Abstract

My thesis analyzes adopts a discursive approach to reconstruct and recover the life history and memory of my sister, who committed suicide at the age of 21. As opposed to looking for my sister in the pathologizing, hidden accounts of diagnostic categories, a discursive approach within communication allows me to look for her in what is visible and manifest in language. I transcribed three narratives describing my sister’s life and analyzed them in conjunction with literature and a textual analysis. The narratives are spoken transcriptions from my mother, a local chiropractor who befriended my sister, and I. The literature review focused on communication between people, identities, different perspectives, and the events that create life stories. The discourse analysis consists of a monologue of emails from my sister to my mother, her résumé, and an online post to a foreign exchange website. Searching for My Sister seeks to show that the identities of people are simply stories; they are stories we constantly recreate about ourselves and others. Each time these stories are retold, depending on the audience or setting, they may change. My sister’s life was a mystery to me and I sought to find out exactly what happened in her life. I learned there is no exact answer. I can find out who she is by creating my tale of her. She lives today though her story and its possible retellings.

Introduction / Thesis

I think of my sister as Tiffany, although she has chosen a variety of names for herself. I have decided to reconstruct my sister’s life in order to remember her story differently; I do not want to be unsure about her life, but rather, I want to be proud to realize that at the age of 21, my
sister was able to say she had lived a lifetime’s worth of events. The events of Tiffany’s life create her story and her voice is kept within the story, which is all I may keep of her.

Tiffany was always searching for herself. Her story revolves around certain defining events. She gains her voice while growing into a woman, but subsequently loses it in a relationship when she allows someone else to tell her story. I feel she lost control, and ultimately the voice of her story, when she was beaten by her husband. Nobody wants to be hurt by someone close and especially not by a significant other. Fine lines exist between unintentional degrading of a spouse and forms of abuse. The problem lies in that there is no steadfast criterion to define ‘domestic abuse.’ Such a limit must be set by the individual. And thus, it is simple to think ‘it will never happen to me.’ I said it. She said it. This thought is the detrimental mistake of many women, including my sister and countless others. Abuse is such a gradual and indefinable process. The people involved are unaware until too late, when they have already lost control of their own story.

I will never know exactly what happened in her life, but it does not matter to me. A life is simply a story. These stories exist from many different perspectives, each one unique, and stories are subjective to questioning. Were the stories unquestioned, then they would be taken for granted to be true and objective, but only because they are not further examined. Further examining leads to understanding and learning. To understand one another, we need to make sure we do not close off views of stories and “harden” the perspective to the point of which it may no longer be questioned (Parry, 1991). We want to question others, and ourselves, to redefine identities in communicating with the world around us.
My sister spent her life searching to find herself. My purpose here: to find my sister’s voice. I am searching for my sister.

**Methodology**

I used first, a narrative analysis and second, a process of reconstruction (or re-storying) to tell the story of my sister’s life, which was done subsequently, to find her voice. Narrative analysis is the breakdown and examination of the structure and function of a story as an act of communication. Three narratives are included, and each tells the story of Tiffany’s character from a different perspective.

In my narrative, recorded on September 26, 2009, I first describe Tiffany as the sister she was to me. In addition to my narrative, I include my mother’s perspective of my sister, as told to me on February 15, 2010. The final narrative from Dr. Michael Major, a chiropractor my sister worked with on web design, was recorded on May 13, 2010; his name and website was found on her résumé. After transcribing the narratives, I analyzed and explained the clauses. The narratives are separated into clauses (each containing one action) to better understand the themes constructing Tiffany’s story. Following the transcriptions, I used the literature review to summarize and synthesize sources in relation to my thesis. I then moved to explain the methodology of narrative analysis. Afterwards, I added a textual analysis from emails and the résumé my sister wrote. Finally, I considered the effect the thesis had on me and my story.

I used Dorothy Smith’s model from “K Is Mentally Ill” (1972) to analyze the narratives. Her model is concerned with how events are relevant to an argument, as presented by the
narrator. Social assembly and processing of information is used in a persuasive format to try to convince the audience that the character “K” is actually mentally ill. In order to prepare the narratives for analysis, I recorded each narrative, listened to them several times, and then transcribed them according to narrative clauses (numbered for reference), which are the basic units making up the story. Each clause contains the content of one action, and either individual or groups of clauses are examined as part of the analysis.

Tiffany’s emails and résumé give insight into how she felt about events in her life. Much of her emails coincide with the narratives written about her, which shows that she was aware of her own characteristics and how others saw her in society. The emails were written between the years of 2000 and 2002 and tell who she was at the time: her thoughts, concerns, plans, and feelings. The résumé is a sample of how my sister would describe herself professionally to advertise herself as a good candidate for potential employers. Textual analysis takes note of the one-sided emails written to my mother. Since my mother is the intended audience, most people noticeably speak differently to parents than friends or strangers. The analysis of the texts also looks at her claims, support, and ethos. Social implications embedded in her writing may be interpretatively unearthed to further appreciate characteristics of her identity.

The methods of narrative analysis, reconstruction, and textual analysis allow for the understanding of the process of domestic abuse. In addition, the methods let me to think of my sister’s life and her abusive relationship without pain or lack of understanding. I can remember her as the distinctive individual I am proud to call my sister.
When my sister came to our home to seek safety from her husband, she told us a story of what had happened to her. She told us about her experiences when her husband was drunk. He had her pinned to a wall, and he would swear at her. He did not like the way she dressed because he was jealous of other men who looked at her. She could not tell him exactly how she felt, for fear of upsetting him. Though, she did mention how everything was great when he was not drunk and things were going well.

My sister’s life changed when she committed to a marriage, which by design is a co-authored story; it was no longer only about her, but about them. What was wrong with the story my sister told? The problem exists in that the story was about Tiffany’s husband, not Tiffany.

In “A Universe of Stories,” Alan Parry (1991) explains how women will tell their life story using other character’s descriptions of themselves. These women are being told who to be. For example, in my sister’s case her husband is able to control her life with his wants and desires. It is easy to be a good pleasing wife, but not to the point of excess whereupon an individual must lose their own characteristics. Is it abuse? She may not think it is abuse, or know where to draw the line. Perhaps, she is ‘allowing’ him to control her life because of fear, dependence, or any number of reasons. Women have the power to choose who to listen to, and how to will behave. The power is there, and it simply needs to be claimed.
Dorthy Smith wrote “‘K’ Is Mentally Ill” by means of an analysis of a narrative about mental illness. Smith introduces the narrator Angela, who tells a story about her friend ‘K.’ Angela presents her narrative about her certainty about how ‘K’ has a mental illness. Angela’s narrative is transcribed and separated into narrative clauses in order to better understand how her persuasive argument is pieced together.

Ochs & Capps (1997) investigate how our memory, experience, and narrative vary by our mindset and choice of assembly in “Constructing Panic.” Objective truth and historic facts are in actuality stories, but told “objectively” by sources credited as believable. Hence, the story itself remains subjective, and the power behind belief is driven by the representative teller (e.g. the President has an easier time swaying the population, versus a random stranger on the street). Simple as the concept is: stories are to be taken as stories. The choice of the way a character presents their story is telling about who they are today and how they feel about their own existence. There is no ‘true’ or ‘real’ version. A story may be retold in many ways.

In her research on abused women in shelters, Loseke (1992) points out a standing pattern of calling abused women ‘victims.’ Women who are hurt by their spouses are more likely to have low confidence, and to believe they are not being abused. They think “it is not that bad,” or that their situation is not enough to be deemed as actual “abuse.” Loseke takes notes of how infrequent or light beatings and psychological abuse are often brushed off as insignificant due to our extreme cases that label of abuse. Yet, progression into more damage is incremental and must start somewhere.

In The Battered Woman and Shelters: The Social Construction of Wife Abuse, Donileen Loseke (1992) addresses stereotypes on battered women, and specifically she points out the use
of the term “victim.” Society tends to view “victims” as helpless people who have been tortured by a more dominant person. Yet, each case of abuse is unique and hard to classify under one hard condition of “victimization.” Loseke explains abuse as repeated assault on a woman that progressively becomes worse over time. Loseke calls woman’s failure to leave the relationship “maladaptive choice behavior.” The term is descriptive of a woman’s actions because logically the woman is expected to try to move herself away from the abuse. If there are separations in an abusive relationship, often they are only temporary. Each time a woman returns, she reinforces her inability to permanently leave the man.

Peggy Penn (1994) from “Creating a Participant Text” highlights how writing can allow an individual to channel their words into a more concise and rational purpose. There is a noteworthy difference between a story told conversationally and one told within paragraphs of organized writing. Writing a self-analysis is a purposeful way to tell a life story in a more concrete manner than orally, because writing is an incredibly solid and thought-out form of communication. Penn notes that the silent internal voice is wise and often contains implicit meanings that will manifest in writing. While in the process of writing, the actual purpose itself can change to fit the backing and new ideas, and one can learn from their own writing.

In “Everyday Talk,” Karen Tracy (2002) investigates conversational structures, adding a new element to the way people speak and write about their experiences. The context of a conversation is only part of the story. Thus, we find fragmented sentences, random utterances, hesitation, and other conversational mishaps when analyzing transcribed narratives or conversation. Narratives are great examples of verbal stories full of attached emotion, personal perspectives, and urging from the listener.
Tracy also notes that in any given conversation, speakers convey what they mean to a particular audience and that audience – or even others we do not directly speak toward – will make a separate inference on what speakers meant. Typically, the speaker and interpreter will not have aligned views, and this leads to a new perspective. According to Tracy, there are many areas where the actual meaning is changed within the communication of ideas between people. A delicate line of transfer includes the perspective of the teller, thought process of the teller’s interpretation, choice of words the spoken, words heard by the listener, and the interpretation of the listener.

All types of people make up the world, and thus sharing is so important with our inherent curiosity for one another. What would the world be without communication? It would be empty and full of individuals who never mingle or acknowledge one another’s existence. The ability to share the act of “being” with others gives meaning to life.

**Research Findings / Conclusions**

Tiffany exists only in our memories and stories we tell about her. Our memories create the narratives about her. She becomes whoever it is we choose to represent her as, and she is remembered by those who knew her personally during her life. As her younger sister, I thought I had little to tell or remember of her. Yet, I was wrong. There is much to tell about my sister, she was a great person. This thesis has taught me how we can recover and recreate a person, alive or deceased, by the way we communicate the stories we have about them.

I will never know many things, and this does not bother me in the least. I no longer require concrete answers or factual data of what ‘most definitely happened’ in the past. There is no objectivity. In fact, both my sister and I are no more than stories. I have the ability to create
my own story and express myself to others. If I am lucky, they will view me in the manner I wish to be viewed. But, if I am not, then society will judge me according to set stereotypes and choose to disbelieve me by my actions. Communication is full of oral, written, signaled, emotional, and all other sorts of expression.

In my relationships, I plan to apply a better understanding of its evolution over time and the magic of good communication. In my story, I am the lead character and never let someone else control what I want to do. I will not rely on one person for emotional or financial support, because I can be happy with myself for my decisions and career. There is no right, wrong, or judgment in this world that can supersede how I feel about myself in my life. I have a voice, and I claim it as my own.

As a whole, the literature sources have given me the understanding of stories and more applications than I could have imagined. I learned about how Tiffany did not have to be an exact set, concrete, and unchangeable person. I do not have to seek and discover precisely who she was and why she acted as she did. As a story, and a character leading her own story, Tiffany is created by the people who knew her. By writing and telling stories about her, we create narrative which are open to interpretation and analysis. We share to remember. Although, memories only exist in the moment.

The strongest memory I have is of going to Satellite Beach to scatter my sister’s ashes into the Atlantic Ocean. I believe I have come to terms with my sister’s suicide. It is not painful, or immoral. I will stop asking “why,” for that is all I have thought of for years. Her choice may have liberated her and made her happy. We all must die one day, and it is not necessarily selfish to choose the date, rather than allow for someone else to choose for you.
Suicide is a choice one can rationally make. Tiffany’s decision and reasoning for whether to or not to live would let her be free from the constructs of another’s power.

Who is Tiffany Tenn? She is dynamic. Like every other person, she is constantly changing, always refined by both herself and others. Her uniqueness as a person is forever held within the confines of her story, yet freed by each retelling and revision of her story. By understanding more of my sister, I am able to remember her in a new manner. Since stories are all I have of my sister, I want them to mean something to me.

When I began writing this thesis, it was painful for me to think or speak of my sister, and there was so much I did not understand about her. All I knew is that I lost her when I was in 7th grade when a detective came to our door and told us she was gone. Writing Tiffany’s story has made a difference in my story. The ability to re-story her life has not physically changed anything. Yet it has made the way I feel incredibly different, in a positive way. Now I remember her as my sister who was someone, and not just as my lost sister I never understood. And now I have had the firsthand opportunity to feel the therapeutic powers of re-storying.

I feel that re-storying my sister’s life has been a therapy for me, as explained in Parry’s “A Universe of Stories.” Through the course of the thesis, she has changed because of the stories we tell about her. She had a purpose in life, and she had a voice. I could tell you about her story. I would love to tell you about her. I can carry my sister’s story in another way— no longer am I searching for my sister. I have found my sister.

Bibliography


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