

Jo Mensinga

Quilting Professional Stories

**A Gendered Experience of Choosing Social
Work as a Career**

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Table of Contents

	Page
Acknowledgements	vi
Foreword to my Readers.....	viii
Chapter 1:	11
The Identification of the Research Puzzle	11
Preamble.....	11
Why career choice?	14
Autobiographical influences affecting my exploration of social work as a career choice	16
The past.....	16
The not so distant past.....	19
The past merging with the present.....	20
Exploring career choice as an experience	22
The relevance of the research puzzle	24
Story 1 – My reflections on preparing for the first year residential experience	28
Chapter 2:	35
Career Choice as a Culturally Constructed Narrative	35
Theoretical mandates within the vocational guidance sector	37
Research exploring career choice in social work	41
Discerning the social work discourse	47
Themes associated with the social work discourse in Australia	48
Understanding a narrative social work identity.....	52
Distinguishing between and/or integrating the social justice and caring discourses.....	55
Story 2: Geraldine's reflections during the 'Quilting Professional Identities' session.....	57
Chapter 3:	65
'Thinking Narratively' – A Holistic Insight into Students' Choice of Social Work as a Career.....	65
Experience as a cultural artefact for personal and professional practice, education and research	66
Communications theory	68
Systems theory	69
Feminism	69
Critical theory (Marxism)	70
Narrative therapy.....	70
Moving from practice to research.....	71
Locating experience in narratology	71

Researchers' experiences of narrative as a research approach	73
Researchers' experiences of narrative and its links to career choice	75
The purpose of professional life stories (Linde 1993).....	76
An exploration of therapists' professional stories (White 1997).....	77
Understanding craftartist's stories of identity (Mishler 1999).....	78
The significance of social positioning in stories (Riessman 2001) ...	80
Shaping and understanding teachers' professional identities (Glandinin and Connelly 2000; Connelly and Glandinin 1990)	81
Positioning myself in the narrative template	86
Using the quilt as a heuristic device to link theory and method	87
Negotiating ethical considerations and entrance into the field	90
The immersion phase.....	91
The reflective phase.....	93
The integration phase	95
Ethical considerations for the reader.....	96
Collecting field texts as material.....	97
Appreciating the texture and nuances present in the field texts	97
The immersion phase.....	98
The reflective phase.....	99
The integration phase	100
Piecing the material together	102
Story 3: John's reflections during the 'Quilting Professional Identities' session.....	105
Chapter 4:	112
Geraldine's Experience of Choosing Social Work as a Gendered Profession	112
Dear John,	114
Reflecting on my role in the career choice experience.....	117
Awareness of a gendered identity	121
No men in Geraldine's story!	124
Learning caring skills from the women in Geraldine's story	130
In Conclusion: Turning To Jane Addams	138
Research process	140
Chapter 5:	142
John's Experience of Choosing Social Work as a Gendered Profession.....	142
Dear Geraldine,.....	143
Women as characters in John's 'stories of lived experience'	145
Negotiating the male career discourse.....	149
The importance of group membership	156
Returning to the care theme.....	158
The future.....	162
Chapter 6:	165
Exploring Gender As An 'Obstacle' In Career Choice Stories.....	165

Gender as a significant 'obstacle' in the career choice narrative ...	166
Encountering gendered career discourses in the community.....	168
Negotiating gendered agendas in the family	170
Challenging the gender discourse informing education and work agendas	173
Accounting for the gendered career discourse in the profession ...	176
Returning to explore gender in pre-existing research stories	179
The process of quilting a professional story	182
Chapter 7:	185
Reflecting On My Experience Of Narrative Inquiry As A Method To Explore Career Choice.....	185
Dear Chris,	188
Bibliography	198
Appendix A – Describing the terms used to structure this inquiry.....	212
Appendix B(1) – Letter to Respondents.....	216
Appendix B(2) – Letter to respondents	218
Appendix B(3) – Letter to respondents	220
Appendix C – Checklist of theories for analysis of stories	222
Appendix D – Example of table used to analyse social positioning.....	226
Appendix D – Example of table used to analyse social positioning.....	226

List of Tables and Illustrations

	Page
Table 3.1: Summary of the ways researchers can interact with narrative material	75
Table 3.2: Summary of assumptions underpinning the exploration of career choice stories.....	83

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Foreword: A letter to my readers

Dear colleagues,

Welcome and thank you for taking the time to read my research text. As I reflect on the process of writing this text, I am reminded that you have already, if only inadvertently, been a participant of sorts in this inquiry. All narratives are told with an audience in mind (Sawyer 1976). As such, I assume that like me you are either an academic and/or a social worker (although you may be neither!) and that you have expectations of how this particular text will be written. However, because of the nature of the phenomenon being studied, and because I want to convey the experience I have had during the course of this inquiry, I have chosen to present the findings in a slightly less than conventional way.

Geraldine, John and I came together over a period of four years to tell and retell our 'stories of lived experience' in an effort to better understand what choosing social work entails. Whereas many texts describe career choice as a linear experience, for us choosing social work as our preferred career was a far more complex and 'patchy' process that involved revisiting and revising our stories as we became aware of impacting personal, institutional and social agendas. While some of these agendas were readily integrated into our 'stories to live by', others remained and continue to linger on the edge awaiting our attention at some later time. As you can imagine, representing this process has proved quite difficult to capture in a two-dimensional space provided by words on a page.

The research approach itself renders an assortment of data, academic deliberations, personal reflections and the like, which are difficult to separate into discrete sentences, paragraphs and chapters. While many research texts using narrative inquiry as method overcome this by interweaving these emerging features

throughout the manuscript (Connelly 2002 -2004), in the main I have conformed to accepted forms of writing. Nevertheless, there are occasions within each chapter where a separate story (delineated by bolding of the text), is presented seemingly with little introduction or warning. While I acknowledge this can be somewhat disconcerting for you as the reader, I employ this as a deliberate device. As such, I hope to continually remind you that although convention dictates that the inclusion of new pieces of material in a career story and research text should be made imperceptible to maintain a semblance of congruence and coherence (Linde 1993), when they are first encountered by the teller, they are experienced as separate and distinct events.

However, even though I have chosen to present 'unlinked stories' in this text, by the time you reach the end, I trust that you as the reader will be able to see that the stories do indeed form an emerging pattern – much like the separate pieces in a completed patchwork quilt do. I anticipate in presenting the text in the way that I have, I not only illustrate John, Geraldine and my own experience of choosing social work, but I also create a space for you to revisit and include career choice stories of your own. This way I hope that we will all continue to contribute to an evolving narrative that acknowledges and describes the passion and purpose that motivates and sustains social workers in the work that they do.

Oh yes, there is another thing I wanted to note before you started reading this account, the stories themselves are just that. While they are based on fact and collected field texts, the stories are also 'fictionalised'. That is, the order of events, names and overarching themes have been reconstructed to both maintain a level of confidentiality for the participants and to provide some narrative coherence for you the reader. Moreover, in writing the stories this way, I have attempted a departure from an engrained academic style to capture the genre of 'story making' that prevails in the everyday

world of the social worker. Although this contributes to the resulting text appearing somewhat 'patchy', it is intended to reflect Geraldine, John and my experience of entering and performing our career choice stories in a number of different contexts. Once again, welcome.

Regards,

Jo Mensinga