Nostalgia, Anxiety and Gratification: Narratives of Female Staff in a Merged Higher Education Institution

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Abstract

The merger processes that the South African Higher Education system went through over the last 15 years are well documented. There is less research exploring the personal experiences of staff members during and after the merger and in particular the experience of female staff members. This study explored how female staff members perceived of the merging of a tertiary institution in the Western Cape. Narratives of eight academics and administrative/support staff members collected in four digital storytelling workshops form the basis of this study. Through a Dialogical Narrative Analysis lens two 'core narratives' emerged. *Stories of nostalgia*, mourning and struggling recorded the pain of letting go of the old culture. *Stories of opportunity and gains* told of those staff members who embrace the new culture and its emphasis on promoting a research career. Both core narratives reveal a sense of pain and loss. The institutional culture portrayed in the narratives of these women enculturates women into a hegemony of white male academia, exemplified by notions of solitary advancement, ambition, isolation, focus on research and lack of recognition for teaching. There is a need at the institution to engage with the collective narrative emerging from these women's stories to address the way women experienced an institutional merger and engage in a conversation on how to define academic excellence at the institution.

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Introduction

A significant legacy of apartheid is a fragmented and unequal education system based on ethnic separation and discrimination. After 1994, the new government committed itself to equity and redress as a cornerstone principle for all education policies (Waghid & Engelbrecht 2002). Government proposed restructuring the institutional landscape of higher education (HE) in South Africa in 2002 as a top-down government-driven vehicle of transforming society (Kamsteeg 2008). The objective of this restructuring was the development of a HE system that would deliver effectively and efficiently and that would be based on equity, quality, excellence, responsiveness, good governance and management.

As part of this process, the number of universities was cut from 36 to 23 through incorporations and mergers. This was met with strong resistance from various stakeholders such as management, staff and the unions who perceived these mergers as driven more by a need for efficiency and control than a transformative agenda (Jansen 2003). International research (Wyngaard & Kapp 2004) and national authors such as Jansen (2003) use strong words when reflecting on the traumatic effects that the mergers had on involved staff. Literature on institutional mergers and lessons learnt in South Africa from a human perspective are scarce (Botha 2005; Hay & Fourie 2002; Kamsteeg 2008). There is even less research on the effect of these mergers on the specific sub-groups, who should have benefitted most from mergers which were concerned with issues of redress and transformation, such as female staff and students, staff and students of colour and staff and students with disabilities (Hay & Fourie 2002; Wyngaard & Kapp 2004).

The merged HE institution under examination was constituted in January 2005 as result of a merger between a number of institutions with students and staff from different racial and socio-economic backgrounds. Consolidation of different institutional systems was of primary concern to the institution. Less importance was given to marrying various organizational cultures and ensuring that staff and students embraced the similarities and differences that existed between them. This year (2015), this institution is

celebrating its 10th year merger anniversary. In the context of these celebrations, we found it essential to engage in a critical study aimed at exploring how female staff members, both academic and support, experienced the merger process and its effect on their lives 10 years later.

The purpose of this study was to investigate how female academic and administrative staff members perceived of the merger process through the stories they told during digital storytelling workshops. The research question thus was: How do female academic and administrative staff members experience the merged institution in which they are employed?

The structure of the paper is as follows: we first introduce a literature review on the effects of merger from a human perspective, with a particular focus on the South African HE experience. A discussion of the third wave feminist perspective and Fraser's participatory parity within the context of social justice as theoretical lenses will be presented, followed by the methodology, dialogical narrative analysis and presentation of findings. Discussions and conclusions complete the paper.

Literature Review

Apartheid affected every facet of South African life: not least education. Separate education departments, governed by specific legislation along racial lines, reinforced divisions in the education system (Engelbrecht 2006; Malherbe 1977). After the democratic election in 1994, a new democratic education system was needed: one which ensured equality in all aspects of education (Sayed 2000). In December 2002 the then Minister of Education, Professor Kader Asmal, announced that the Cabinet had approved the final proposal for restructuring the institutional landscape of HE in South Africa, confirmed in terms of the Higher Education Act in 2003 (Government of South Africa 2003). There are a number of excellent research papers detailing the historical context of these mergers (Seehole 2005; and Chetty & Merrett 2014). It is beyond the scope of this study to provide the history of the merger processes in South African HEIs. This study focuses on the experiences of the merger process from the perspective of female staff at a single merged institution.

Researchers warn of the devastating effects that mergers have on staff and students. Price (1999: 39) states that executives involved in mergers

and acquisitions often 'ignore the people issues at their peril' and that 'issues of culture, values, behaviour and working styles should be carefully managed from the very beginning of the process'. Internationally, the merger literature is one of trauma. Some of the words used to describe the effects of mergers on staff, as cited in Botha (2005: 276), are: 'traumatic, disruptive, distressing, painful, uncertainty, loss in commitment, dampening in work motivation, shock, anger, disbelief, depression, anxiety, disappointment, disillusionment and withdrawal' (Crouch & Wirth 1991: 3, 4);'emotionally exhausting' (Brousseau 1989: 72); 'loss and betrayal' (Galosy 1990: 90); and 'turmoil, confusion, low morale, low productivity and absenteeism' (Greengard 1997: 53,55). South African authors allude to the traumatic effects that mergers had on staff and students. Jansen (2003: 43), as an example, mentions that 'the impact of mergers on staff, in all cases, has been devastating for the emotional and professional lives of all staff, at all levels'.

Several studies have emphasised how mergers in South African HEIs impact on employees. Hay and Fourie (2002) focused on the pre-merger study on staff experiences. Wyngaard and Kapp (2004) conducted a qualitative analysis of staff merger experiences collected during a workshop with four Education Colleges in the Western Cape. De Lange and Olivier's (2008) study focused on in-depth interviews with staff at one merged institution. Reddy (2007) conducted a quantitative study of staff perceptions at a merged institution. What these studies have in common, is a a highly critical assessment of the various merger processes emphasizing the lack of management, communication and the non- participatory way in which these mergers were conducted. Wyngaard and Kapp (2004: 193) described the merger process of two non-named Technikons as follows (our emphasis added):

> The process was *distressingly messy* with evidence of political machination operating at the highest level of management. *There was no capacity building or empowerment of staff.* The process was characterised by 'jerkiness' (sometimes moving along fine, then coming to a halt for some time and then continuing again). The merger was declared on the 1 April (another ominous sign). […] *The process was characterised by a lack of sensitivity for equity and diversity and an absence of a business plan.* This resulted in staff strikes. Lately an Office of Change Management has been

established, the effects of which have not yet been apparent. A new council has become operational and there is some hope for a vision, mission and business plan.

This negative description highlights lack of proper management of the merger, messiness and in particular lack of support and recognition of the needs of diverse staff and students in this transitional period. Reddy (2007: 500) summarizes: 'poor communication, top-down management style, no participative decision-making, lack of extrinsic motivation, decreased job satisfaction, and the absence of institutional loyalty'. Similarly, de Lange and Olivier (2008: 60) conclude their paper by stating that*:*

> We have, however, seen that the academic staff most often felt that they had to fend for themselves as the management in the higher education institution did not fulfill their side of the deal. This becomes clear in the apparent mismanagement of the incorporation, including the lack of communication, consultation and ownership, along with its psychological consequences, clearly affecting the functioning and well-being of academics in the workplace.

These disturbing findings urged us to explore how the staff members at the institution studied, and in particular, how female academic and administrative/support staff reflected on the merger, 10 years after it happened.

Theoretical Framework

Our study of women's experiences of a merger draws upon feminist theory at the intersection of critical race and queer theory. Within feminist epistemology the emphasis falls on personal narratives to understand female experiences. In particular, when it comes to understanding the complex dynamics of oppression, sharing personal stories in women collectives have a long tradition in feminist thought (Haug 1992; hooks 2000; Romney, Tatum & Jones 1992).

Feminist theory has its roots in women's liberation (hooks 2000). Over time, its central tenet has become the challenge to, and a critical and

radical transformation of, asymmetrical and dominant power relations across the world. Chaudry (2009: 138) defines the feminist project as 'the impulse to speak subjectivities into existence in order to voice that which has been forbidden, repressed, or pushed to the margins by patriarchal codes of thinking, language, and representation'. However, to define feminist theory as focusing only on oppressive relationships between men and women is to reduce and distort its fundamental basis. According to Manicom (1992: 366), feminist epistemology has:

> a political intent and visions of social change and liberation-not simply with an aim to have (some) women 'make it' in the world of (some) men, but to learn to act in and on the world in order to transform oppressive relations of class, race and gender [...] not to change women to fit the world, but to change the world.

Feminist theorists are concerned with intersections between race, class and gender, rather than simply questions of women assuming predominant power positions occupied before by men. hooks (2000: 19) defines this as a 'simplistic definition of women's liberation'. She states that:

> Implicit in this simplistic definition of women's liberation is a dismissal of race and class as factors that, in conjunction with sexism, determine the extent to which an individual will be discriminated against, exploited, or oppressed.

We draw in particular on third-wave feminist theory: the intersection of critical race and queer theory (Schippers & Sapp 2012), which deconstructs stable notions of women/men. Defying fixed gender identities, third wave feminists are concerned with how terms such as 'gender' are discursively constructed (Butler 1999, 2004). Schippers and Sapp (2012: 30) describe third wave feminist theory as 'corporeal performance of a discursively produced and contested set of criteria for being a woman within the structural conditions of gender inequality'. Second wave feminists critique femininity as an embodiment of male domination. Third wave feminists regard femininity as a set of cultural and social ideals: what a girl or a woman should do. Power dynamics are not functions of males dominating females, but relations between people; constantly re-negotiated and re-established, as

hooks (2000: 27) states: 'When we cease to focus on the simplistic stance 'men are the enemy', we are compelled to examine systems of domination and our role in their maintenance and perpetuation'. In similar fashion Schippers and Sapp (2012: 32) urge us to examine notions such as gender and femininity, for their subversive potential to counter hegemonic constructions:

> Third wave feminist perspective rejects the assertion that men possess power and women are subject to and/or lack power. Instead, third wave feminist perspectives conceive of power as relational, having multiple tactics and strategies, and as available to subordinate groups and not just the possession of dominant groups.

An important concept for this study is feminist philosopher Nancy Fraser's (2005, 2007, 2008, 2009) normative framework on Social Justice. Fraser sees a socially just society as one where people (men and women) interact on equal terms. According to her, 'justice requires social arrangements that permit all to participate as peers in social life': a process she refers to as participatory parity (Fraser 2007: 20). Fraser defines three levels of this participatory parity: economic, cultural and political. For our study, the cultural level is of particular interest. She argues that there is a need for social arrangements that allow for equal respect and equal opportunities to achieve self-esteem for all members of society. Obstacles to cultural participatory parity are hierarchical-status order and institutional patterns of cultural value which attach status to certain people and activities. Fraser explains that: 'people can also be prevented from interacting on terms of parity by institutionalized hierarchies of cultural value that deny them the requisite standing; in that case, they suffer from status inequality or misrecognition' (ibid). Fraser uses the terms *recognition* and *misrecognition* in this context.

Methodology

Narrative inquiry, the analysis of narratives, has gained an increased following: telling and listening to stories provide comfort and the possibility of making meaning of human experience (Kohler Riessman 2008). There are many approaches to narrative inquiry and many definitions of narratives. Storytelling in this investigation is seen as social practice, co-constructed

within a specific socio-cultural and historical context; carrying notions of power and privilege; having capacities/being performative; and ultimately with the aim of disrupting norms and hegemonic discourses. Storytellers appear as multiple, disunified subjectivities involved in production of stories, rather than singular, agentic storytellers: 'the storyteller does not tell the story, so much as she/he is told by it' (Squire *et al.* 2008: 3). In terms of differentiating stories and narratives, the term *stories* is used for stories written by study participants, while *narratives* are broader narrative genres, resources, that these storytellers draw from in their stories. There seems to be a particular interest in the use of personal narratives to understand merger experiences of staff and management, both internationally (Brown & Humphreys 2003 or Vaara 2002) and locally (Kamsteeg 2014, 2008).

This study focuses on narratives collected in four digital storytelling workshops held in 2014 at the institution in which staff members involved in the study were employed. All participants were employed at one of the institutions that became part of the merged institution. A digital story is a personal narrative which combines voice, sound and images into a short video developed by non-professionals. This study is influenced by the digital storytelling model developed by the Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS) in Berkeley, USA. The CDS foregrounds communal sharing of stories in a story circle (Lambert 2010). Their model of creating digital stories is specific and involves a workshop running over several days where participants collaboratively develop their stories. Communal sharing of stories is the main element in the process of digital storytelling; another step in the digital storytelling process is writing of the story, the script that forms the basis of a digital story.

Participation at these storytelling workshops was on a voluntary basis: each workshop attracted approximately five participants. Three workshops were held with academic staff members and one with support staff members. Workshops lasted one day and participants shared their stories in the story circle. The digital story was developed in follow-up sessions on a one-to-one basis as collaboration between the participant and the digital-storytelling facilitators. In total, 20 digital stories were created, 17 by female staff members and three by male staff members. Of the 17 female staff members, 15 agreed to be part of this research and of these 15, eight had been with the institution since the time of the merger, while seven joined after the merger in 2005. The eight *written scripts* developed during these digital

storytelling workshops by female academic and administration staff members who had been through the merger process formed the focus of this study. Table 1 shows demographic details of each of the eight storytellers, the title they had given their story, the word count of each written script and the core narrative/typology each of these stories was following (resulting from the analysis of these stories). The word count of each story ranges from approximately 400-600 words – slightly longer than the traditional digital stories, which are usually of a 300-500 words' length. Examples of these stories can be found below. Each of these stories is a reflection of how the narrator experienced the merger condensed into a digital story, which is usually approximately 3 minutes long. Storytellers had to be selective about the story they told, what they focused on and how they structured their stories.

Table 1: Demographic background of storyteller/participant, title of story given by participant, word count, and core narrative/typology stories were the following:

Story	Demographics of storyteller	Title of Story	Word count	Core narrative/ typology of stories
Story 1	Academic (White)	Late Bloomer	550	Stories of opportunity
Story 2	Support (Coloured)	Getting Unstuck	485	Stories of opportunity
Story 3	Academic (Indian)	Space for Grace	553	Stories of opportunity (with elements of nostalgia)
Story 4	Academic (Coloured)	New Beginnings	586	Stories of opportunity (with elements of nostalgia)
Story 5	Academic (White)	The fragility of the transformation process	508	Stories of opportunity (with elements of nostalgia)
Story 6	Support (Coloured)	Becoming a Number	426	Stories of nostalgia
Story 7	Support (Black African)	My merger happened in 2010	569	Stories of nostalgia

Story 8	Academic (White)	The Pow in Power	435	Stories of nostalgia

To analyze these eight written stories, we employed dialogical narrative analysis (DNA), an approach developed by Arthur W. Frank (2010, 2012) to explore how illness stories told to him in various support groups affected people's lives. DNA is less concerned with the meaning of stories, the usual focus on narrative inquiry, and more with the 'types of work that stories do and how they do it' (Frank 2010: 120). DNA highlights the performative nature of stories, which are seen as having capacities, 'they are made of air but leave their mark' (Frank 2010: 43). Frank regards stories as actors who can have socio-material consequences on the storyteller. The telling of different stories can have different outcomes for the storyteller. Frank aims at building typologies of stories. In his work with long-term medical patients, he encountered three core narratives people drew from to construct their stories: 'the restitution narrative, the chaos narrative, and the quest narrative' (Frank 2010: 118). While he is careful to warn that none of these core narratives is final and that a good typology should always be open for dialogue and critique, he argues that 'people use typologies as guides to listening and to storytelling'(119).

Frank (2010) suggests the following five analytical foci for DNA, which we have used to analyze the eight stories collected for this study:

1. **Resources**: What narrative resources can a storyteller draw upon? What resources shape how the story is being told and comprehended? How are resources distributed?

2. **Circulation**: To whom is the story told, who can understand the story and who can't?

3. **Affiliation**: Who does the story render external or other to that group?

4. **Identity**: What identity is performed/constructed? What are the possibilities to change or remain the same? What identity is claimed, rejected, experimented with?

5. **What is at stake?**: Who is made more vulnerable by the story?

Ethical clearance was sought through institutional channels and all participants gave informed consent to be part of the research and for their stories to be included in the research. The names of the storytellers were concealed.

Findings

This section of the paper reports on the findings from analysis of the eight stories written during the digital storytelling workshops along Frank's five analytical foci for DNA, as listed above. The **narrative resources** from which stories were drawn vary: some stories focus on women's professional lives, others integrate aspects of their personal lives. Not all stories deal explicitly with the merger, although all stories are affected by the merger. In *Late Bloomer* (story 1) for example, the storyteller tells a story of her often painful transformation from housewife, mother and artist to first teacher, academic and scholar through her husband's betrayal and their consequent divorce. It is a story about her struggle for permanency and other professional upheavals experienced through the merger process. *Getting unstuck* (story 2) is a reflection on the storyteller's personal and professional growth in the merged institution, by taking the decision to embrace change and making the most out of it, such as taking up the opportunity to continue her studies. *Space for Grace* (story 3) is a story of redemption, in which the storyteller reflects on the taxing expectations that a young female academic feels at the beginning of her career, her realization that her single-minded focus on career advancement has a negative effect on her engagement with students and her resolve to challenge this system. *New beginnings* (story 4) is a story of political awakening of a young academic, her experience as 'quota' black and the growing conscientization and understanding of her own political and ethical values, which eventually makes it impossible for her to continue her work at the institution. *The fragility of the transformation process* (story 5) is a critique of academia, with its greed for credentials and a story of loss of privilege as experienced by a white academic after the merger. It is a story of reverse racism, loss of voice, critiquing the transformation process for favoring race before teaching quality in new appointments. *Becoming a*

number (story 6) is the most painful story, a heart-wrenching account of somebody's loss of professional family, status, recognition – the experience of losing one's humanity, in the context of office politics, conflicts and power plays as experienced in the merged institution. In a similar fashion, *My merger happened in 2010* (story 7), mourns the loss of status, comfort and recognition that the merger and its physical reshuffling of staff entailed. Finally the *Pow in Power* (story 8) reflects on the debilitating increase in conflict and arguments at management level, the continuous fight for recognition of issues of teaching and learning against the backdrop of neoliberal talk on efficiency and outputs as experienced in the merged institution.

From the way we sequenced these stories, two core narratives emerged, which we decided to term *stories of opportunity* and *stories of nostalgia* (see Table 1). See inserts below for examples of these stories. Shuman (2005: 62) defines *stories of nostalgia* as emblematic stories which 'are allusions to an idealized period that the stories de-historise and restitute in a particular relation between the present and the lost ideal [...] the past is coherent while the present is fragmented'. We found this definition particularly useful, since for most of the storytellers of this category of stories the present seems to be difficult, if not traumatic, and the merger experiences prove to be a turning point in their institutional careers and a turn towards a space that was experienced as negative, leaving them with a strong yearning for an idealized past. While the storytellers of what we called '*stories of opportunity'* also regard the merger as a turning point in their careers, their stories reflect a tentatively positive outcome to their post-merger experiences. Not all stories are firmly positioned either in the opportunity or the nostalgia core narrative; in some cases they represent both elements of nostalgia and opportunity. While reflecting on the opportunities that the new research culture awards them, some participants yearn for a simpler past.

With regard to **affiliation and circulation**, to whom these stories are told and who is made internal and external to these stories, in the stories of nostalgia we found a strong sense of bereavement; grief for the loss of family, intimacy and closeness that came as a result of the merging of the institutions. This is depicted in narrative 6 where the storyteller says: 'When I hear the word merger, I think about the family I lost.' Within this core narrative, storytellers still affiliate and identify with their pre-merger colleagues, failing to build new communities within the merged institution. They position

themselves as 'external', isolated from new colleagues, non-recognized and bullied, as shown in narrative 7: 'I saw myself as outsider, I didn't belong. It was a message that was sent to me and which told me that I was just not good enough'.

Within the stories of opportunity, participants establish new networks, drawing from supportive colleagues and mentors to further their careers and distance themselves from 'negative talk' circulating in the merged institution. In these stories, the storytellers have powers in the institution and find a mentor or *more knowledgeable other* to support them personal and professional development, as seen in narrative 1: 'When [name of dean] was appointed, she encouraged us to improve our qualifications and get involved in research. I became part of her study group and started writing and presenting papers at national and international conferences'. Often these mentors are experienced female academics who take junior women under their wings to support them in their academic growth.

Analysing the stories in terms of **identity and change**, the stories of nostalgia do not leave much room for change, while in the stories of opportunity, storyteller create the change for themselves. The identity claimed in the stories of nostalgia is one of merger victim, an identity characterized by loss, disempowerment and stalled growth.

LATE BLOOMER (story 1)

Growing up in the Afrikaans culture, my 'career' after I married was to bring up my two children. I sang semi-professionally and worked in my own ceramics studio. However, a sense of calling drove me to continue studying and pass my BA. At the age of 40, after 17 years of marriage, my husband left me for his young secretary. I was devastated and suddenly forced to review my role as woman and mother. It was now up to me to be the breadwinner in my family. My teaching qualification allowed me to enter formal employment again. But from being my own boss, going back and dealing with the challenges of being employed under a headmaster, was not always easy. After six years of teaching, in 1998, I started lecturing art education at the teachers' training college in [campus 3] in a permanent position. I loved my job and started to feel that what I was doing was what I had been created for.

But then from 1999, when the first merger with the [institution 2]

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was announced, to 2003, I was shaken up again. We had to reapply for our posts, but our qualifications were never really considered. What counted were recommendations of the former rector, tainted with nepotism. From my permanent position I now found myself working on a contract. This uncertainty broke down my immune system and I became ill with tuberculosis. At the worst I weighed only 49kg. For six months I had to queue at the clinic every month for medication, but fortunately, I recovered completely.

In 2003 all contract staff was appointed in permanent positions, pending the second merger with [institution 3]. This was a relief, yet it put me on a par with younger staff members who had never taught in permanent positions. This was unfair, but I never gave up. Instead of becoming bitter like many of my colleagues, I decided to take hold of every opportunity I could get. When [name of dean] was appointed, she encouraged us to improve our qualifications and get involved in research. I became part of her study group and started writing and presenting papers at national and international conferences. I enrolled for every training opportunity and workshop that I could. After gaining my ATCL in singing in 2005 I registered for my M Ed and passed cum laude in 2008. My research continued and I received my D Ed in September 2013.

I became the chairperson of [cultural institution]. As part of my outreach to the community, I designed a Service Learning project in which my students participate. All these activities, which were supported and encouraged by the dean and senior staff, helped me get my ad hominem promotion to senior lecturer, although some cynics said that no white person would ever get promotion at [merged institution].

Although I am a middle-aged person, I feel as if my career has only started and I wish I could carry on working for many more years. For me what I am doing is not just a job: I look forward to every day and know I am where I am meant to be, doing what I am supposed to be doing.

Storytellers position themselves as tired, battle scarred or hiding in their classrooms. The oppressor is a generic, unnamed, faceless 'other', such as 'pool of new faces' (story 6) or 'senior managers' (story 8) in general. The identity that storyteller*s* claim for themselves and experiment with in the stories of opportunity is a strong one, based on a distinct drive to take up opportunities for academic self-development and change: it is an understand-

ing of the individual's role in this self-development. In the stories of opportunity and in the stories of nostalgia, which have elements of opportunity, these opportunities are linked to increased access to funding for research, encouragement to pursue an academic career through further studies and support in becoming a scholar. Many of the stories of opportunity are educative stories of unlikely success, such as the 'Late Bloomer' story, which promotes the idea that it is never too late to start an academic career. Stories of opportunity render individuals/groups 'external' that resist change: those who are bitter, cynical (story 1), do not or cannot believe in change and are stuck in an 'us versus them mentality' (story 2). In stories of opportunity, academic change and growth are possible resulting in academic progression and promotion, even if it has negative side effects, as reflected in story 3: 'What I lost was patience for my students. To my over-stressed eyes, they had become disrespectful and demanding. They no longer seemed grateful.'

If the storyteller faced oppression, it was a distinct 'other', named in their stories as a Head of Department, Dean or the rector (for example stories 1 and 4). The identity in stories of opportunity is one that challenges, resists, claims their own ways based on storytellers own values and judgments, their own political project, even if it goes against the dominant position at the institution, as shown in story 4: 'I know why I am here, I know what I would like to contribute […] I remind myself daily, to always use my voice wisely and not loudly, to have it heard despite the noise and never have it silenced through the might of others'.

What is at stake in these stories? Who is made more vulnerable? Across the eight stories, storytellers shared stories that were uncomfortable and touched on issues that were usually silenced in the merged institution. They reflected on painful moments in their academic careers, where they realized their own vulnerability and the vulnerability of their colleagues, students and the institution. In their honesty, in what they revealed, they opened themselves up to scrutiny and uncomfortable questions. Storytellers were vocal about institutional misgivings, pointing out moments of corruption and unethical behaviour. Two stories (1 and 4) openly address nepotism and corruption, both with the consequence of the storyteller either deciding to leave the institution (returning at a later stage) or temporarily leaving because of an extended illness.

For some, what is at stake is their own personal mental health, as shown in narrative 3: 'Those years are truly a blur. I feel like I was on

autopilot. You do, you say, you act…year after year…' Both academic and administration staff talk about their tiredness, their battle scars. In narrative 6, an administration staff member says 'The continuous conflict and power play make me tired, angry and frustrated. I struggle to wake up to come to work, when I remember I have to go through the front gates of [the merged institution]'. This is echoed in narrative 8, by an academic: 'When I see pictures of myself now, I am tired and battle scarred.' For others it may be their academic career that is on the line, their voice being silenced as depicted in narrative 5: 'As a white woman, I am not allowed to have a voice'.

In order to survive in this environment - often described as toxic due to, for example, its competitiveness, corruption, negativity, gossip, etc. - women in these stories report how they appropriated characteristics of white males (as so beautifully described in narrative 8: 'I put on my battle armour'). Within the patriarchal context in which the women find themselves, there seems to be low recognition of teaching and learning in favour of research (for example stories 3, 5 and 8).

Participants feel that they have to abandon roles associated with femininity and assume male-dominated roles of immersing in research (i.e. focusing on publications and academic career progression). Stories show the pitfalls of adhering to these societal norms, such as being overwhelmed with a sense of guilt when they 'act like men' as opposed to enacting as caring, nurturing self that is associated with femininity. Story 3 is a powerful example of how being overstretched with teaching and research responsibilities makes the participant misrecognize her students' vulnerabilities and needs: 'I keep thinking: Good teaching is more than just good practice and innovation. I ask myself: How have you impacted them? Did you show them love, did you show you cared? Are you able to give them truth, with grace?'

Space for GRACE (story 3)

I submitted my PhD in June 2002, and started my first lecturing position at [institution 2] in the same month. I epitomized the eager, excited, passionate lecturer. I loved teaching and I loved my students. I was grace. But soon I found out: it was not JUST lecturing, it was marking, and administration, and research, and being a supervisor, and publishing. I kept saying to myself... you are too young to be bogged down by all this responsibility!

I don't remember much between 2006 and 2013. I remember teaching more, acquiring more administration tasks, co-ordinating and teaching on five BTech distance programmes and being away from home up to 20 weekends per year. I remember having between 8 to 11 postgrads during any given year and I remember the pressure to publish. I remember my HoD giving me more and me accepting the more. I was single with no children or husband... so I coped... heck, I excelled... and slowly, [merged institution] became my substitute... for just about everything. Those years are truly a blur. I feel like I was on autopilot. You do, you say, you act... Year after year ... you do, you say, you act.

Even as my time became saturated, I still loved standing in front of the classroom. What I lost was patience for my students. To my over-stressed eyes, they had become disrespectful and demanding. They no longer seemed grateful. They demanded so much time... and time, time was my most precious commodity.

On a Tuesday morning in 2007 a female student came in to my office to explain why she did not write my test on the Monday morning. I had just finished teaching […] to the [campus 1] group, and was about to get into my car to drive to [campus 2] to teach again. I DID NOT HAVE TIME TO SET UP ANOTHER TEST. YOU KNOW THE RULES... where is your medical certificate, I blasted. I ranted and moaned... and when I paused, I thought to ask why. I remember how frightened she looked when she said to me, 'Ma'am, I was raped this weekend....' I made all the right noises, said all the correct sympathetic phrases... left her, got into my car, and cried. Grace was gone.

I wish I could say that that was my turning point, but it was not. I know I do a good job as a teacher; last year I won the Faculty award for outstanding teachers. But am I doing the BEST I can? I keep thinking: Good teaching is more than just good practice and innovation. I ask myself: How have you impacted them? Did you show them love, did you show you cared? Are you able to give them truth, with grace?

I have worked hard for the past ten years, and I have been rewarded for it. But when I worked TOO hard, it was not just me who paid the price; it was my students.

For the past few months I started praying again. Lord, give me a love for my students. Let me care for them, let me show them respect, let me treat them as whole human beings, with a life and family. Let me see them as a

complete unit. Through love, grace will flow.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study set out to explore female staff members' experiences of a merger by analysing eight written stories developed in a series of digital storytelling workshops. Two 'core narratives' or typologies emerged: *stories of nostalgia*, mourning and struggling to let go of the old culture (in the pre-merger institutions) and *stories of opportunity* of those staff members who embraced the new culture (in the merged institution). This echoes findings of other studies, such as Brown and Humphreys (2003) who found *epic* and *tragic* narratives of merger in their institution. In our study the old culture was described as one 'big family', community, solidarity, emotional attachment and a clear sense of belonging. The new culture was perceived as one of personal growth and seemingly endless opportunities for those who took them and were prepared to extend themselves: also as a competitive and unhealthy work environment. Opportunities were linked to increased access to research funding, support in furthering their studies, or presenting at local and international conferences. What is interesting but at the same time disheartening is the lonely path that some women traversed in these stories. This situation emphasized the pain associated with the merger process mentioned earlier in the literature review (Botha 2005). This pain is most strongly felt by for those who found themselves in environments that were alien to those they were accustomed to prior to the mergers.

The findings showed the complexity of the intersectionality of gender, race and class. Women of black, white and coloured racial backgrounds told stories of nostalgia and opportunity. White and women of colour mourned their loss of voice. Other white and women of colour found their voice. In all stories, there is a dichotomy of subjugation and victory, an indication that women did not experience the merger process the same way. This illustrates that there is no homogeneous 'female' experience, and points to the interrelatedness of sex, race and class oppression and the importance of recognizing the ambiguity inherent in complex social processes such as mergers (Vaara 2002). It seemed more difficult for administrative/support staff to see opportunities for personal development than for academic staff, the latter who are strongly encouraged to develop their scholarly careers, in

line with the institution's attempts at repositioning itself as a University. This mirrors Reddy's (2007) findings, that job satisfaction in a merged institution seemed to be higher at his institution for academic staff than for admin/ technical staff or Brown and Humphrey's study (2013), where management told epic stories and subordinate staff tragic stories of the merger.

As a collective, these narratives unearth underlying structural dynamics of oppression at the institution (Haug 1992). They provide a starting point to understanding a potential misrecognition (Fraser 2005, 2007, 2008, 2009) of female staff members at the institution in the context of the merger process. The focus on research and pursuing one's academic career collides with the need for supportive and caring teaching. This polarization can lead to an oppressive hegemonic working environment. Other studies conducted at the institution have previously found that staff and students are rendered vulnerable to exploitation and manipulation (Hassan 2013).

On a positive note, what emerged in some of the stories was that women found ways not only to cope, but more importantly, to resist and rise above the hegemonic situations and structures that threatened to disempower them. Individual coping comes at a cost (such as having to leave the institution, or experiencing health problems).

BECOMING A NUMBER… (story 6)

When I hear the word merger, I think about the family I lost. I came to Cape Town in 1986 to study at the [institution 1]. Coming to Cape Town was a big thing for me, because I was brought up in Afrikaans culture in a small town and was scared of what to expect of the big city.

While I was studying, I started working as a student assistant in the [name of department]. We were just a handful of staff and I was very happy and felt right at home. I was never treated as if I was less or knew less than anyone else.

We all knew each other at [institution 1], you weren't just a number […]. I felt I belonged to the [institution 1] family, from the gardener to the rector… we all knew each other's names. I can't explain the feeling that came over me when passing through the front gate knowing that **'this is where I belong'.**

Then suddenly talks about a merger between the '[institution 2]' and the '[institution 1]' started. While we were still hoping this would never

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happen, decisions were taken and there was no stopping this idea of a merger! 2004 was the last year of [institution 1]… We had our last family get together in the CTICC with a big bash! We were all dressed up for the occasion but in our hearts we knew nothing would ever be the same again.

And in 2005 which was the beginning of the two merged institutions and we became [merged institution] - everything changed! We called it the 'Big Take Over'. I felt like I was drowning in the pool of new faces, new colleagues. The bickering, backstabbing, gossip and politics got worse day by day. After working at this institution for almost 25 years, I felt like people were treating me like a child. I felt not recognized or taken note of, just because I didn't have all the Educational credentials behind my name. I learnt not to be fooled by the smiles or the friendly greetings, if I got greeted at all.

The continuous conflict and power play makes me tired, angry and frustrated. I struggle to wake up to come to work, when I remember I have to go through the front gate of [merged institution]. I no longer feel part of this place with its toxic environment … I just know that I am *A NUMBER*.

These narratives show is that there is a need for collective agency at this institution, for female solidarity and support. We argue that the promotion of change should be a collective and relational responsibility, emphasizing the importance of supportive leadership and women's networks for an experience where female employees can be free to be who they are. Briskin (1990) reminds us that women cannot effect this radical transformation in isolation but need to forge networks and alliances with men and women across race and class lines. What makes third wave feminist theory useful in this context, is its concern with a more fluid view of gender, race and class, an understanding that how we define femininity and masculinity is not cast in stone (Butler 1999; 2004). Women have the agency to disrupt and renegotiate these hegemonic discourses while being conscious of their own roles in perpetuating certain oppressive standards and practices.

No merger is painless and the literature on mergers reminds us that it can take up to ten years for the wounds to heal and for the new institution forged from previously autonomous identities to operate as a cohesive and well integrated whole (Harman & Meek 2002). It is thus imperative for merged institutions to recognize the importance of addressing the merger effects on staff. While the institution in which participants in this study are

employed is celebrating its 10 year anniversary in 2015, stakeholders, management, staff and students can gain by reflecting on these stories as a catalyst for breaking down the silences and opening safe spaces for dialogue and debate around staff merger experiences as well as what academic excellence would mean in the context of this institution. This would help the institution, as Wyngaard and Kapp (2004) suggest, to recognise the devastating effects mergers may have on their people and allow people to re-assess and (re) construct their narratives based on an emerging collective narrative. Frank (2010) reminds us that naming types of narratives can help people think about what story they are telling and what story they want to tell. Naming narrative types can authorize the telling of particular stories and liberate people from stories they no longer want to tell. In the same way as gender, race, class is performed discursively in everyday conversations; merger processes keep being performed in our narratives, with socio-material effects on staff and students.

Further research is needed to explore whether the experiences shared in these digital storytelling workshops and in particular the collective analysis of these women's stories could allow participants to change their own narratives and develop a deeper understanding of the dynamics of oppression through the collective reading and analysis of their stories, as Haug (1992: 17) calls for 'in order to uncover the social construction, the mechanisms, the interconnections and significance of our actions and feelings'. We recognize that for a complete picture, we need to collect merger stories from male staff members, from staff and students with disabilities and other vulnerable groups.

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