if it was possible to find things to work with that go hand in hand with our status. Things that do not make us overwork, yes. In life, ehm, those pills need us to rest. We sometimes overwork ourselves because

we are seeing that, ehm, especially myself a widow, ehm, I am straining myself. [Grandma Rose]

Concluding Remarks

The findings show how participants' lifeworlds are challenged and disturbed in the context of HIV infection, which necessitates many changes to everyday life. The ordinary and the traditional way of life is exposed to several reality shocks, which call for flexibility and innovation to maintain meaningful engagements. Many of the clinical issues related to HIV treatment and care constitute disruptions in as far as traditional culture and meanings that surround sickness in many conservative African societies. HIV entered African spaces in the context where sickness is commonly perceived as a punishment from God or from the ancestors, or from witchcraft. The traditional way to deal with sickness, therefore, often involves spiritual and divine healing combined with traditional medicine.

As in many other African contexts, in traditional Zimbabwean society, HIV is perceived as foreign and coming from the outside, and more specifically, from the West. Prevention and treatment options from the

West are thus also seen as "foreign tools" and similarly under suspicion having followed the virus from the outside. The illness, its prevention, and its treatment can all be regarded as countering traditional indigenous medicines and challenge the way traditional people from Africa normally exercise their health, familial, community, and even conjugal rights.

To survive and live meaningfully with such a threat to life and living requires several paradigm shifts involving re-assessments of circumstances and options, as well as the adaption of new ways of doing things. This study found that the overwhelming desire is to live healthily and to grow old with HIV. Rationality, intentionality, and motivation take center stage and life saving steps are employed. All participants took uncommon steps and employed rational means to manage their condition. As older women who are living with HIV, they constantly have to weigh up the requirements of a healthy lifestyle against the demands of everyday life and injunctions to adhere to cultural norms several of which go against health needs. A norm that works in their favor is that age is revered in Zimbabwean society: some use this to move beyond personal coping into the realm of advocacy.

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Experiencing Physical Disability: Young African Women in Lesotho

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Abstract The article unwraps notions related to young African women's lifeworld experiences of physical disability. The study is positioned in the broad context of the theoretical frameworks of phenomenology, existential sociology, the social construction of reality, feminist disability theory, and intersectionality. Focus is given to the way social systems of cultural oppression and discrimination impact women with physical impairments and manifest in how they perceive and make meaning of their everyday life experiences. Women with physical impairments often experience a double measure of oppression—being both female and disabled. When these women try to engage in a normal life and interact with others, they experience barriers imposed on them by their social reality—particularly in the form of cultural norms and patriarchal ideals. There are also instances where participants demonstrate resilience in the face of negative social stereotyping, instances that clearly show that they are not different, and do not perceive themselves as being different to able-bodied women. Drawing on semi-structured in-depth interviews with eight young Black women who are living with physical disabilities in Lesotho, the objective of this article is to examine their everyday life experiences within a predominantly able-bodied society.

Keywords Women; Physical Disability; Identity; Everyday Life

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Physical impairment is a complex human condition that can strike anyone, in spite of his/her social rank or status. The World Health Organization (WHO 2011:261) signaled at the beginning of this decade that more than a billion individuals in the world were living with some or other forms of physical impairment, making individuals with disabilities the world's largest single minority. The fact that many of the world's physically disabled people are women makes it likely that this group is prone, too, to other forms of inequality such as being deprived of proper education, being more likely to be unemployed, and when they are employed being more likely to have low income jobs (WHO 2011:262).

According to the Lesotho Ministry of Health and Social Welfare's Draft National Disability and Rehabilitation Policy (2011), this country has very limited

coordinated disability databases to provide accurate statistics on people with disabilities. Additionally, no recent, comprehensive national disability survey has been undertaken in this country—the last was conducted in 2001 by the Bureau of Statistics (Dube et al. 2008:10) and revealed that approximately 4.2% of the population or around 80,000 individuals in Lesotho are seriously disabled. A more recent study in 2010, *Living Conditions of Persons with Disabilities*, found that 3.7% of Lesotho's 1.8 million suffer from one or more severe disabilities (Kalebe 2016:8). This statistic was generated via a 2006 Population and Housing Census, which Shale (2015:184) elaborates on by offering a breakdown in terms of gender:

The results of the census were presented for the first time to stakeholders in December 2009 and they indicate that 3.7 per cent of the total population of

Lesotho has some form of disability of which 2.1 per cent constitute males and 1.6 per cent females.

Amongst the major forms of severe physical disabilities are visceral, skeletal, and disfiguring impairments such as paralysis, limping, amputations, lameness, deformity, and suffering from a hunched back. Contrary to the situation world-wide, the occurrence of physical impairments in Lesotho is more prevalent among male members of society. This is mainly due to amputations resulting from accidents related to male migrant labor in neighboring South Africa. The total physical disability ratio for Lesotho is 4,179 per 100,000 of the population, with the male disability ratio of 4,814—about 26% higher than the female physical disability ratio of 3,556 (Dube et al. 2008).

Although the number of disabled women in Lesotho might be smaller than the corresponding number among men, women with physical impairments often face additional challenges as a result of their disability. They often are excluded from taking part in many mainstream activities such as attending school, being considered for a job, and being regarded as an efficient mother and wife. Knowledge of how women with physical disabilities experience their everyday life is, however, limited and the issue of impairment has often been ignored within mainstream sociological practice (Turner 1992:252). Research done on women with physical disabilities originates mainly from first world countries and mostly focuses on the psychological, economic, and social issues that impact women with disabilities. The research often ignores these women's everyday experiences (Shakespeare 2006:197). The voices of

women with physical impairments have therefore been omitted almost entirely in research in developing societies. This is also the case in Lesotho, and there is, therefore, little understanding of how young Black women with physical disabilities in this country experience their everyday reality. This article seeks to add to our understanding of the experiences of women suffering from physical disability by taking a phenomenological approach to this issue. A phenomenological approach attempts to describe the participants' lived world in a way that increases the understanding of these human beings through analyzing their experience (Norlyk, Martinsen, and Kjaer-Petersen 2013:2).

Experiencing Disability

Women in developing societies with physical impairments often experience multiple forms of discrimination, which makes it hard for them to meet the expectations of the roles related to being a woman. This is the case because in developing societies being a wife is often seen as synonymous with being a co-provider, a sexual partner, a mother, and a domestic worker. When women with physical impairments are not able to perform these roles, they are often regarded as not being self-sufficient and, therefore, less fit for the role of a wife. Depending on the severity of their impairment, some women with physical disabilities are indeed unable to perform all of the basic activities of daily living related to household chores and community engagement, which may compel them to be dependent on others. Although many women with physical impairments are able to perform most of the roles ascribed to them and although they appear to

be largely independent, they are often unlikely to get married because they are perceived as not being fully capable for the role of a wife (Hanna and Rogovsky 2006:44).

Women with physical disabilities are often made to feel inadequate and vulnerable as sexual partners. Many individuals believe that women with physical impairments cannot have a normal sex life. As a result, it becomes hard for women with physical disabilities to be in serious relationships. Because of society's prejudiced views, able-bodied men tend to be discouraged from being in relationships with disabled women (Tilley 1996:140). Societal prejudices can portray women with physical impairments as unattractive and as a risk in as far as the outcome of love is concerned. Hanna and Rogovsky (2006:45) summarize society's prejudice in this regard:

Physical attractiveness is the most visible and most easily accessible trait of a person. Physical attractiveness is also a constantly and frequently used informational cue...Generally, the more physically attractive an individual is, the more positively the person is perceived, the more favorably the person is responded to, and the more successful is the person's personal and professional life.

When women with physical impairments perceive that they are seen as unattractive and unworthy of love, they experience negative perceptions of their body image. Hence, they are made to feel uncomfortable in their own society because they do not only have to deal with the male gaze but also with general societal ideals of what constitutes feminine beauty.

In this article, the spotlight falls on disability and impairment as experienced in and through the body in terms of cultural and personal narratives that allow an individual to construct her own meaning of disability as part of her lifeworld (Papadimitriou 2008:694). The body is central to the experiences of everyday life. How people interact in everyday life emphasizes the importance of embodied experience (McMahon and Huntly 2013:31). Embodiment is viewed as highlighting the physical and emotional framing of our bodies in everyday encounters (McMahon and Huntly 2013:31). For this reason, disability in this article is understood from the point of embodied experience of action and meaning. The lived body of the disabled women is an impaired body. Moreover, this lived body is linked to these women's experiences and past actions; it is also linked to the thoughts and beliefs that they, as women with physical impairments, have encountered in their lives (McMahon and Huntly 2013:31).

By focusing on the narratives of women who are living with physical disabilities, an understanding will be gained of how their lived body represents subjective experiences that entail, or are connected to, the concept of embodiment. From the perspective of Bill Hughes and Kevin Paterson (2006:101), "the impaired body is not just experienced: it is also the very basic experience." The way these women perceive their bodies will provide us with a perspective on their world. It is important to consider the meaning of the lived body in order to understand the experience of disability; in turn, the meaning and experience of disability can also help to recall the concept of the lived body (Hughes and Paterson 2006:101).

The body is described by Hughes and Paterson (2006:101) as “an experiencing agent, itself a subject and therefore a site of meaning and source of knowledge about the world.” Hughes and Paterson (2006:102) further consider the importance of physical, emotional, and cultural factors in determining the embodied experiences of women with physical disabilities. Peters, Gabeland, and Symeonidou (2009:548) claim that

the body becomes a metaphor for culture, where culture is created from whole body experiences and the disabled body is the interactive force for cultural identity and change.

This means that a physically impaired body often cannot escape cultural meanings. When women with physical disabilities cannot meet the cultural expectations of the normal body, they often perceive their bodies as a source of pain, unworthiness, shame, and imperfection.

Labeling women with impairments in terms of their body limitations implies stigma. Stigma often originates from cultural expectations and from social disgrace (Goffman 1963). When a woman is unable to meet the cultural expectations of the feminine body, the body is stigmatized. In modern, developed societies, the stigmatized view of the disabled body often leads to reactions which may include making attempts via surgery to eliminate the basis of stigmatization (Holmes 2010:110). Furthermore, women with physical impairments may experience isolation because they are viewed as members of a stigmatized group by the non-disabled society (Wendell 1996:25).

The preceding arguments explain why it is the case that disability is perceived as an important characteristic of self-identity. Identity describes and determines belonging. It refers to what people have in common and how they are different from each other (Davis 2006:233). At its most basic function, identity provides a person with a sense of individual location. Women with physical disabilities experience difficulties in developing a positive sense of identity because of discrimination and oppression. As a result of failing to develop a positive sense of identity, women with physical impairment experience a negative perception of self, which prevents them from engaging with societal activities. This leads to social exclusion, limited opportunities, and negative labeling (Blinde and McClung 1997:327).

From what has been said thus far it is clear that society plays an active role in determining the negative self-perception of women with physical disabilities. This suggests that the self-image of women with physical disabilities is connected to fear of others’ attitudes and reactions. In extreme cases, they might even avoid contact with others altogether (Blinde and McClung 1997:328). Many women with physical impairment accept the labels given to them by their society—that they are in essence incapable and in need of help.

Of all the barriers that women with physical disabilities face, the attitudes and prejudices of others can be the most difficult to negotiate. More often than not the way a woman with a physical disability feels about herself is affected by the attitudes of those around her. The negative attitudes of members of society often result in discrimination, stigma, and

stereotyping. These inevitably impact the women and can lead to poor self-care and low self-esteem (Power and Dell Orto 2004:31). Some negative ways in which able-bodied people react towards disabled women are gazing or staring, as well as projecting fear, hostility, and anxiety (Sawadsri 2011:61). In addition, women with physical impairment are often patronized when they appear in public because of the inferiority inherent in disability, as imposed by the able-bodied individuals. Because of these negative reactions and attitudes, women with disabilities often experience discomfort and apprehension during interactions with others. Within society the negative attitudes towards women with physical disabilities stem from the assumption that disability is a problem in need of attention—mostly in terms of medical intervention (Cameron 2014:137).

Methodological Reflections

This article builds on sociological theories that can provide us with insight into the research participants' lifeworlds: phenomenology, existential sociology, the social construction of reality, intersectionality, and feminist disability theory. The research is largely situated within the context of ideas in Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's social construction of reality (1991). The social construction of reality relates to the subjective understanding of personal experiences—understanding that reflects shared meanings about women with physical impairments. A phenomenological perspective also guides the research. Following the phenomenological perspective, human beings constitute meaning and researchers need to make sense of people's lifeworlds. The research, therefore, attempts to estab-

lish how the research participants experience the interrelationships between disability, race/ethnicity, religion, social class, and gender.

This qualitative study made use of purposive and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling involves locating specific participants who can speak authoritatively on the research topic. The premise of our purposive sampling is that it selected women with physical disabilities because they share particular knowledge, and experience, of disability (Creswell 2013:155). Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used for collecting data on participants' personal stories—their histories, experiences, and perceptions. A research schedule guided the interviews. The narratives were digitally audio-recorded, transcribed into Sesotho, translated into English, and then analyzed thematically.

At the time of the interviews, two participants were married, two were in intimate relationships, and one of them was a single mother, while the other three women were single. All the participants lived for most of their lives in rural areas, but at the time of the interviews they were all residing in Maseru, the capital of Lesotho. Their socio-economic status and their educational level did not play a role in their recruitment as research participants. In-depth interviews took place in the privacy of participants' homes and all efforts were taken to avoid any discomfort to participants. A starting point to the interviews was the introduction of the research topic to the participants. They were then provided with details about the project and their role therein. After discussing the documentation outlining the full extent of the ethical context within which they would

participate, and after dealing with all their questions and concerns, those willing to be part of the project were given the opportunity to sign consent forms. All the interviews were conducted individually. The interviews started with an introductory section in which each participant was asked to tell us about herself. They also talked about their families, their day-to-day experiences, and their relationships. These experiences and relationships were explored in terms of participants' feelings, emotions, and reactions. Rest breaks were provided during the interviews to allow for participants' maximum comfort. Special care was taken to be attentive to any special needs associated with participants' physical disabilities.

Ethical Issues

Fully aware that this research deals with sensitive issues and with a vulnerable group in society, the stringent ethical procedures laid down by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of the Free State (ethical clearance number: UFS-HSD2015/0615, 09-Nov-2015) were faithfully implemented in order to protect the participants. The research participants' informed consent was obtained to audio-record the face-to-face interviews so that the interviews could later be transcribed, translated, and analyzed. All documentation related to their participation, such as the informed consent document, was presented in Sesotho—the participants' mother tongue. Participants were given the assurance of confidentiality and anonymity; one related strategy was to use pseudonyms to protect their identity. These pseudonyms are used in this article.

Presenting the Findings

The findings focus on the narratives reflecting the experiences of eight physically disabled women in Lesotho. We draw on Botle—one of the participants—to provide the context from which to hear their stories. Botle articulates living with, and the experiencing of, physical impairment:

Let me start off by saying it is very difficult to find a job, especially when you are a woman with a disability. What happened is I first started off as a volunteer at the IEC [Independent Electoral Commission] during the elections. My friends and other people told me that I should apply to volunteer because I had experience. While I was a volunteer at the IEC, I also applied to study part time at the NTTC [National Teachers Training College] and I was admitted. There was a lot of discrimination against individuals with disabilities at this institution [NTTC]. We were given special care and we were welcomed in different ways from the able-bodied individuals... This made me feel different from others. I was not alone...there were many of us [disabled people]... Women and men, young and old alike. When I realized that there were many people with disabilities, I started growing emotionally and spiritually. We were allocated rooms [dormitories] downstairs because all the other rooms were upstairs. In most cases, the rooms downstairs had single rooms. However, we were first asked if we preferred to stay in single rooms or sharing. They gave us options... sometimes you would like to stay with other people...roommates...When it was time to eat, we were given first preference, we were told not to queue for food... [Botle]

From Botle's narrative, it is evident that people with disabilities in Lesotho are perceived as different from able-bodied people and are regarded as being incapable, helpless, and dependent. People with impairments at this institution were treated differently and although some of the arrangements made for them can be said to come from a caring and considerate space, it is possible that their agency might have been undermined in the process (Garland-Thomson 2002:6). Botle initially felt that she was seen as being "different" and experienced this as being perceived in a negative light. This way of society looking at disability leads people with disabilities to experience a sense of conflict with their identity (Wendell 1996:83). But, when she realized that she was not alone, that there were many others with physical disabilities in her new community, she "started growing emotionally and spiritually."

Beauty Concepts

Women with physical disabilities are usually stereotyped and seen as unsuitable to pursue female beauty ideals. After raising issues that contribute to female beauty—such as make-up, clothes, and hairstyle—the research participants were asked about their attitudes and practices in this regard. Khauhe-lo gives her take on this matter:

[Laughs]...I like doing these things so that I can also look beautiful like other women. I should not look ugly just because I have a disability. I do not want to be ugly just because I am disabled...No...I have to look beautiful, really. A woman should look stunning all the time, whether she is disabled or not. [Khauhelo]

These duties are not a waste of time because one has to look and dress appropriately—so that one looks beautiful. The hair must be nice...Even if it is short, it must always be clean. The clothes should always look nice and one should dress for her body just like other women do...Yes. [Botle]

I like them. A woman has to look beautiful...I like being pretty and presentable. I do not want to look like I come from the farms. I have to look pretty all the time. Even when I am at home...People should think that I just came back from somewhere. [Iponeng]

Several participants believe that physical attractiveness is important; being physically impaired does not mean that they have a diminished right to beauty or to caring about their appearance. For Lisebo, on the other hand, using make-up, following fashion, and changing hairstyles are not that important because she feels less attractive:

I am...ehm...I am not a beautiful person...Yes ma'am...I am not a beautiful person. [Lisebo]

Feeling unattractive and undesirable, however, was not a common trend among the participants. The majority seem to concentrate on their physical appearance and spend more time preparing to look attractive. These participants seem to believe that having their hair styled, wearing make-up, and dressing well added to their sense of femininity.

Barriers to Intimate Relationships

The focus now shifts to physically impaired women's experiences of intimacy in as far as their

relationships are concerned. Women with physical disabilities often find it harder to experience everyday intimacies, which non-disabled people take for granted. This may be the case because many able-bodied people fail to consider them as desirable and romantic partners (Hanna and Rogovsky 2006:44). As a result, many women with physical impairments experience insecurities and fear of being rejected by men.

This is exactly what Palesa reveals through experiencing. Her negative attitude towards relationships and intimacy seems to hinder her from being with a partner. The resulting insecurity leaves her isolated:

I am scared that they will not love me. I wonder if they will love me the way I am. Maybe it is because I am self-doubting. I am scared. I think they will only take advantage of me because I am disabled. [Palesa]

Palesa's fear of being taken advantage of probably stems from a previous relationship. She says that she broke up with her boyfriend because she was assuming that he only wanted to have sex with her:

The relationship was good...but the problem was sex...I think about so many negative things that persuade me to break up with men. [Palesa]

Nthati speaks about the difficulty of getting into a relationship. She explains the distrust that she experiences towards able-bodied males. She also believes that she does not deserve to be loved by a man because of her impairment:

Hah...I think non-disabled guys feel sorry for us. When you are in a relationship with them and you have a disagreement...they give you that look. Like they feel sorry for you. I do not believe that a non-disabled man would love me. They just feel sorry for me. I am scared that I might fall in love with him and the next thing, he regrets being in a relationship with a disabled woman while there are so many able-bodied women out there. [Nthati]

Like Palesa, Nthati's fear of rejection stems from previous relationships. As she interprets past experiences, able-bodied men whom she dated seemed to be in a relationship with her because they pitied her, not necessarily because they loved her. The experience, or interpretation, of being pitied has impacted so negatively on Nthati that she believes no able-bodied male can ever love her because of her impairment.

Marriage

The expectation to find a partner and to marry is an important issue for the research participants, and a right that most able-bodied people take for granted (Pfeiffer 2006:74). Many participants experience negative attitudes to them getting married from their immediate families and from the public in general. These attitudes center around the non-acceptance of disabled women as wives because they are perceived to be unfit for this role. Being a wife is normally seen as a helping role such as being able to provide for and take care of a husband and children (Hanna and Rogovsky 2006:44). Married women interviewed for this study do speak about being dependent on their husbands and explain how they

rely on their husbands for support with many activities.

Iponeng indicates that her husband is able-bodied and she speaks passionately about her marriage. She mentions a balance between independence and dependence in relation to her husband and that she has not experienced any serious challenges in her marriage:

I have not experienced any challenges in my marriage thus far. I was expecting many challenges because I had seen so many things happen to other married couples. I did not experience the biggest challenges...I do not ask my husband to do things for me. He knows what I am able to do and he knows what I am not able to do. He does things for me. [Iponeng]

Iponeng emphasizes that she is unable to do some things that able-bodied individuals can do. Nonetheless, she is worthy of being loved and taken care of. She reports that she has not been abandoned by her partner, although other married couples around her broke up. Viewed from a feminist perspective, Iponeng has constructed an identity as a wife without undue emphasis on having to depend on her husband to some extent. A level of co-dependency is, after all, characteristic of all relationships. However, Botle points out that, based on the level of dependency, women with physical impairments may experience negative reactions when they are supported by their husbands:

When you are married and your husband does things for you like getting water from the community tap, people start talking. They say: "Wow, he has eaten it" [love potion]. Sometimes they will say: "Look at how

he is struggling. Why did he marry someone with a disability?" [Botle]

For some of the research participants who are not married, their dilemma regarding marriage is further complicated by able-bodied individuals who talk able-bodied men out of marrying women with physical impairments. The remarks by Nthati illustrate this point:

The other thing that made me sad was when one guy asked me to marry him...when I was doing my grade eight. I asked him why he wanted to marry me and he told me it is because his parents told him to marry, since he was old enough. Again, he told me that he told his parents about me and they had a problem with him marrying someone with a physical disability. His parents were worried if I would be able to perform the roles of a wife. For example, they were worried if I could take care of their son, do his laundry, cook for him, and many other things. When he told me this, I was very sad! [Nthati]

Nthati clearly experienced negative perceptions and stereotypes that position women with physical disabilities as not being capable of performing the traditional gendered roles associated with ideal wives (Hanna and Rogovsky 2006:44) and mothers (Garland-Thomson 2002:7). The research finds that participants are doubly disadvantaged due to gender discrimination and their physical impairment.

Motherhood

Identifying self in relation to motherhood is an important issue for women. The research participants

discuss in detail their experiences of motherhood. An interesting point is made by Botle who says:

My name is Botle Sello from Malibamatso. I got married in Pitseng. I have a house in Tsikoane...I am 35 years old. I have two daughters and my husband is non-disabled. [Botle]

Similarly, Nthati says:

My name is Nthati Pheko, I am 30 years old...From St. Michaels, but I was born in Quthing. I have a daughter and I live with her. [Nthati]

From the narratives of Botle and Nthati it is clear that constructing an identity as a mother plays an important role in the sense of self of these participants. In doing so, Botle and Nthati imply that they are as capable as any able-bodied woman of effectively carrying out the role of child-bearing and child-rearing.

According to Garland-Thomson (2002:17): "Women with disabilities often must struggle to have their sexuality and rights to bear children recognized." This is borne out by some participants who report that their right to care and to reproduction was violated by nurses at the clinics. They also seem to have experienced discrimination during pregnancy. For example, Nthati was told that she would not be able to give birth naturally because she had polio. She was also told to stop falling pregnant. This is part of her story:

I remember on the day I was going to give birth... the nurses told me that I had to give birth by caesar-

ean section. They told me that I could not give birth naturally due to my disability. They told me that because I had polio, I would not give birth naturally. They also told me that I should never get pregnant again...But, I do not know, I think that I will still have more babies. I do not know. The nurses told me that because I had a disability, I would never give birth to a healthy baby...But, I gave birth naturally. I did not have to go through any surgical procedures. My baby was healthy. Nothing went wrong. [Nthati]

Botle shares a poignant story, which takes place at the hospital at the time she was going to give birth:

Even at clinics and hospitals the female nurses ignore us. They do not take care of people with disabilities. For example, when I was pregnant, I went to a hospital. When I got there, the nurses ran some tests and everything was fine. When it was time for me to give birth, I asked one lady to take me to the hospital and we got there on time. When we got there, we went to one nurse's office and she told me to go to the labor ward and wait for her there. What astonished me was that there was one nurse with a physical disability in that office...They were sleeping. I went to the labor ward as directed. The other nurse who asked me to wait for her in the labor ward came, but she had to go back because she had forgotten to bring gloves. Immediately when the nurse turned to get the gloves, I gave birth. When she came back, the baby was born and I did not know what to do. I was so scared because the bed was too small and when the baby came, I had to grab her because I was too scared that she was going to fall. However, the baby

did not fall and I realized that the reason the baby did not fall was because she was connected to the umbilical cord...So, the umbilical cord was around the baby's neck and I was scared that it would strangle her. But, when I looked closer, I realized that it did not do any harm to the baby. When the nurse arrived, she found that the baby was born. She did not even apologize. That is how much non-disabled women care about disabled women! They ignore us... [Botle]

One factor, which seems to fuel the attitude of nurses, is reflected in negative perceptions of impairment which suggest that women with disabilities are not capable of giving birth; and when they do fall pregnant, that they will not give birth to normal/healthy babies. But, as Botle and Nthathi's experiences clearly show, being physically impaired does not mean one is incapable of giving birth to normal, healthy babies. These participants have challenged ideas about the normalization of bodies and socially held assumptions about rights of reproduction (Garland-Thomson 2002:15).

Conclusion

In this article, we focused on the everyday lived experiences and aspects of the lifeworlds of women with physical disabilities in Lesotho. As is the case with most able-bodied women in society, women with physical impairments also value pursuing feminine beauty ideals. The perception of femininity is strongly associated with looking and feeling attractive. As such, several participants believe that using make-up, following fashion, and

changing their hairstyles make them more feminine and that in this regard they are no different from able-bodied women. The need to conform to socially sanctioned standards of ideal beauty and the continuous practices that coincide with the presentation of their bodies in line with these norms are too demanding for some. For most participants, feeling comfortable in their bodies seems to be an important part of femininity.

Drawing on the experiences of women in this study, it seems that in Lesotho, a long road lies ahead in order to reach the point where women with physical disabilities will become accepted as capable of living normal lives as normal members of society. Not only is there a need for changed perceptions regarding the roles and values associated with impairment but there is also a need to address public opinion on the rights of disabled people. This is particularly important because the experiences and feelings of disabled women often contribute to public opinion and re-enforce, rather than challenge, attitudes towards the physically impaired. Some participants who do not have partners seem to believe that they will most probably be abandoned by any potential partners. These negative attitudes have led them to distance themselves from possible relationships under the assumption that no man will fully love a woman with a physical impairment.

Society has long moved past accepting the right of women with physical disabilities to exist in society. More needs to be done to firmly establish the right to ways to make their existence meaningful and effective.

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Insurgent Citizenship and Sustained Resistance of a Local Taxi Association

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Abstract A growing body of literature on urban and grassroots social movements is replete with case studies of citizens mobilizing against infrastructural development projects. These mobilizations, known as insurgent citizenship—the participation in alternative channels of political expression—take different forms and have various impacts. An investigation into the case of the mobilizing agenda of the Greater Bloemfontein Taxi Association (GBTA) against using a costly intermodal transport facility in Bloemfontein is aimed at highlighting the often neglected dilemma of how powerless citizens—for example, taxi owners—respond to state hegemony. Theoretically, the article is grounded in the conceptual framework of insurgent citizenship and, empirically, draws on narratives of a range of participants. The findings provide an understanding of the importance of organizational structure and leadership in the sustained insurgent action by the GBTA. It is argued that the insurgent action by the GBTA is produced mainly by—on the one hand—the conflictual relationship between government policies and practices and—on the other hand—grassroots resistance to their exclusionary and marginalizing effects. Furthermore, the findings elucidate that insurgent practice may be driven by neoliberal principles of competition, profit, and entrepreneurship.

Keywords Insurgent Citizenship; Organizational Structure; Protests; Social Movements; Sustained Resistance; Taxi Industry

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Globally, infrastructural development projects often have been a primary source of protests by urban and grassroots social movements (Mayer 2000; McAdam et al. 2010; Abers, de Oliveira, and Pereira 2017). These projects can include a wide range of issues such as the construction of turbines, power plants, roads, dams, and airports. Research on the protests against infrastructure projects has

shown how activists use a range of protest tactics, including demonstrations (Kirchher 2012), sustained policy advocacy by nongovernmental organizations (Steinhardt and Wu 2015), or adapting transnational labels that connect them with similar struggles in other countries (McCormick 2010). Similarly, there has been an increased focus on sustained resistance campaigns against infrastructural projects in developed countries and, to a lesser extent, in developing countries (Pahnke, Tarlau, and Wolford 2015). Two common themes emerge from these studies. First, these campaigns illustrate the ways citizens engage with the apparatus of the state. The state apparatus refers to the institutions of representative democracy and to the ability of citizens to access them or to act in relation to them (Khanna et al. 2013). Second, the campaigns highlight how citizens or relatively powerless groups respond to domination (Scott 1985) by actively forming new ways of resistance. The campaigns show that citizens—through collective efforts—“have the potential to provide more meaningful practice of citizenship and democracy for those living on the socio-economic margins of society” (Runciman 2014:27).

Central to any discussion on citizenship is the question of civil rights and claims (Holston 1998; 2008; 2009). The understanding of citizenship—as depicted above—does not entail a passive citizenry that assumes that the state “is the only source of citizenship rights, meaning, and practices” (Holstein 1998:38). Active citizenship is closely linked to Holstein’s (1998:47) conception of insurgent citizenship which has been termed to refer to an engaged citizenry who negotiates “what it means to be a member in the modern state” (1998:47). In the context of this ar-

ticle, insurgent citizenship is conceptualized as “alternative channels of political expression, with the aim of attaining greater autonomy” (Duboc 2013:67). While the conception of insurgent citizenship often refers to spatial contexts to frame and explore struggles for citizenship located in urban areas (Douglas and Friedmann 1998; Friedmann 2002; Witger 2017), it also serves as an analytical lens for the analysis of social rights enshrined in progressive constitutions such as those in countries like Brazil (Witger 2017) and South Africa (Matebesi 2017).

Post-1994 South Africa is often referred to as a democratic state in which citizen rights are enshrined in the constitution. However, as Brooks (2017) found in his review of the discourses of participatory democracy, mechanisms and programs designed to foster such rights do not always operate within the bounds of accountable institutions. Thus, it is not surprising that, contextualized within more than two decades of complex political reforms, South Africa has experienced widespread citizen struggles against a myriad of issues, many of which relate to municipal services (Alexander 2010; Langa and Von Holdt 2012; Matebesi 2017). Several voices have also been heard “insisting upon a radical equality within the social order” (Brown 2015:3). One of the institutions at the forefront of protest against perceived injustices is the taxi industry. The minibus taxi industry, which constitutes a significant form of public transport in South Africa, has a history of struggles for recognition during the apartheid years (Sekhonyane and Dugard 2004). For example, by 1989, the South African government only recognized one national taxi body, the South African Black Taxi Association (SABTA). Over time,

and primarily due to the apartheid government's policy of economic deregulation initiated in 1987 (Dugard 2001), the minibus taxi industry has been haunted by the proliferation of rival and unregulated taxi associations. The lack of regulation resulted in overtrading with subsequent concerns over ambiguous taxi permits, claims to taxi ranks, and conflict over routes (Sekhonyane and Dugard 2004). Since the early stages of the establishment of the widespread use of minibus taxis, the rivalry in this industry has led to high levels of violence that have claimed many lives, resulting in this industry being characterized as murderous (Bank 1990; Khosa 1992; Bruce and Komane 1999; Mashishi 2007; Bähre 2014).

This article examines the somewhat paradoxical non-violent sustained resistance or insurgent act by the Greater Bloemfontein Taxi Association (GBTA)—a voluntary association of taxi owners and operators—to use the capital-intensive Mangaung Intermodal Public Transport Facility in Bloemfontein. The construction of this multi-storeyed taxi rank began in April 2009 and was completed in early 2011. The new taxi rank was built to bring different public transport modes, like buses, minibus taxis, and trains, under one permanent roof. After completion, local minibus taxis used this taxi rank for only three weeks. At the time, some of the major complaints by the GBTA included structural defects such as poor ventilation, narrow pathways, and a lack of adequate entrance and exit space (Makhofola 2012; Seleka 2012; Tlhakudi 2012). The more than six-year-long protracted negotiations between the Free State Provincial Government, the Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality (Mangaung Metro),

and the GBTA are yet to resolve the impasse. The discussions often centered on the progress made by the Mangaung Metro with the plan to buy a building opposite the exit of the taxi rank to create more exits for a large number of minibus taxis. In October 2016, there was renewed hope that the new taxi rank will be used when the Mayor of Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality signed a memorandum of agreement with the GBTA (Gaeswe 2016). However, so far the stalemate continues.

This article uses an interpretive approach to the study of insurgent citizenship and addresses three questions. First, what are the grievances of the GBTA about the intermodal transport facility? Second, what are possible explanations for the sustained non-violent insurgent act by the GBTA? Given these two interlinked objectives, the article contributes to the understanding of grassroots insurgent practices and to the exclusionary and marginalizing effects of the conflictual relationships between government decision-making processes and the responses they elicit. In particular, the article seeks to enhance the understanding of the web of socialized roles and entrenched behaviors that the weak (in this case, the GBTA) and the dominant (in this case, the Mangaung Metro) are caught within.

Insurgent Citizenship

An analysis of sustained resistance campaigns by a marginalized group such as the GBTA can benefit from an application of insurgent citizenship as a conceptual guide. Globally, insurgent citizenship is not only increasing in quantitative terms but it has also evolved regarding its mobilization and the

protest tactics that it employs—in both democratic and authoritarian political settings. Scholars ascribe the rise of political protests in recent decades mainly to the process of (post)modernization, which emphasizes that evolving individual values have radically changed modern people's way of interacting with the political system (Inglehart 1990). This process coincides with a general reduction of levels of political trust among citizens. At the same time, the values of self-expression, including the emergence of the so-called insurgent citizenship, increased (Norris 1999; Inglehart and Catterberg 2002; Adler 2012).

Everyday spatial practices and manipulations dominate the focus of literature on insurgent citizenship. Scholars advancing the spatial context argue that cities are the breeding ground for emerging insurgent citizenship practices (Routledge 1997; Holston 1998; 1999; Isin 1999; Friedmann 2002). Holston (1998:48) identifies contemporary urban life as “sites of insurgency because they introduce into the city new identities and practices that disturb established histories.” A distinct element of insurgent practices is that they transcend localized identities. Insurgent practices also contribute to a socially diverse and heterogeneous urban population, by propagating for inclusive and substantial citizenship. Similarly, Friedmann (2002) further emphasizes the evolution of the notion of citizenship from an individual (one-to-one) relationship with the nation-state to a more universalist approach. This evolution towards a more mass-based way of life has not only contributed to the weakened role of representative democracy but has blurred formal power relations as well.

Closely linked to the notion of insurgent citizenship are theories of collective action. Here, community context and framing theories, as well as civic capacity and political opportunities are at the core of the motivation and capacity to mobilize (Opp 2009; Wright and Boudet 2013). The framing perspective is a social-psychological approach that focuses on how movement activists construct interpretations of social problems and the goals of resistance (Bendford and Snow 2000). The framing processes not only “articulate grievances, and generate consensus on the importance and forms of collective action to be pursued” (Williams 2004:93) but they also “present rationales for their actions and [for] proposed solutions to adherents, bystanders, and antagonists” (Williams 2004:93). The framing efforts of activists are the foundation of collective action (McAdam 1982).

Advocates of the framing perspective propose four conditions that must be met for collective action to take place (Snow et al. 1986; Snow and Byrd 2007). These conditions are discontent (prevalent dissatisfaction without relief), ideology (collective identification of complaints as being morally legitimate by the aggrieved), ability to organize (core leaders of the aggrieved group are capable of recruiting, sourcing resources, and communicating strategies), and political opportunity (the extent to which civil liberties allow freedom of speech and association) (Oberschall 2004). Furthermore, the framing perspective contends that, in respect of movement ideology, “individuals actively produce and maintain meaning” (Dobratz, Walner, and Buzzell 2016:325). Thus, the masses will assess what is wrong and who is to blame (diagnostic framing) and what

action needs to be taken (prognostic framing). Frame alignment is achieved when, according to Snow and colleagues (1986), people have a shared understanding of what is wrong and what action needs to be taken.

Another building block of the notion of insurgent citizenship is organizational structure. The structure of groups is at the basis of the forms of collective action undertaken by these groups (Opp 2009; Thomas and Louis 2014; Matebesi 2017). For example, Thomas and Louis (2014) use the violent and non-violent protest dichotomy to discuss the different forms of collective action. Simply put, non-violent and violent protests include as forms of collective action the following components: normative collective action (for example, the signing of petitions, attending peaceful protests), and non-normative collective action (for example, riots and sabotage); moderate, but not militant action; and activism, but not radicalism (Moskalenko and McCauley 2009; Becker et al. 2011). For Scott (1985:136), resistance is the opposite of hegemonic compliance and involves the overt or subtle structures related to “collective defiance of power holders.” Regarding these views, peaceful forms of collective action and resistance can only be coordinated by highly structured groups. This high level of structuredness enables group leaders to communicate, frame, and sanction members without much effort (Opp 2009).

The notion of insurgent citizenship can be applied to wide-ranging contexts as demonstrated by studies conducted in various contexts in South Africa (Miraftab and Wills 2005; Meth 2010; Von Holdt et al. 2011; Langa and Von Holdt 2012; Runciman 2014;

Brown 2015). South Africa has a rich history of citizen struggles against oppression by the apartheid state before 1994. At that time, the struggle was mainly about achieving recognition of formal citizenship. In the post-apartheid order—characterized by an expansion of civil rights—the struggle has shifted towards articulating “aggressively for a thicker and more substantive practice of citizenship” (Brown 2015:59). Some even argue that insurgent citizenship advances democracy and transforms the character of state-society relations (Machado, Scartascini, and Tommasi 2009; Matebesi and Botes 2011; Runciman 2014). In South Africa, the first decade after the democracy obtained in 1994 was characterized by a period of relief from citizen struggle due to the end of what Von Holdt (2013:589) refers to as “a break in the violent confrontations of the apartheid era, and hope that the democratic state will address the substantive rights (albeit their ironies and ambiguities) of citizens.” Developments during this early stage of democracy were broadly in line with public opinion. However, since 2004 insurgent citizenship has increased in post-apartheid South Africa, with around 1400 protests in the period 2004-2017 that directly targeted local municipalities over the perceived inadequate provision of services (Municipal IQ 2017). In the next section, the context of the case of the GBTA is provided as an example of insurgent citizenship. In this example, I also focus on a historical overview of the taxi industry in South Africa.

An Application: The South Africa Taxi Industry and the State

The minibus taxi industry has become one of the most significant contributors to the informal econ-

omy of South Africa. This multi-billion industry is predominantly black-owned and transports over 60% of the country's lower socio-economical employment commuters (Mahlangu 2002; Czeglédy 2004). The taxi industry is sometimes hailed for playing a critical role in creating self-employment, as well as employment for many South Africans (Fobosi 2013). However, the industry has not always been regarded as a formal business in the country and, as a result, the lack of formal recognition led to the formation of the South African Black Taxi Association (SABTA) in 1979. At the time, SABTA served as the umbrella body for over 400 affiliated local taxi associations across South Africa (Moyake 2006). The internal conflict within SABTA subsequently led to the establishment of many rival taxi associations, such as the South African Long Distance Taxi Association (SALDTA). The competition between taxi operators became more and more intense and eventually signaled the beginning of prolonged violent clashes between rival taxi associations and individual taxi drivers (Hansen 2006). According to Ingle (2009:87), this violence was further compounded "by the zero-sum notion that competition is something to be suppressed."

In an attempt to provide safe, affordable transport, well-trained drivers, and acceptable employment relationships (Mahlangu 2002), the post-1994 democratic government has taken some steps to formalize and regulate the industry (Fobosi 2013). These steps towards re-regulation were resisted actively by the industry, represented by powerful taxi associations, often leading to the escalation of violence during the late 1990s (Khosa 1992:232; Dugard 2001; Sekhonyane and Dugard 2004:15). As Dugard (2001)

points out, 1947 deaths and 2841 injuries were recorded between 1991 and 1999. Thus, many scholars portray violence as endemic in the taxi industry or, even worse, they characterize it as a "murderous industry" (Bank 1990; Khosa 1992; Bruce and Komane 1999; Dugard 2001; Hansen 2006; Mashishi 2007).

A significant challenge for the taxi industry came from the introduction of the Taxi Recapitalization Program initiated by the government in 2005. Under the Taxi Recapitalization Program, taxi operators were paid an amount to scrap their old and mostly unroadworthy vehicles and buy new ones. However, several concerns were raised over the implementation of this recapitalization program. These concerns included, firstly, the length of time that it took to implement the program. The slow progress was ascribed to the high number of government departments involved in the process. Secondly, the consultation approach adapted by the Department of Transport (the government department overseeing the taxi industry) involved occasional high-level strategy meetings. Despite inputs from the taxi industry at these consultative meetings, the Department of Transport proceeded to make pronouncements on matters which had not been fully supported by the taxi industry. Thirdly, the taxi operators raised concerns that they were left in the dark about the cost of the new minibus vehicles that would have been fully compliant with the government specifications. Other concerns included the lack of subsidies to the industry, the lengthy period it would take to supply new vehicles, and the requirement that an operator's permit had to be converted to an operating license before obtaining a scrapping allowance (Moyake 2006).

Since then, the taxi industry has faced significant challenges, not least of all related to their resistance to the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system implemented by various metropolitan centers in the country. The BRT introduced dedicated lanes and formal embarking/disembarking facilities for municipal buses, aiming at faster journeys. Improved bus services held implications for the taxi industry. Additionally, contestations over routes by different taxi associations and the transformation and restructuring of the taxi industry continue, which lead to numerous confrontations as a result of unlicensed vehicles, persisting violence, and the general lack of safety of commuters. The hostile environment in the industry was taken further by the mushrooming of meter taxi companies such as Uber and Taxify. No other meter taxi company has met similar hostile reception than that given to Uber, which has been criticized for unfair competition practices and for having disrupted the existing systems in the passenger transportation industry in South Africa (Dube 2015).

Methodological Notes

This article draws on the narrative accounts of members of the taxi associations, taxi drivers, taxi owners, and key informants among municipal officials in Bloemfontein. A qualitative approach embedded in an exploratory, descriptive design was employed in order to gain an understanding of the complexity of the experiences of the participants. A non-probability purposive and snowball sampling technique was used to recruit the chairperson of the GBTA, 12 taxi drivers, eight taxi owners, two municipal officials, and two local

architects. Semi-structured in-depth interviews, conducted by the author over an 11-month period (April 2016 to March 2017), were used to collect the data.

The interviews were conducted at the informal taxi ranks in the central business district of Bloemfontein and not at the mostly defunct new intermodal transport facility. The interviewees signed consent forms before the commencement of the in-depth interviews. The in-depth interviews with the key informants from the taxi industry were conducted in Sotho and English in the case of the two municipal officials. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and a thematic analysis was used to identify, analyze, and report on common issues, as well as specific experiences and perspectives regarding the contestation around the intermodal transport facility. To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, the narratives of the participants were triangulated with newspaper reports and official government reports on the intermodal transport facility. The main themes covered in the research deal with the grievances commonly expressed by the research participants and with the underlying reasons for the sustained non-violent insurgency of the GBTA. These two themes are presented in the following two sub-sections.

Grievances of the Greater Bloemfontein Taxi Association (GBTA)

More than six years (2011 to 2017) passed since the completion of the Bloemfontein intermodal transport facility that cost about 400 million South African Rands. According to a report published three

years before the construction of this facility, the primary goal of the Metropolitan Municipality was to expand and redevelop the old Russel Square taxi rank in the central business district of Bloemfontein into the city's primary transport facility. The plan also included the integration into this intermodal facility of the Bloemfontein railway station and bus transport facilities (Mangaung Metro Municipality 2017). This article aims to address the question: Why did the GBTA manage to foster insurgent citizenship among its members?

The framing perspective, which involves the articulation of grievances and generating consensus on collective action strategies, is helpful in providing a context within which to answer the above question. Simply put, the framing perspective looks at how "meaning is socially constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed" (Benford 1997:410). Various motivations were mooted in the media at the time for the construction of the intermodal transport facility. Firstly, there was the issue that the three formal transport facilities in Bloemfontein—Central Park Bus station, CBD taxi rank, and the railway train station—which catered for more than 50,000 commuters on a daily basis, could no longer handle the ever-increasing number of commuters (IMIESA 2011:56). The available formal minibus taxi facility in the CBD of Bloemfontein could only make provision for approximately 200 taxis, and it was estimated that about 700 more taxi bays were needed (IMIESA 2011:57). Secondly, the inability of the three formal taxi facilities to handle the coordination of taxis led to the mushrooming of informal facilities. There were eight different operational associations, all affiliated to the Greater Bloemfontein

Taxi Association (GBTA) (Seleka 2012). The high number of taxis in the CBD of Bloemfontein led to numerous other challenges such as pressure on traffic flow and pedestrian mobility, overcrowding, and safety of the public (IMIESA 2011). Thirdly, the existing transport infrastructure was regarded as not being user-friendly. These taxi facilities were difficult to reach as they were scattered all over the CBD. For this reason, the notion of an integrated transport facility with proper pedestrian facilities was propagated (Seleka 2012; Tlhakudi 2012).

From the motivations mooted in the media for the construction of the intermodal transport facility in Bloemfontein, I now turn to the grievances reported by the research participants. Among the main grievances shared in the interviews are the size of the intermodal facility (particularly for taxis), the lack of consultation, and the safety issues. For the GBTA's taxi owners and taxi drivers, one of the most common complaints concerns the inability of the new intermodal transport facility to accommodate a large number of taxis, as well as the bigger, new minibus vehicles. Other complaints from taxi drivers relate to the fact that two taxis cannot simultaneously enter or leave the building. The inadequate space compelled commuters to spend long periods waiting in queues. Consequently, this affects the traffic flow around the intermodal transport facility adversely. Taxi drivers also complain about the single lift, which is often out of order. As a result, one taxi driver notes:

It has been a nerve-rattling and bone-jarring experience as commuters were expected to climb two flights of stairs before reaching the taxis.

Taxi owners also report their inability to understand why the rank was built in the first place. One taxi owner remarks:

This taxi rank does not meet any of our needs. I keep on asking myself what the real reason behind the building of this death trap was.

Expanding on this obviously emotive response, another taxi owner says:

Anger aside. I do not want to lie, it is a beautiful building, but, it cannot be occupied by human beings.

The majority of taxi owners highlighted the negative impact on the health of people. One taxi owner explains the health threat as follows:

I would rather work from the streets than in that so-called state-of-the-art taxi rank. You do not have to stand longer than 30 minutes in that rank without reaching for your breath. Eh! No, we are not that desperate!

Taxi drivers share similar experiences about the potential health threats. A taxi driver makes the following remark:

The building cannot accommodate 22-seater taxis, as it is too small. What does this mean for the owners? The poor ventilation in the building, which is compounded by fumes from the exhausts of taxis in an overcrowded taxi rank is bound to cause significant health hazards in the end. Another problem relates to safety. Should a taxi catch fire, or any other fatal incident, for that matter, happens, personnel from emer-

gency services will find it hard to reach those affected in time.

Another central concern of the research participants relates to the consultation process before the building of the intermodal transport facility. The responses from taxi drivers and owners differ from that of the GBTA representative regarding the consultation that took place. Both taxi drivers and taxi owners describe the consultation process as being “farcical.” A taxi driver, for example, says:

We heard about the building of the facility, but thought we would be informed.

Similarly, one taxi owner also expresses concern that they had not been sufficiently briefed about the construction of the intermodal transport facility.

An interview with the municipal representative reveals that the taxi association was indeed consulted. According to the municipal representative, all the relevant stakeholders, including the GBTA, had been consulted in time and were provided with opportunities to comment on the design of the intermodal transport facility. One quotation from the municipal representative captures this position:

The GBTA was part of the many trips to Johannesburg that we took with architects to familiarize ourselves with the kind of facility, including the taxi rank that will best suit the needs of the taxi industry in Bloemfontein.

The municipal representative continues by stating that the GBTA was even requested to provide the

number of registered taxis that will be using the facility. The Municipality remains steadfast that they consulted with the GBTA. However, when asked why the GBTA is failing to acknowledge that they were consulted, the response from the municipal representative was that, perhaps, the GBTA wanted to put pressure on the Municipality to allow them to manage the facility. Concerns about the purported intention of the GBTA to manage the transport facility were also reported in the media. One municipal official was quoted as follows: "This is absurd. How will they manage such a vast facility when they were unable to manage a smaller taxi rank?" (Tlhakudi 2012:2).

An architect, when asked for an opinion about the intermodal transport facility, explains that, although he was not involved in the project, he does not believe that the fault of the design of the building is with the architects. He, however, points out that:

It was undoubtedly a glaring oversight to have thought that such a large number of vehicles would be able to enter and exit the rank without trouble.

He concedes that this building is of architectural significance for the following reason:

This building yields a poignant lesson for us in the building industry that we should never ignore or underestimate the human factor when designing structures. Certainly, I believe this is what happened here.

Another architect notes that he is impressed with the innovative materials used on the intermodal transport facility, unlike the traditional kerbside

shelters used for taxi ranks. His primary concerns center on the issue of ventilation. He expresses both his approval and disappointment:

Such a building should serve the purpose of resolving some of the pressing challenges experienced in the CBD and not create any new ones. I must admit, it is a world-class building, and for that, we need to applaud the Municipality and other role players. However, I reckon not enough attention was paid to natural ventilation, which would have been a sustainable design strategy, considering the main objective of providing buildings with the required air quality and quantity. Within this context, cross-floor ventilation is not a luxury, but a necessity in such buildings.

Previous research demonstrated the central role of the collective identification of complaints as being legitimate by the aggrieved (Oberschall 2004; Taştan 2013; Karriem and Lehn 2016). Despite the differing opinions about whether the GBTA was consulted or not, many of the participants' concerns centered on the user-friendliness of this intermodal transport facility.

What Enabled the GBTA to Sustain the Non-Violent Insurgency?

This section of the article focuses on the conditions that made it possible for the GBTA's collective action. Several studies demonstrate that organizational structure is closely linked to the success of a social movement (Opp 2009; Taştan 2013; Thomas and Louis 2014). The GBTA is a unitary actor and, as with most modern-day social movements, its superior coordination of strategy and mission within

its ranks allows it to use its resources to advance its insurgency effectively. Thus, the taxi drivers and taxi owners had an advantage of belonging to an organization which had been in existence for some time. The organized structure of the GBTA provides the aggrieved with the necessary leadership, and it was able to mobilize resources and to create an environment conducive to the sustained insurgency.

The GBTA indicates that the collective action was possible because its members remained resolute in their decision not to use the new taxi rank at the intermodal transport facility. The chairperson of the GBTA lamented extensively about how the Association acted as a means through which individual members could exercise a degree of agency. When asked about the relatively peaceful nature of their collective action, the chairperson of the GBTA indicates that he cannot underline enough the importance of their peaceful approach:

For us, our peaceful approach has become a powerful tool of politics. The taxi industry is often seen as being managed by ill-fated and ill-advised elements.

He further criticizes the Municipality for having tried to unleash the police on taxi drivers during the early stages of the insurgency. He emphasizes that the approach of the GBTA caught authorities by surprise as they were eager to suppress the action of taxi drivers by using police brutality and unjustified arrests:

To me, it would be fair to state that our collective spirit rendered the police helpless and insecure. Does our

action really justify the vilification we had to endure from the police?

Several taxi drivers and owners cite that the Municipality took a conservative stance in as far as dealing with the GBTA on the matter of the new intermodal transport facility. They emphasize that even they were themselves surprised by the new sense of camaraderie among themselves that was engendered by their collective action. One taxi driver recounts how ill-behaved other taxi drivers were towards one another in the past and that as a result of their collective action, their attitude towards each other changed. The fact that the GBTA was able to act as a single voice for the local taxi industry in respect of the impasse about the intermodal transport facility is hailed as exemplary by this same taxi driver. Another taxi driver expresses the renewed discovery of the collective power of the GBTA in the following way:

It is evident that shortcuts do not yield positive returns. We have demonstrated to the state that we are a force to be reckoned with. We have certainly defeated the iron-fisted law and order approach of the state. At one point, we thought we had no choice but to use the rank. But, our leaders told us to be determined in asserting our rights and that we have to continue the struggle for an industry that is taken seriously by everyone, including the state.

Attempts by the Municipality to force taxi operators to use the intermodal transport facility soon after its completion were widely reported. Several newspapers referred to the attitude of the Municipality and the state towards the GBTA and its members during

2013. Some of these articles reported that the Mayor of the Municipality set September 2013 as the deadline to relocate all public taxis to the new intermodal transport facility. The Municipality stated: “The reality is the facility has to be used at some point because the government has made a huge investment in this building” (Molebatsi 2013a:2). This deadline came and passed without any change in the attitude of the GBTA and its members. The earlier optimism of both the Mayor and the Municipal spokesperson once again met with non-violent resistance by taxi drivers.

One taxi driver notes that the Municipality undermined them and that the facility should instead be used as a government garage or parking area. Towards the end of October 2013, the Free State Provincial Member of the Executive Committee for Police, Roads, and Transport issued an ultimatum in which he gave the Municipality and the GBTA three weeks to reach an agreement on the relocation of public taxis to the intermodal terminal or else he would step in to enforce the law. He further showed his intention to use strict action when he said: “The pick-up point is the official taxi rank, and those refusing to adhere to that stipulation will have their licenses revoked” (Molebatsi 2013b).

This time, the GBTA seemed willing to compromise and persuaded some of its members to relocate to the new terminal. Again, the majority of the taxi owners and taxi drivers vowed not to use the facility, stating that they would not be intimidated or “ordered around like kids” (Mekoa 2013; Molebatsi 2013b). Many taxi drivers interviewed are of the opinion that their campaign had gained wide-

spread sympathy from the community. This sympathy, they believe, is mainly due to the intransigent attitude of the state, including the Municipality, and the use of security forces while claiming to support negotiations.

In summary, the GBTA had the leadership and organizational structure, as well as empathetic members to advance its goals. While the GBTA provided the leadership and organizational structure to sustain the non-violent insurgency, it was its members who refused to abandon the use of informal taxi ranks when the Association seemed ready to give in to the Municipality’s threats.

The Future of Non-Violent Insurgency

It is known that the most successful protest movements in history have been the ones that have set their agendas. In an attempt to make sense of the future relationship between the Bloemfontein Municipality and the GBTA, representatives from both were asked what their views are in as far as the impasse is concerned. The Municipality representative offers the following view:

We are committed to ongoing negotiations which are at a critical stage, but we are really disappointed in how things turned out. I only hope there will be much more rigorous introspection on the part of the Taxi Association before the next round of meetings.

The Greater Bloemfontein Taxi Association (GBTA) is of the opinion that the Municipality is negotiating in bad faith. As the GBTA chairperson argues:

For us, it will be a major step forward if the building could be extended. That is a simple demand from us. Our members are also demanding that the Public Protector should release its report about how the funds allocated to the building of the intermodal facility were spent.

Similar utterances are made by taxi drivers and taxi owners who state that they are adamant that they will only use the new facility when the space around the entrance and exit of the taxi rank and the air ventilation problems are resolved. One driver sums up this view:

We know that not all our demands can be met at once, but let the Municipality show us that they genuinely want to contribute to a solution for the new facility by addressing our concerns.

In Conclusion

This study focuses on the sustained non-violent insurgent activism by a civic organization in an urban setting in Central South Africa. Social movements across the globe have used civil disobedience as a means of exerting pressure on the political system. These collective acts by ordinary citizens give new impetus to what is known as insurgent citizenship. This study confirms the importance of both organizational structure and leadership when marginalized groups attempt to mobilize towards obtaining their rights. The findings suggest that a pre-existing organizational structure is important for social movement mobilization, and it provides institutions with improved organizational opportunity.

This research provides insights into social movement studies. Firstly, as confirmed by several researchers (Meth 2010; Von Holdt et al. 2011; Langa and Von Holdt 2012; Runciman 2014), citizens turn to non-institutionalized means once institutionalized ways of settling disagreements proved to be unsuccessful. The non-violent insurgent action by the GBTA follows on the failure of formal channels of engagement with the Bloemfontein Municipality. Also, the resistance of the GBTA should be understood against a general trend in post-democratic South Africa where citizens are increasingly taking a firm stance against any perceived threat or injustice.

The question remains: What motivated the GBTA to adapt a non-violent insurgent approach? According to Butcher and Frediani (2014:119), “insurgent practices have manifested in a diversity of approaches ranging from contestation to negotiation-based practices.” In the context of this research, studies suggest that successful social movements often benefit from their organizational structures (Heckathorn 1989; Opp 2009; Tapscott 2010; Lupo 2014). Peaceful protests also require coordination and restraint, something that only a structured group such as the GBTA can provide. This kind of structure makes effective communication, mutual encouragement, and sanctioning possible. Conversely, spontaneous and highly fragmented groups have weak authority structures and often fail to constrain violence (Opp 2009). In highly structured groups, the leaders and members of the groups regularly meet to discuss activities (Morris and Staggenborg 2007). In such highly structured groups, collective action is achieved through a sanctioning system consisting

of strict norms requiring cooperation (Heckathorn 1989).

Notwithstanding the organizational structure, individual motivations, and internal group dynamics, studies of insurgent practices also have to consider the broader political, economic, and cultural context of their cases. In South Africa, several studies report on the long-standing contentious relationship between the state and the taxi industry (Bank 1990; Dugard 2001; Fobosi 2013; Gibbs 2014; Dube 2015). This research reveals that, while overt civil disobedience (often in the form of boycotts and road blockades by the taxi drivers) against the state is not uncommon, the sustained insurgent act by the GBTA is unprecedented. Thus, the GBTA's resistance can be construed as

part of a long-standing tradition in the power and ideological conflicts that exist between the state and the taxi industry.

In conclusion, I argue that the GBTA case is not merely reflecting a considerable degree of non-responsiveness by the state. Instead, the GBTA's insurgent act is a cause of, and a means for, demanding and practising new forms of citizenship in the 21st century. Since interest groups mobilize concessions around social issues, it is argued that effective social movements are often produced through the dialectical relationship between government policies and practices and grassroots resistance. In the case of the GBTA, the non-violent insurgency was itself also driven by neo-liberal principles of competition, profit, and entrepreneurship.

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