

What it took: Reflections on the GRACE Research Journey

Keynote address at the Launch of African Women and ICTs: Investigating Technology, Gender and Empowerment, at the UNISA Library in Pretoria, 7 September 2009.

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Good morning ladies and gentlemen, colleagues and friends...

I want to thank UNISA, especially the UNISA Library and the UNISA Press staff, for organising this launch and for inviting me to speak at this event.
I am honoured.

I want to start by sharing with you that Pretoria means something special to me: my first professional adventure after my husband and I arrived here in 1990 from Brazil, started right here at the Human Sciences Research Council, at the Centre for Research Methodology, of which I became head in 1991, a position I held for five years. Thanks to those very challenging and enriching years, I was able to establish my consultancy Research For the Future in 1996, which eventually led to my involvement with GRACE, the Gender Research Networks that focus on the use of ICTs for Empowerment in Africa and Arab countries. So in a way, I am a home girl reporting back to home.

I am proud of our book.
Very proud.

I am proud that we brought this very challenging journey to a good end. I am proud that we were able to transform our learnings into a product we can share with the world. I am proud of every one of us. I am also grateful to each and every one of us.

And during this little time that I have with you, I want to tell you why I think that our journey was so particularly challenging.

All of us gathered here know that knowledge is important. I do not have to tell you that. This library houses knowledge and a university press diffuses it: knowledge that comprises people's best efforts, greatest dreams and deepest worries. So indeed, which more appropriate venue could there have been for our book launch than this place?

Knowledge is about concepts and the power of concepts.

Our concepts have created the world we live in, the lives we live. Everything was a thought before it became physical reality: This library had a design before the bricks came, and our CD ROM disks needed quantum physics concepts to open up the technological pathways we now so take for granted.

Our concepts do not only shape our physical reality, they also shape our non-physical reality. Our concepts are the houses we live in, and we look out from the windows of these houses. And then we create our reality according to what we see, and this reality leads in turn to more emotions and other thoughts, which then lead to other realities - and so we can go on and on.

Sometimes we create our own concepts, but most often we inherit them, and unfortunately very often we do not question them. I will give you an example: a “mega concept” that very few people seem to question is the economic concept of “scarcity”. In a world where nature teaches us every day that we may have everything in abundance when we can be the wise stewards of ourselves and our environments, we humans have created a subsystem of economics. This of course is a subsystem to the wider biological and ecological system we live in and are a part of, that is grounded in “lack”. And when we (for instance) know that diamonds are actually destroyed in Kimberley here in South Africa so that they keep their value, this demonstrates to us where the actual reality of abundance and the artificial, man-made reality of scarcity are at odds. I do not want to go deeper into this particular concept; it is not the main focus of our being together here this morning. It is just an example that you may want to contemplate further.

What is important to realise from this example for our purpose this morning - which is about me trying to explain to you why our journey was so challenging and why I am so proud - is the fact that even in the light of this clash of “realities”, very few people would want to let go of the concept of “scarcity”. But why not? Isn’t the concept of abundance much more attractive than the concept of lack? Wouldn’t the reality we could create with the concept of abundance be much more liveable, sustainable and joyful than the concept of lack?

Indeed it would.

BUT: We human beings are creatures of habit.

We tend to be afraid of change.

When we would have to let go of the concept of lack and scarcity, maybe we would have to let go of our money system as we know it. Maybe we cannot imagine that? And something we cannot imagine will not happen. We have adapted ourselves to a sub-optimal reality in terms of our emotions, our thoughts, dreams and aspirations. And this seems to be part of the human condition. It seems to be how we function, how we operate.

A part of our being is programmable, and this part of our being is strong. There is another part of our being that can observe this programming. Sometimes this other part is strong enough to intervene and stop the programming, and then we can experience a change in our reality. Einstein once said: very few people think with their own mind and feel with their own heart. And he is right. But this does not mean that we do not have the potential to do so and strengthen our capacity to do so, when we want this and can imagine it. The way in which I see change is: what appears a miracle to the conservative part of our being appears as the common reality to the imaginative part of our being. Maybe that is why Adrienne Rich, the famous feminist poet, once said: “Change is the only poem”.

Now to our book.

Our book is about women and about women empowerment.

African Women and ICTs: Investigating Technology, gender and empowerment.

That is what we did indeed.

Women live in a men’s world still.

We have grown up in images that strengthen the male experience of our world.

From the room of my guesthouse this morning, I saw a huge soccer ball wrapped around the telecommunication tower. And I wondered, in a world of partnership where women and women's realities would count as much as men and men's realities, would there be such hype about a game like soccer?¹ Because, with all the costs ... what will it really contribute to the well-being of the people in this country? But let's not go into that, another topic altogether again.

Back to women and their thinking and our book.

Women are, like all human beings, perfectly capable of rationalising something that is not good for them into something so good for them that they cannot let go of it.

The most dramatic example is of course Female Genital Mutilation, that is perpetrated by women on women, who of course are socialised (brain-washed?) into believing that this is the right thing to do.

But we find many less dramatic examples in our daily lives. And because they are so "normal" to us, we do not question them.

What this means for research is the following:

When we do research with women, and we merely focus on their lived realities and their perceptions of their lived realities - without contesting their knowledge as to whether it really serves their dreams in relation to the purpose which we [researchers and research participants] are working on together (like, for instance, empowerment through the use of Information Communication Technology) - we could, as researchers, contribute to these women's further disempowerment.

And because we in GRACE did not want to do this, because we wanted to stay true to the purpose that we set out together in Johannesburg in October 2004: Women Empowerment through the use of Information Communication Technology, we had to do research in such a way that we could create the space where women would be able to listen to the various parts of their beings, and could give voice to those different parts. And where we as researchers, could listen to them, really listen and contest. Contest in love and respect.

There is a saying by Carlos Castaneda (an anthropologist, by the way), who has Don Juan, the shaman in his books, describe a warrior as patient, ruthless, sweet and cunning. I liked that - I could see how those same qualities would be needed by researchers, especially by women researchers doing research with women. Because women researchers do share the same predicament as their female respondents: their brains are permeated with male images, concepts, thoughts and feelings. And in order to become another woman's guardian, in order to create a space for her dreams and a new and empowering reality to be worded and realised, one has to be able to do this for oneself. We all, in GRACE, had to learn how to become our own guardians, the Watchers at the Gates of our Minds.

I think we succeeded.

¹ South Africa is currently preparing for the 2010 FIFA World Cup Soccer tournament.

I think the chapter of which our Buhle is first author is a shining example. For those of you who have not read this chapter yet, I strongly advise you to do so. I will give you the gist of this chapter:

At the University of Zimbabwe in Harare, access to the free library computers was governed on the basis of the rule of first come, first served. The librarians, however, noticed that the overwhelming majority of the students using the computers were male. Asking the female students about their perspectives and experiences around access, the female students spoke about their duties as wives and mothers at home, which they had to fulfil exactly during the time at which the computers were free, and about the fact that when they lined up they ran the risk of being pushed out of the line by the male students. And while they acknowledged the first come, first served rule as democratic, fair and even empowering, at the same time they lamented that they had to put in extra efforts to get access to computers in other ways.

These female students did not have a concept, a way of thinking about this access rule that really matched their experience of this rule, the lived reality that was a consequence of this rule. When the researchers subsequently deepened their research efforts, and created opportunities for these women to face their experiences, emotions, reflections and dreams, these female students were able to bring more coherence to their thinking and acknowledge their lack of access as inconvenient and disempowering. There were, however, deviant cases - a few young women who did manage access to the computers, and the researchers needed to make sense of these research data too.

Now I want you to ask yourself what it would take, in patience, in sweetness, in cunning and in ruthlessness, to accomplish:

- Getting insight into how women constructed their lack of access to the library computers as democratic and empowering.
- Contesting this knowledge in such an empowering way that these women did realise there was another truth, a more empowering truth possible.
- Handling the paradox of the deviant cases: women who did access the computers.
- And to link the reason why the deviants were able to access the computers with a potential future for the majority of students who did not manage access, in a way that did not judge, shame or disempower students, nor the library management.

This is knowledge construction that is life-giving.

It is empowering and it will contribute to a better world.

But it is challenging indeed.

And that is why, for me, this celebration is appropriate.

That is why UNISA is indeed the right place to have it.

You may understand now why I am proud and grateful.

I am very proud of our Buhle, your Buhle, and I am grateful.

And in Buhle, I want to thank all GRACE researchers.

I came to call them the Graciousnesses.

And gracious indeed they are.

Thank you.