

## EMOTIONS AND THE LIS RESEARCHER

Archie L Dick  
Department of Information Science  
University of Pretoria  
11 September 2006

I wish to thank Prof Dennis Ocholla and the Conference Organizers for inviting me to participate in the seventh DLIS Conference. It represents in no uncertain terms the healthy state of this department's research programme and its contribution to shaping a new generation of LIS researchers in the KwaZulu Natal province, in South Africa and the rest of the continent. I am reminded of a few lines from poet William Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey* which says:

**While here I stand, not only with the sense  
Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts  
That in this moment there is life and food  
For future years. And so I dare to hope...**

You have in this Conference programme an exciting and varied array of topics and research styles. I wish you well as you complete your studies and embark on your careers, which I presume will involve more research in teams or as individuals. Africa needs the calibre of LIS researchers who are architects and planners in the international research community instead of just woodcutters and water carriers.

We should not be content simply to put the theories of North American and European researchers to empirical examination in African contexts. We are far too resourceful and our own information environment is far too rich and interesting for that. In our response to the global political and economic realities of research output and publication that still favours the advanced industrial nations, we should both produce our own conceptual schemes and engage the theories and models produced by others - not in the spirit of empire building but as citizens with equal rights and responsibilities in a research republic or commonwealth.

We need to plant our own flag on the LIS research map – where we are still conspicuous by our absence. For example, in a recent publication in

the ASIST Monograph Series with the title *Theories of Information Behavior* (Fisher *et al*, 2005), I doubt that you will find more than one or two references to LIS researchers from this part of the world. In a giveaway remark to me by a European keynote speaker following a conference much like this one in Pretoria a few years ago, he remarked that there was a completely different set of LIS issues that is relevant here than in Europe.

The irony was that many of the local student presenters at that conference had laboured heroically to fit their empirical data into a theoretical framework co-produced by that keynote speaker. My challenge to you today then is to redress this imbalance, to help shift the international balance of theoretical and model-building power, to strike out in new and innovative ways. I hope you start by publishing the papers you present here today in places where they can make a difference.

But my main aim this morning, as you may have noticed from my title, is quite unusual. In line with the Conference theme of popularizing knowledge sharing I wish to draw on my own research experience to broach a topic that is often considered taboo, even a dirty word in academic research – emotions. Let me introduce this topic with two examples. A few months ago while conducting research in Cape Town I received a telephone call from a former colleague whom I had worked with in public libraries in the 1970s.

I had already interviewed him a few years ago and he now wanted to share more of his recollections and thoughts on his library career. What struck me in this telephone conversation was the urgency to meet again, and the remark that he was suffering from cancer and did not have much time left. When we met later I struggled between objectivity and a deep sadness as I spoke with and recorded him.

The second example comes from a question I put to a former City Librarian of Cape Town who during a period of book burning in the apartheid era was quoted by a newspaper journalist about the fate of banned books brought to the Central Library from branch libraries as follows: 'Then we will have a big bonfire and burn them'. When I asked him whether or not this was true he replied calmly that he had absolutely no recollection of that time in his career. In this conversation I struggled between objective distance as a researcher and a feeling of anger.

My question then is what does a researcher do with these and other emotions? What methodological technique is there in the researcher's tool kit to deal with them? If not explicitly then certainly in a subtle but strong message in research methodology courses we are told to banish subjectivity and eliminate emotions as factors that will fatally flaw our research findings.

But such classic denial of emotion in a normal and healthy life style, as we know, is the first step to the therapist's couch or to anger management courses or perhaps to a career in politics. The truth is that research can be and indeed is an emotionally charged activity. Today's Conference programme includes topics about the performance of South African universities, cancer and HIV, staff morale, conflict management, drug abuse among students and others - all of which can evoke powerful emotions and reactions.

How do we prepare researchers professionally for a sudden and unexpected turn of events during an interview, like an emotional breakdown by an interviewee or the potential emotional meltdown of an interviewer who is overwhelmed by empathy? Kleenex tissues or a stiff whiskey, I suggest, is not enough to wipe away or drown the feelings that invade the research process in several of its phases.

The source of the problem lies not only in our traditions, canons and protocols of research methodology. It reaches also towards the way we think about our discipline and ourselves. In the attempt to become a respectable academic discipline worthy of inclusion in the range of university offerings, LIS historically sought a social scientific status that adopted the ideals of classic liberalism, which emphasizes value neutrality and objectivity. In its preference for this path towards scientific status, LIS effectively dismissed emotions and subjectivity and disputes about moral values (Dick, 1995a).

In South African LIS departments in the 1970s and 1980s, for example, I recall a mindless adoption of a formula approach to the scientific method in the shape of fixed steps that all students had to follow in their assignments and dissertations, the enforcement of third-person writing and a narrowed range of viable research topics. All of this was connected with a predominantly Afrikaner male chauvinism that prevailed in LIS academic circles at the time. The scientific method was used cynically to close down

criticism and debate, and to propagate apartheid LIS policy for a considerable period of time. Research funding, academic appointments, acceptance and rejection of research articles and inclusion of speakers in conference programmes operated within this regime.

I have shown elsewhere that this was a fraudulent use of scientific method in South African LIS (Dick, 2002a). There has, moreover, always been more than one way for LIS to become a respectable social science. In brief, alternative approaches emphasizes a connection between social scientific inquiry and the pursuit of the human good that questions the strict separation between researchers and the object of research as well as the degree of participation by ordinary people and ordinary human experience in research.

Even at the heart of the most extreme form of empiricism, which is called logical positivism there is a contradiction for so-called value free, objective social sciences. It is that classical empiricists are empirical about everything except the concept of 'experience' itself as the source of knowledge (Dick, 1991; 1993). And emotions are an important part of human experience as a source of knowledge, and they therefore have to be dealt with instead of being simply ignored or dismissed.

I would like to suggest that emotions in research operate on at least three levels. At the **first level**, and mostly in qualitative research, there are the emotions involved in the relations between researcher and interviewee. We are now aware, especially in in-depth interviewing, of the ethical issues that are raised when we tap into areas that are emotionally sensitive for the respondent.

Many of these respondent-related emotional issues are covered today by prior scrutiny of questionnaires and interview schedules using ethics committees in university structures, so that respondents can take little if any personal offense. For the researcher at this level there are strategies for managing emotions especially in team research where sharing or opening up about sensitive issues with team members can help deal with emotional distress.

Techniques such as pacing an interview, avoiding interviews at certain times of the day, note writing and de-briefing sessions allow researchers to

acknowledge and utilize emotional experiences instead of avoiding them (Cylwik, 2001; Hubbard *et al*, 2001). Individual researchers can also learn from each other how to deal with the emotional aspects of research if special arrangements for this are made.

At the **second level** there are emotions involved in the relations between a researcher and the research topic, especially sensitive topics. In dealing with the information seeking behaviour or information needs of vulnerable or socially excluded groups like HIV/AIDS patients, prostitutes, immigrants and so forth there is often a greater concern for the protection of the research project and the integrity of the data than for the emotional vulnerability of the researcher. Often we avoid topics or participation in research projects because we anticipate emotional distress or discomfort, such as in the cases of HIV/AIDS or child abuse and so forth.

In our own library past, silence on the complicity of librarians in book burning, collusion of provincial library service book selectors with state authorities in apartheid era censorship, failure to expose Broederbond members among senior library officials or Nazi-sympathisers among the founders of LIS departments, and fingering librarians who were apartheid spies may all be examples of research areas studiously avoided or ignored by South African LIS researchers because of the emotional and personal costs involved.

But they are also a kind of betrayal and failure of nerve on the part of South African LIS researchers in the past – leaving huge gaps in our chequered but interesting library history. I recall being recently invited to tea by a now retired senior library official at the very point that I was considering whether or not to include his name as a former Broederbond member in a research article footnote. In other words, I had mixed emotions on the matter. As it turned out, I first went to tea and then added the footnote afterwards. I'm not expecting another invitation to tea anytime soon.

I want to spend more time, however, on the **third level** where there are emotions involved in the relations between researchers and their own research experiences. This implies reflexivity or self-evaluation in which researchers continuously draw on and assess their previous theoretical ideas and experiences and re-create themselves in the process, acknowledging that

research practice is an emotional and personal journey. This continuous, self-critical exercise allows researchers to confront and make explicit and visible the beliefs, assumptions and bias that are present in their work, and as a result - to improve the quality of future research (Burman, 2006; Hallowell *et al*, 2005).

I will select a few emotions from my own research experience that now spans about twenty-five years, and identify the lessons that I learned from them, which I hope will be useful to your own research projects and research careers. These emotions are related to three of what sociologists of emotion call the four universal or primary emotions of sadness, anger, fear and happiness (Turner, 2005: 13).

The first emotion is **Pity**, which is related to sadness. At the end of October 2005 I received a rather tortured apology in an e-mail message from someone in the United States. The writer of the e-mail had authored a book that was published in 2004 with the title *The Theory and Practice of Bibliographic Failure, or Misinformation in the Information Society*. In it he had quoted from an article of mine on transforming subject access (Dick, 1995b).

It was only when the author was reading a more recent book that also quotes from my article that he noticed that there appeared to be a huge difference in how my ideas were presented there and how he had presented them in his own book. When he went back to my article he discovered that he had not read it completely. In other words, he had misrepresented me because he skimmed the first few pages and found and used a passage that was completely at odds with his own perspective.

As a kind of penance, he promised in his e-mail to correct this error in a subsequent book he was completing and said that I could review the offending book and point out his error, and he even offered two copies of the book free of charge. Instead of being outraged, which I had every right to be, I felt a strange sadness at the irony of publishing false information about me in a book that included the word *Misinformation* in its title. In his efforts to direct attention to this disease of the information society he had actually fallen victim to it.

He had rushed his research into publication and suffered the consequences. In setting up targets for his critique he had identified me as representing a villain whereas in fact for what he was trying to do I should actually have been portrayed as one of his heroes. He got it all wrong because he hurried. You cannot hurry good research. Time is as good a teacher if not better than the best research advisor or research methods textbook. Only fools (and hasty researchers) rush in where angels fear to tread!

My reply to this beleaguered colleague was that I bore no ill-feeling towards him and that he could send me the free copies of his book. My own emotion of sadness about this incident was linked in some odd way to his emotions of shame and embarrassment, different though they may be. But the lesson for the researcher is to be diligent and thorough in dealing with sources, especially those containing views contrary to your own. Respect researchers with opposing views!

The second emotion is **Anger**. If you lived through apartheid and then had to conduct research relating to that period you cannot avoid the emotion of anger and the challenge of how to deal with it in a responsible and mature way. I lived and worked in the townships of Cape Town, and when I conducted research on the role of librarians and books in the liberation struggle on the Cape Flats in the 1980s an underlying emotion was that of anger (Dick, 2006).

I had to record accounts of young library users that were killed by security police and of libraries and books that were burned by youth groups and often by common criminals who exploited township unrest for their own advantage. In one case, police snipers used a library's high windows to shoot at young people around the library. Working through archival material and collecting interviews from many now retired librarians and library users was often a difficult and stressful undertaking. The same feelings possessed me as I examined the task of prison censors to cut off political prisoners from the outside world by forbidding the possession of newspapers and books and snooping through their private letters.

As a researcher I often had to pull myself back from depression, from over-empathising and even from feelings of claustrophobia as I read through

many prison memoirs, diaries and letters written in jail. In my effort to acknowledge and deal with feelings of anger I began to look for the lighter and exceptional moments of that period. And there were many. For example, under the guise of chess clubs political groups met in several township libraries. Young activists learned about marxism by reading only the quotations from Marx cited in anti-marxist library books.

One librarian was actually an MK (Umkhonto we Sizwe) operative who recruited others in the library and served as a courier for the ANC. Libraries were used to hide political leaders from police, and as venues for political meetings, printing political pamphlets, making protest posters, and exchanging banned books. The library also provided its space for anti-UDF and other political groups, and continued to fulfill its library functions for all members of the community.

In the case of political prisoners, discipline and resourcefulness resulted in many of them becoming some of the best informed and most well read people in the country at that time. They were, for example, resourceful in their reading techniques. One prisoner confirmed the rumour among prisoners that the Sasol oil refinery plant had been successfully sabotaged by reading about the financial losses of a Sasol subsidiary company in the business section of a smuggled newspaper.

Newspapers were often smuggled or stolen from the bags of priests and pastors visiting Robben Island while they were praying. Several prisoners rolled cigarettes and zolls with the pages of pocket edition New Testaments of the Bible, which were the best size and weight – this of course led to the smoke of many burnt offerings not entirely of a devotional kind. One prisoner actually used a book about a daring prison escape to actually organize a successful breakout from Pretoria Central. And there are many other examples.

The lesson is that anger can drive your research energies but when anger overtakes you the result could be something like the emotion of blinding road rage - you lose focus and often inflict harm. The first research ethical guideline for me is also the well-known DO NO HARM! Finding the truth and telling it is not the same as writing in anger, and learning the difference between the two requires tact, patience and practice.



The third emotion is Excitement, which is linked with the primary emotion of happiness. It is what I like to think of as the thrill of research. There are of course many moments of research excitement – success with your masters dissertation or doctoral thesis, seeing your name in a research journal for the first time, publicly presenting your research at a conference, getting research awards or a research grant, and so forth.

For me the real excitement is either stumbling across something unexpectedly or confirming a hunch that I have in my research. Let me provide an example of what I mean by the latter. They often say in sporting circles that you make your own luck. In research circles, it is the trained or sharply focused mind that often makes a valuable finding based on a hunch or a suspicion.

When I looked into the professional life of the founder of Unisa's Department of LIS I discovered genius, intrigue and evil all mixed together in a fascinating intellectual biography. H.J. de Vleeschauer was an internationally acclaimed scholar of the German philosopher, Immanuel Kant. He was at one time the head of both the Departments of philosophy and library science at Unisa. He started the well-known journal *Mousaion*, which still survives today, and could speak and write in about 5 or 6 languages.

But he had escaped to South Africa just after the end of the Second World War when he was condemned to death by the Belgian government for promoting the aims of the Nazi occupying forces as Minister of Education. In his correspondence with unsurprisingly sympathetic Nationalist government officials to gain entry to South Africa he mentioned his unique personal library that he had accumulated over many years. He argued that this collection of books would be a contribution to academic scholarship and researchers in South Africa.

He arrived here via Switzerland to which he had escaped from Belgium with forged identity papers, and even tried out the surname of De Villiers for a few years as a South African surname close to his own De Vleeschauer. He brought his personal library with him, and donated it to the old Randse Afrikaanse Universiteit (RAU) library where it now sits in the Rare Book Collection of the recently merged University of Johannesburg (UJ). Given the dark and hidden areas of his intriguing life, I had always wondered how he

had developed this collection of books that he so openly boasted about to apartheid government officials.

As Minister of Education in occupied Belgium he would have had the opportunity to gain access to the libraries and private collections of Belgian Jews who were sent off to labour or concentration and extermination camps. There were claims that he had personally denounced Jews in spite of his own claim that he had actually saved many from certain death. I had a suspicion that his collection included books of unfortunate holocaust victims and looted libraries. For over more than three years since I published an article on him in a history journal (Dick, 2002b), I was possessed with this suspicion but could never get around to confirm it.

Then just last week I made the trip to the Rare Books Collection at UJ. You cannot imagine the thrill I experienced when I discovered several books dating from the period of the Second World War and some unique older philosophical works with the original ownership signatures on title pages or flyleaves that had been neatly cut away. Some of these excisions were poorly done so that one could still detect part of the original author's name and surname. The Rare Books librarian at the UJ informed me that those cuts were there when the books were catalogued for the Rare Books collection and she had always wondered what the meaning of this was.

All of this leads me to ask: Why were the names of previous owners cut out of these books? Is this normal practice when one acquires a second-hand book? What or whose identity was being hidden from view? Does the de Vleeschauwer collection contain the books of holocaust victims whose personal libraries were pillaged? Was he personally involved in this and perhaps other instances of the looting of books and theft of cultural property from Belgian Jews?

I still have much work to do on this project, but the thrill of finding what I had suspected for a number of years will supply the energy to see it through to its completion. I can add other emotions and experiences but the point I make is that as researchers we need to acknowledge our emotions and learn how to manage them and make them work to improve the quality of our research. Emotions can be a mirror that holds up to our view our own prejudices and taken-for-granted beliefs and assumptions.

At the most specific level, emotions affect the LIS researcher in the mechanics of data gathering. At a more general level, emotions affect the LIS researcher in decisions about which topics to investigate or leave for others. At the broadest level, emotions affect the LIS researcher in self-examination and personal growth. By recognizing instead of marginalizing emotions we begin to view research practice as not just a voyage of discovery of things about the world of LIS. It is also a voyage of self-discovery.

## References

- Burman, E. 2006. Emotions and reflexivity in feminised education action research. *Educational Action Research*, 14(3): 315-32.
- Cylwik, H. 2001. Notes from the field: emotions of place in the production and interpretation of text. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 4(3): 243-50.
- Dick, A.L. 1991. The influence of positivism on the design of scientific techniques: implications for library and information science research. *South African Journal for Library and Information Science*, 59(4): 231-9.
- Dick, A.L. 1993. Three paths to inquiry in library and information science: positivist, constructivist and critical theory approaches. *South African Journal of Library and Information Science*, 61(2): 53-60.
- Dick, A.L. 1995a. Library and Information Science as a social science: neutral and normative conceptions. *The Library Quarterly*, 65(2): 216- 35.
- Dick, A.L. & Burger, M. 1995b. Transforming subject access: some critical issues for South African information professionals. *South African Journal of Library and Information Science*, 63(2): 65-9.
- Dick, A.L. 2002a. Social epistemology, information science and ideology. *Social Epistemology*, 16(1): 23-35.
- Dick, A.L. 2002b. Scholarship, identity and lies: the political life of HJ de Vleeschauer, 1940-1955, *Kleio*, 34: 5-27.
- Dick, A.L. 2006. Struggle libraries under cover. *Cape Librarian*, 50(3): 10-14.
- Fisher, K.E., Erdelez, S. & Mckechnie, L. (eds). 2005. **Theories of Information Behavior**. Medford, New Jersey: Information Today, Inc.
- Hallowell, N., Lawton, J. & Gregory, S. (eds). 2005. **Reflections on Research: The Realities of doing Research in the Social Sciences**. Berkshire: Open University Press.

Hubbard, G., Backett-Milburn, K & Kemmer, D. 2001. Working with emotion: issues for the researcher in fieldwork and teamwork. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 4(2): 119-37.

Turner, J.H. & Stets, J.E. 2005. **The Sociology of Emotions**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.