

Abstract

The literature and research investigating why people choose social work as a career has tended to focus on motivational traits rather than on the choice experience itself. Whereas the vocational sector has moved to include a focus on the narrative processes involved with selecting a career, much of the social work research fails to capture the meaning-making processes individuals engage in to make sense of their career choices within their personal and social contexts. This research project describes the meaning-making processes two students participating in the social work program at Central Queensland University and I employ to understand our career choice experiences. Over a period of four years, using a research approach that combines Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) narrative inquiry with Riessman's (2003) emphasis on social positioning within narratives, Geraldine, John and I explore the interplay between individual, community and professional agendas in our past, present and imagined career choice experiences – particularly focusing on the impact of gender. Identifying the importance of caring as a hallmark of the profession and what draws us to social work, this co-constructed research text highlights the agendas that predominantly support women's entrance into the profession and challenge men's participation. Drawing on the metaphor of a quilt to describe our career choice experience, this project draws attention to the importance for aspiring social workers to carefully choose, cut and join together bits of gendered narrative material to create a professional story that both legitimises their entrance into the profession and to position them within the larger career sector.

Quilting Professional Stories: A Gendered Experience Of Choosing Social Work As A Career.

Thesis submitted by

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in any form for another degree or diploma at any university or other institution of tertiary education. Information derived from the published or unpublished work of others has been acknowledged in the text and a list of references is provided.

J.T. Mensinga
June 2005

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 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 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,

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