Reflections on Life Design Narrative Inquiry as a Methodology for Research With Child Sex Trafficking Survivors

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Abstract
At present, there is a dearth of primary data on the experiences of the child survivors of trafficking for sexual exploitation. Qualitative research methodologies are needed to help researchers and practitioners from a variety of disciplines to understand the complex issues associated with child sex trafficking (CST), to gain greater insight into the nature of this problem, and to devise strategies to combat this form of trafficking. In this article, we report on our use of a synthesized methodology, life design narrative inquiry (LDNI), as a way to generate primary data on the experiences of the survivors. This methodology enables researchers to do research with CST survivors to gain a deeper insight into the nature of trafficking to devise strategies in different disciplines to combat this form of trafficking. Reflections on employing LDNI with child trafficking survivors revealed that this methodology is context sensitive, takes on an individualistic perspective, and leads to rich descriptions of CST survivors’ experiences. Reflections on ethical challenges revealed that gaining access to CST survivors is a complex process, protecting both the participants and the researchers against harm is challenging and that keeping confidentiality of participants is extremely important.

Keywords
child trafficking, life design, methodology, narrative inquiry, sex, survivors

Introduction
The crime of human and child trafficking occurs throughout the world. Internationally, human trafficking is defined by three elements: act, means, and purpose of trafficking, whereas child trafficking is defined by two elements: act and purpose of trafficking (United Nations [UN], 2000). The different purposes of trafficking include “…the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs” (UN, 2000, p. 2). Globally, child trafficking is defined by the purpose itself and the fact that children cannot be held accountable if they “decide” to participate in their exploitation (Sanghera, 2012). In the case of children, the initiation through different means into the act of trafficking is irrelevant, but the act toward the purpose is classified as child trafficking (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2007). In this study, the focus is on trafficking of children for the purpose of sexual exploitation.

Even though the UN’s (2000) definition clearly distinguishes between child and human trafficking, qualitative research on sex trafficking that includes children and adults generally does not distinguish between the two groups. Although research has been done on sex trafficking, little of it has used primary data (Twis & Shelton, 2018; Zhang, 2016). What is more, child sex trafficking (CST) research focuses only on survivors’ experiences as children have not been sufficiently researched (De Sas Kropiwnicki, 2010; Tyldum & Brunovskis, 2005; Twis & Shelton, 2018). U.S. Department of State (2014, p. 30) argues, “[n]umbers are not always the story”; we need individual narratives such as those on survival to acquire qualitative data on trafficking.

Research on sex trafficking that overlooks the fact that CST is different from adult sex trafficking presents numerous

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conceptual challenges related to “the manner in which policies and programmes are designed to combat trafficking” (De Sas Kropiwnicki, 2010, p. 7). If rehabilitation programs for CST survivors are based on research treating adults and children as equals, then these programs might not be suited for the different developmental levels of children. Boyd and Bales (2016) argue that “[c]urrent trafficking policies and interventions are notoriously based on faulty or nonexistent data” (p. 185).

Gozdziak (2008, p. 904) further complicates the dilemma of research with children by pointing out that one should be aware that the concept “child” varies according to “social, cultural, historical, religious, and rational norms as well as according to one’s personal circumstances.” Manzo (2005) distinguishes between children on the basis of gender and age-group, which affects the purpose and place of trafficking. Age also affects the children’s developmental levels, so their treatment and needs are likely to be very different. In Gozdziak’s (2008) study, the children in the case were diverse and because of this they were treated differently by their traffickers.

To summarize, qualitative research methodologies are needed. They can aid researchers and practitioners from a variety of disciplines to understand complex issues associated with CST and thus gain greater insight into the nature of this problem and devise strategies to combat this form of trafficking. The question that this article addresses is “What do reflections of the use of life design narrative inquiry (LDNI) as a methodology reveal about the possibilities for research with CST survivors?” Our reflections on this research methodology will be weaved throughout the explanation of the theory that supports the use of such a methodology. After the theoretical background for both life design and narrative inquiry are presented, LDNI as a synthesized research methodology is discussed theoretically. The implementation of LDNI is then documented, giving particular attention to the ethical challenges involved. We conclude this article with a discussion and conclusion.

Theoretical Background on Life Design and Narrative Inquiry

In this section, we provide descriptive accounts on the theoretical background for both life design and narrative inquiry. Both life design and narrative inquiry are established fields; in this section, we give a brief background on the origin and then only focused on the elements of these theories that informed the synthesis of LDNI.

Life Design

Originally, Savickas (2012) coined life design as a new paradigm to career counseling. Savickas is the one who contributed most to the conceptualization of this paradigm, and for this reason, we relied heavily on his work. Career development methods and models had to be reconceptualized and customized to meet the self-construction and career design needs of people in this century (Savickas, 2012). Life design is more frequently understood as a counseling strategy than a research methodology. The terms “client” and “counselor” describe those involved in life design.

Relationship, reflection, sensemaking, and narratives are central to life design (Savickas, 2015). The relationship between a client and a counselor should be one between equals; the counselor works with the client and does not make decisions on behalf of the client (Maree, 2015). Counselors and clients bring their expertise and experiences to their relationship for reflective purposes (Savickas, 2015). Clients engage in autobiographical reflections through distancing themselves from their experiences, and these reflections deepen their knowledge of themselves (Savickas, 2015). After this time of reflection, clients move on to making sense of their experiences. First, they narrated an identity narrative and then engaged in adaptive action to prepare themselves for a life they want to live (Savickas, 2015). In part, sensemaking partly clarifies life’s purpose, encourages commitment to self, and fosters intentionality for the future (Savickas, 2015). The purpose of sensemaking is to encourage clients to become powerful agents in their personal narratives (Cochran, 2007). Life design is embedded in constructivist and narrative theories (Savickas, 2011). A narrative paradigm is employed as an aid to organizing client’s biographical narratives (Savickas, 2011). The informing principle of this paradigm is the importance of making connections among experiences, expectations, and explanations of the client’s narratives (Savickas, 2011).

A counselor uses three sessions to guide clients to re-author their narrative identities and project new possibilities for their future careers (Cardoso, 2016). The first session starts with the exploration of a client’s narrative by the counselor, followed by the second session of self-construction of the narrative by a client and placing the self-constructed narrative into a larger narrative and then the final session of the mutual construction (by the client and counselor) of a future narrative or life project (Maree & Symington, 2015; Savickas, 2012, 2015).

Working with individuals and their experiences in life design presents particular challenges regarding the following: counselor competence, client variables, and counselor–client relationship. A counselor needs narrative competence to facilitate the construction of narratives (Savickas et al., 2009). This competency requires counselors to enter and enable clients to be able to narrate and then to understand the client’s narratives (Savickas et al., 2009). Client variables include the severity of a problem, the complexity of a problem, and client resistance. The severity and complexity of the problems of the clients who come to the life design counseling sessions vary (Cardoso, 2016). The less capable a client is of facing the social, occupational, and interpersonal demands of life, the more severe the problem is and the more challenging it is to conduct life design counseling (Cardoso, 2016). In these cases, clients are often prisoners of redundant constructions of their experiences and cannot use alternative ways to cope (Cardoso, 2016).

Although life design has its roots in career counseling, the principles that informed life design could be useful building
blocks for a research methodology. Life design allows a participant to become actively involved in the research process. In the section on LDNI Methodology, we elaborate on how life design influences LDNI as a qualitative research methodology. Next, a theoretical background on narrative inquiry is provided.

**Narrative Inquiry**

Narrative inquiry as a methodology has a long history in social sciences research (Bamberg, 2006; Bruner, 1990, 2004; Frank, 2002; Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2011; Squire, Andrews, & Tamboukou, 2013). A researcher in narrative inquiry assumes that people make sense of experiences by imposing narrative structures on these experiences (Bell, 2002). Researchers aim to explore how people frame, remember, and report their experiences in the form of narratives (Squire et al., 2013). Pinnegar and Daynes (2007, p. 4) point our attention to the nature of narrative inquiry: That it “embraces narrative as both the method and phenomena of study.”

Traditional research methods did not sufficiently address the multiplicity of perspectives, complexities, and human centeredness. This led to the increased use of narrative inquiry across disciplines to address these issues (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Narrative inquiry was informed by structuralist theories, post-structuralist theories, deconstructionism, feminism, psychoanalysis, film theories, historicists, psycholinguistic theories, postmodernism, and humanist approaches (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007; Squire et al., 2013; Webster & Mertova, 2007). Therefore, researchers philosophically position their narrative inquiries in different modernistic and postmodernist discourses (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

Narrative methodologies could also be positioned according to the narrative turn researchers take when employing these methodologies (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). The first turn is based on the change in relationship between the researcher and participant (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). In the second turn, the researcher moves away from numbers and toward the use of words as data (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). In the third turn, the researcher focuses locally and specific rather than on the general and universal (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). The fourth turn enables the researcher to have a widening in accepting alternative epistemologies (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). In the section LDNI Methodology, we elaborate on and justify which modernistic discourses as well as narrative turns underpin the LDNI methodology.

Narrative inquiry is useful to initiate personal and social change (Chase, 2011). Some researchers study how narratives bring about personal and social change and others collect and analyze narratives to initiate personal and/or social change (Chase, 2011). The act of narrating a significant life event could in itself already facilitate positive change for a participant (Chase, 2011). Participants might have a desire and need for others to hear their stories so as to initiate social change (Chase, 2011).

Due to the nature of narrative inquiry, the researcher faces several challenges when employing this type of methodology, including the relationship between participant and researcher, ethics, interpretation and validity, and representation of narratives (Bell, 2002; Chase, 2011; Elliot, 2005; Gay et al., 2011; Gristy, 2015; Josselson, 2007; Webster and Mertova, 2007).

**Ethics.** The ethics surrounding narrative inquiry is vast: Hence, Josselson (2007) recommends a researcher adopts an ethical attitude. An ethical attitude requires the researcher to think through ethical considerations, deciding how to best honor and protect participants while maintaining standards for responsible scholarship (Josselson, 2007).

**Interpretation and validity.** The validity of narrative inquiry is frequently questioned (Chase, 2011). This is because the researchers’ interpretation of the narratives is not the only possibility. When researchers interpret and analyze participants’ narratives, they impose meaning on participants’ experiences (Bell, 2002). For interpretations to be valid, they need to be plausible interpretations that are true to the narratives (Chase, 2011).

**Representation of narratives.** Any form of oral or written data that involve people necessitate that researchers represent the narratives (Gristy, 2015). This happens when researchers redescribe original narratives and reconstruct their meaning (Mishler as quoted in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A researcher reorders a narrative and inevitably generates a new narrative (Byrne, 2017). Therefore, researchers are coauthors of participants’ narratives, either directly during interviews or indirectly when they represent and reconstruct the narratives (Mishler as quoted in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Webster and Mertova (2007) argue that personal narratives are not meant to be exact records of events, mirrors of the world, generalized productions of truths, or descriptions of how things should be.

The challenges described above should not be viewed in isolation because the borders between these challenges are porous. For example, ethical challenges that emerge during a study are interlaced with all of the other challenges that manifest themselves. In the next section, we discuss how narrative inquiry informs the synthesis of LDNI as a research methodology with CST survivors.

**LDNI Methodology**

Both life design and narrative inquiry are qualitative approaches, which inform the synthesis of LDNI. In this section, we first provide a theoretical discussion of how the LDNI methodology was synthesized. In the section “Employing
LDNI With CST Survivors,” we provide an account of how this methodology was employed.

The aim of life design is the construction of a career narrative, whereas narrative inquiry aims to generate narratives in a research study and could be conducted in a wider variety of contexts than life design. In life design, a client makes an appointment with a career counselor, and in narrative inquiry, a researcher invites someone to participate in a study. LDNI is informed by narrative discourses such as narrative inquiry, narrative counseling, and narrative therapy. The nature of doing research with CST survivors calls to blur the borders between psychological and sociological narrative forms of inquiry—this blurring allowed us to generate LDNI as a research methodology. This research methodology is not intended as a counseling or therapeutic model.

LDNI is rooted in the elements of life design, namely relationship, reflection, sensemaking, and narrative. A rapport with the participant is essential for LDNI to be successful. A researcher should enter into the participants’ environments and stay there as long as necessary to build an authentic relationship and to complete the data generation. This methodology encourages participants to engage in making sense of their experiences. They do this through reflection, narration, and forming future intentions. The researcher encourages them to reflect by asking guiding questions to deepen the participant’s knowledge about their own lives. They are encouraged to interpret their experiences in multiple ways and are provided with the opportunity to view themselves as powerful agents in their personal narratives, reflect independently and continuously on their lives, explore alternative futures, and design their own lives.

The synthesis of LDNI was informed by critical theory, a modernistic paradigm. The ontology of critical theory is based on the assumption that human nature operates in a world based on a struggle for power (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). Critical theory views reality as subjective and constructed on the basis of issues of power (Lather, 2006).

Politics shape multiple beliefs and values, which are socially constructed: Some views of reality are therefore privileged and others are underrepresented (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). The epistemology of critical theory relates to research driven by studies on social structures, freedom and oppression, as well as power and control (Lincoln et al., 2011). In these studies, events are understood within economic and social contexts where ideological critique and praxis are emphasized (Henning, Van Rensburg, & Smit, 2004). Knowledge is then constructed through a dialectical process of deconstructing and reconstructing the world (Henning et al., 2004). Underlying these studies is the belief that the knowledge produced could change existing oppressive structures and remove oppression through empowerment (Lincoln et al., 2011). The methodology employed in critical theory seeks greater participation of the oppressed (Lincoln et al., 2011). A basic assumption is that produced knowledge can change oppressive structures and remove oppression through empowerment (Lincoln et al., 2011). Drawing on critical theory, researchers explore discourses and how they manifest in participants’ lives (Henning et al., 2004). This is done to foreground the power of the discourses that shape the participants’ lives (Henning et al., 2004).

Critical theory emphasizes the collaboration between a researcher and participants (Henning et al., 2004, p. 24). Here, LDNI is also underpinned by principles in the first narrative turn, where LDNI recognizes that the researcher and participant in a particular study are in a relationship and that both parties will learn and change through the study (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). Participants become involved in the research process as equal partners (Henning et al., 2004). Both the participant and researcher are considered experts. The participant is the expert on their own life narratives and future aspirations, while the researcher is the expert in conceptualizing a research problem and conducting empirical research. The participant and researcher engage in data generation as partners, therefore their relationship should be characterized by mutual trust, care, respect, and equality of voice. Only when this relationship is established, can the participant and researcher venture into the four LDNI phases (see Figure 1).

In Figure 1, the LDNI phases are illustrated. The four phases are embedded in the three sessions utilized in life design. The participatory nature of this methodology empowers participants to choose the order of the phases, and therefore, these phases are executed in a dynamic nonlinear personalized way. In life design counseling, three sessions follow each other but should be executed in a nonlinear way.

For LDNI, as we have conceptualized it, the narration of narratives in each phase is crucial, both as a process and as an outcome. Data are generated throughout the following four LDNI phases.

**Phase 1: Contextualization.** This phase forms the contextualization of the space in which participants generate narratives. Through contextualization, researchers gain insight into participants’ current situation in a particular research environment.

![Figure 1. Life design narrative inquiry methodology.](image)
Employing LDNI With CST Survivors

This study forms part of a larger project where the principal researcher explored the experiences using LDNI for the first time. One of its greatest impacts was making a contribution to methodologies that could be used when working with CST survivors (Visser, 2018). In 2016, the principal researcher gained access to a southern African safe house for trafficking survivors including CST survivors who were adults at the time of their rescue; she stayed in that safe house for 2 weeks. During that period, she focused on building a rapport with the safe house manager, safe house counselor, and survivors of trafficking. The safe house’s counselor was involved in the study as none of the researchers were trained as professional counselors. To substantially reduce the possibility of retraumatization, only survivors who had already dealt with their traumatic past were considered as participants. Possible participants were identified by the safe house counselor and invited by the safe house manager. Two survivors, Maya (pseudonym) and Carla (pseudonym) accepted the invitation.

The principal researcher explained the purpose of the study, data generation methods, and ethical aspects of the study to the participants in their mother tongue. Thereafter, the participants provided the principal researcher with informed consent, and they set out together on this research journey.

Data were generated by means of a semistructured interview with the safe house manager (Phase 1), narrative interviews with Maya and Carla (Phases 2 and 3), and the researcher’s journal. During Phases 2–4, the safe house manager participated as a third party to protect the participants from potential psychological harm and to censor confidential information.

Maya participated through three interviews. Her first interview was 11 min and 9 s. In this interview, she attempted to engage with the first LDNI phase. She asked for a follow-up interview. Her second interview was 10 min and 21 s long, and in it, she decided to engage with the third and fourth LDNI phases. Her final interview was 24 min and 28 s; in it, she asked the safe house manager to narrate her life story on her behalf. She only answered clarification questions during the final interview.

Carla participated through two interviews. Her first interview was 30 min and 11 s long. In this interview, she engaged with the fourth and then third LDNI phases. Her second interview was 17 min and 45 s long, and in this interview, she engaged with the second LDNI phase.

In what follows, we provide the main findings on the contributions the participants made regarding doing research with the researcher.

**Interview space and time.** All interviews were conducted in the safe house. The layout of the safe house meant that there was little space for private conversation. Anyone speaking could be heard throughout the safe house. The safe house manager chose for the interviews to take place in her personal room and before bedtime. This was problematic for Maya. She felt reluctant to narrate her story in this space and at this time because she
feared that the other residents in the safe house might overhear her. She preferred to be in a private space where no one else would hear her. She said that it was difficult for her to speak to more than one person at a time and that she would prefer to have the interviews in a place where no one else would be able to hear her speak. Unfortunately, it was not possible for the principal researcher to conduct interviews alone with her because of ethical concerns mentioned earlier. Carla did not seem to feel uncomfortable about the venue or that others might hear her.

Here, we learn that the participants’ need to feel safe during a narrative interview is of utmost importance. A narrative interview should be taking place where participants feel comfortable and safe (Berg & Lune, 2014). If the participants do not feel safe, it could inhibit generating thick descriptions of their experiences.

**Initiating social change through narratives.** Both participants hoped that others could learn from their narratives and become alert to the warning signs of becoming a victim of trafficking. Carla said: “I hope to help people that went through the same as I did, that got hurt as I did.” Maya said: “I know that it will make a difference in other people’s lives so that is the positive thing that comes of the negative.”

One of the major reasons the principal researcher gained access to the safe house was the safe house’s vision for social change. The participants seemed to share in this vision. Through disclosing their narratives, they aspired to initiate social change—this is supported by Chase (2011).

**LDNI nonlinear, personal approach.** LDNI responds to each participant’s reality by taking on an individual approach. The nonlinearity of the methodology enabled participants to be actively involved in the research process. They reordered the LDNI phases, so that the principal researcher would be able to understand their life narratives in the context of their re-authored and future narratives. Maya said: “The most difficult is probably to tell your whole story to someone that is why I chose to do it last. I first told you about my dreams and then about what I would have wanted to change and then I will tell you my story, then maybe you would understand.”

The principal researcher first had to build a rapport with the participants before they trusted her and were willing to engage with her in LDNI. This need for a rapport shows the importance of positioning LDNI in the first narrative turn (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007).

LDNI is an individualistic approach where the researcher and the participant have equal roles in the data generation process. This is supported by the nonlinear nature of this methodology and resonates with critical theory as well as the first narrative turn in which the researcher and participant are in an equal partnership (Henning et al., 2004; Lather, 2006; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). Through LDNI, the participants were provided the opportunity to view themselves as powerful agents in their personal narratives (Cochran, 2007).

**Contextualization phase.** During the contextualization phase, the principal researcher relied on interviews with role-players in the safe house. These interviews aided in describing the research environment as the context in which the interviews took place. Confidentiality and safety measures meant that the researcher could not report all of the information provided by the participants and role-players. To maintain confidentiality, the principal researcher had to carefully select data that would not cause the safe house and role-players involved to be identified.

Through employing LDNI, we learned that this methodology is strongly influenced by context. The context in which the principle researcher employed the research, together with ethical considerations, determined when, how, where, in which circumstances, and for how long the principle researcher could conduct narrative interviews. In this study, the contextualization phase played the cornerstone for providing the context in which the narratives were generated (Gay et al., 2011). The context of narrating played a large role on the generation of thick descriptions. In the Ethical Challenges subsection, the implications of access and rules on the generation of thick descriptions in narratives are explained in more detail.

**Exploration phase.** The exploration phase was started with the narrative prompt “what is your life narrative?”. During the exploration phase, it seemed that Maya consciously suppressed the moment of beginning her life narrative, and she asked the safe house manager to do the narration on her behalf. At the age of 6, she was a CST victim. She listened to her own life narrative and answered clarification questions toward the end of the interview. Carla was exposed to trafficking from the age of 14. Although Carla seemed to be readier to narrate her life narrative, she did not commence telling her life narrative. On one occasion though, Carla enthusiastically narrated her life narrative without being conscious of what she shared. The safe house manager intervened, “Stop! No, you cannot give that information.” Shortly after this interruption, Carla ended the interview and some valuable data were lost.

The safe house manager played a role in both censoring the narratives that were generated as well as to provide the researcher with access to the participants. Through censoring the narratives, the safe house manager influenced the representation of the narratives. The principal researcher had to further censor the narratives as well as to represent and redescribe the original narratives, which results in the reconstruction of the narratives (Byrne, 2017).

**Reconstruction phase.** The reconstruction phase commenced with the narrative prompt: “If it was possible, would you change your life narrative? If you say yes, how? If you say no, why?” During the reconstruction phase, Maya was ambivalent about her experiences. She wanted to be the person she was and did not want to change her experiences if it meant that she would no longer be the person she was on the day of the interview. She said: “There is a lot that I would change... and not everything I went through because then I probably would
not have been who I am and I would not have been able to know what to look out for in life and to know what is wrong.” She wanted to change her mother’s active involvement in her becoming a CST victim: “I would want to change my mother’s decisions when I was smaller because I think then everything would not have turned out the way it did.” Carla mentioned that she wondered what would have happened to her if she had had different experiences. She said: “Maybe I could have been a who knows what overseas, but it did not happen. I wonder about it, but it did not happen.” It seemed that to her the reality of her current situation was more important than changing her past.

During this phase, the participants were invited to reflect, be critical, and make sense of their experiences (Savickas, 2015). Theoretically, it would be more advantageous if the participants would first engage with the reconstruction phase before continuing with the construction phase. However, in the case of this study, Carla first did the construction phase and then the reconstruction phase, whereas Maya did the reconstruction phase first and then the construction phase. Maya could identify some elements in her past that she would want to change, and Carla found it more important to think about what is than about what could have been. This in itself is a significant finding, and we will elaborate on this finding more in the construction phase.

Construction phase. The construction phase initially commenced with the narrative prompt: “Where do you see yourself in 5 years?” Participants found narrating their future narratives challenging in the construction phase. As a result, they and the principal researcher changed the narrative prompt of this phase to “What are your future dreams?” Maya did not dream about the future. She said that one is always disappointed in one’s dreams about the future, and so there was no point in creating high expectations. She said: “At the moment I don’t think so far ahead. I literally take life day-by-day. I am also the type of person if I have to think too far ahead then I stress about things that did not happen yet . . . Even when I know I do not have to stress about something then I stress anyway about it, so I do not want to think too much . . . . many times I think more about the past than about the future.” Nonetheless, she did have some dreams that she revealed after some prompting by the principal researcher. She said: “My biggest dream or wish is not to be like my mother . . . . I think my dream would always be to work with children or with animals . . . . but small children . . . .”

Carla found it challenging to think about her future. One reason was connected to her drug addiction and experience of time. When she was consuming drugs, it felt to her as if a month went by as fast as snapping her fingers, and it would be better for her to see how her life was passing her by. When she began to sober up, it felt as if time was dragging and she considered life week by week or month by month. This made her feel overwhelmed, and it could have made her to fall back into drug addiction. She said: “Especially in my situation, you lived from day-to-day and now you have to think a month ahead, it makes you crazy, it makes that you would really just mess up again, I mean flip it, it sounds too much and it sounds too hard.” Carla had dreams and ideas about her future but did not know what to do with these and whether they would be fulfilled. She was waiting for her Christian God to show her where to go. She shared dreams to become a hairdresser or a photographer and said that before the interview, she had not really considered having a job and studying because she took everyday as it would come.

As mentioned above, Carla first engages with the construction phase and then moved on to the reconstruction phase. It seemed that Carla had some ideas for her future yet could not think about changing her past and how her past could connect to an alternative future. The opposite is true for Maya. In Maya’s reconstruction and construction phase, a common theme emerged, namely, being a mother. In the reconstruction phase, she wanted to change her mother’s active involvement in her becoming a trafficking victim, and in the construction phase, she wished to not be like her mother.

It seems that both participants engaged with sensemaking of their lives and the prospects of having an alternative future, as per Savickas (2015). The construction phase encouraged participants to engage with sensemaking so as to enable them to become more powerful agents of their personal narratives, as also stated by Cochran (2007).

CST survivors are a high-risk group, and special care needs to be taken to meet the requirements of ethical research and developing an ethical attitude. Below are some of the ethical challenges a researcher might face when employing LDNI with CST survivors.

Ethical Challenges When Employing LDNI Methodology With CST Survivors. Conducting research with CST survivors is a sensitive and complex research area that requires well-thought-through ethical considerations. Below, we discuss some of the challenges the principle researcher faced. Although these challenges are described separately, the boundaries between the challenges are blurred.

Gatekeepers: Access and rules. CST research environments are often hidden, and it takes time to identify possible safe houses and a main obstacle is to gain access to them (Goździak, 2008). Access was formally provided to the principal researcher, and she made regular contact with the government safe houses for a period of 2 years, yet she had no success in securing interviews with CST survivors. She then pursued other possibilities and found another safe house. She built rapport with gatekeepers at this safe house and was able to show them how her study could benefit CST survivors as well as future at-risk children (Van Dyke, 2013). She was provided access to the safe house, conditional on her obeying specific rules while conducting research with participants. One of these rules was that the safe house manager censored all the information (especially the information that could jeopardize participants’ court cases) provided to the principal researcher. Another rule was that the
safe house manager was present in interviews to ensure that participants did not experience psychological harm. Although these rules were an important safety measure, they constrained the generation of thick uncensored descriptions of participants’ experiences. Here, the principal researcher acted in the best interest of the participants and obeyed these rules.

**Informed consent.** Informed consent is an elusive matter relating to the protection of the participant against harm, as well as issues of confidentiality. The principal researcher provided participants with detailed informed consent letters. These letters provided information on the purpose of the study and addressed issues such as confidentiality, audio recording, storage of data, expectations, voluntary participation, measures in case of inconvenience, results, and identification of researchers. She explained the content of the informed consent letter to the participants in their mother tongue. They all freely provided her with an informed consent.

When minor participants are involved, gaining informed consent is a much more complex process. A researcher first has to gain permission from relevant authorities and a parent or guardian to gain access to the minor CST survivor. Thereafter, the minor may not be coerced to give informed consent (Kelly & Coy, 2016).

**Harm: Protecting the participant.** Traditionally, harm in terms of participants includes physical, emotional, or psychological aspects (Berg & Lune, 2014). Ethics committees make a judgment in advance on whether a study could harm the participant(s) (Lewis, 2016). When ethics committees emphasize that harm of any kind is unacceptable, they often do so without taking account of wider concepts of distributive justice (Easton & Matthews, 2016). Zhang (2016) argues that when ethics committees make a judgment regarding a study, they censor the data. In addition to censoring data, the hidden message of this judgment is that participants are vulnerable and in need of protection, while researchers are superior to the participants and need to protect them (Zhang, 2016). Research should rather propose strategies to empower participants rather than the ones that simply protect them (Zhang, 2016).

A researcher would find it extremely difficult to provide assurance that no harm is possible (Boyd & Bales, 2016). It is easier to project research practices where harmful consequences are unintentional (Boyd & Bales, 2016). Researchers should consider what will provide the greatest benefit to society (Easton & Matthews, 2016) and what has the least risk of unintended harmful consequences for participants. It has to be acknowledged that outcomes of qualitative research are more likely to cause harm to them than outcomes of reports that are less personal, contextualized, or detailed (Richards, 2015).

The arguments above point to the tension between researchers who are conducting research in an ethical way and micro-management by committees that supposedly know what is best for CST survivors. When an ethics committee denies a researcher permission to conduct research with CST survivors based on arguments that a proposed study might be harmful to participants, they deny potential participants the right to choose to participate in a study, censor their experiences, and silence their voices.

In this study, the safe house’s role-players assessed the possible harm that CST survivors might have faced through LDNI. Based on this assessment, the CST survivors with the least chances of experiencing harm were invited to participate in the research. Participants were explicitly assured that they were in control of what they narrated and they were not pressurized to share memories. The study did not cause its participants to experience harm. Both Maya and Carla seemed to have experienced emotional discomfort in separate interviews. Upon noticing the emotional discomfort, the principal researcher immediately asked the participants whether they would want to end the interview. These interviews were ended, and the safe house manager had made sure that the participants had had a debriefing session after the interviews had been ended.

**Harm: Protecting the researcher.** Ethics committees often do not take into consideration the complex moral and ethical dilemmas researchers are confronted with throughout their studies, which must be resolved case by case (Horning & Paladino, 2016; Lewis, 2016). Research ethics generally focus on the impact of the study on participants rather than the impact of the study on the researcher (Easton & Matthews, 2016).

A researcher might be affected by vicarious trauma resulting in them experiencing the same signs and symptoms of trauma as their participants, such as anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder (Easton & Matthews, 2016). They could experience countertransference while they would have their own responses to and defenses against the range of experiences participants share with them (Easton & Matthews, 2016). Their ongoing and repeated contact with traumatic material through literature reviews, data generation, transcribing data, analyzing data, and writing up reports could also prove traumatic (Easton & Matthews, 2016).

Researchers’ emotions are important in relation to their ethical conduct of research on traumatic topics, especially since their emotional responses can directly affect the outcomes of their research through influencing data generation, analysis, and reporting of findings (Easton & Matthews, 2016). When researchers distance themselves from participants, it could potentially cause harm because of what may be perceived as a lack of empathy—but when researchers overidentify with participants, they might attempt to help them, thus breaching professional boundaries (Easton & Matthews, 2016). In most cases, researchers do not have the expertise to rescue or counsel survivors and should not try to intervene because this could cause harm to the survivors (De Wildt, 2016). Therefore, researchers need to find professional emotional support and to practice reflexivity to protect their participants and themselves from harm (Easton & Matthews, 2016).

In this study, the principal researcher experienced vicarious trauma. She, firstly, identified with the participants’ emotions. Also, she experienced blurred boundaries and later had to seek advice from professional persons to remind her of her role as a
researcher. While she was transcribing the data during data analysis and after analysis, it felt to the primary researcher as if the participants continued to live in her mind.

Due to the trauma and stress mentioned above that the primary researcher had undergone, she chose to stay away from her data analysis for 6 months and to rather focus on the literature review for the bigger project before continuing with data analysis. During the data analysis stage of the research project, she appointed an independent coder to enhance the trustworthiness of the data analysis.

Confidentiality. Confidentiality becomes more contentious in research on CST (Kelly & Coy, 2016). Informed consent includes explaining the limits of anonymity and confidentiality to participants, so that they are clear about when and how their information might be shared or when their identity might become known and to whom (Easton & Matthews, 2016). Matters of confidentiality are complex. In some countries, a researcher might be legally required to disclose information participants shared with the researcher (Siegel & De Wildt, 2016). This means that legally the researcher might not have the ability to ensure confidentiality at all times (Siegel & De Wildt, 2016). In the country where the study was conducted, there are strict legal requirements about the access and disclosure of information survivors provide the principal researcher. If they do not strictly adhere to these instructions, researchers could be guilty of an offence.

If the participants’ confidentiality is breached, it could place them at risk of the traffickers becoming aware of their whereabouts, which could make “them vulnerable to violence, further exploitation and even re-trafficking” (Easton & Matthews, 2016, p. 28). They might feel anxious at the idea that others might be able to identify them based on research reports (Easton & Matthews, 2016). One reason for feeling anxious about being identified is that they are ashamed of their experiences and fear stigmatization (Easton & Matthews, 2016). When confidentiality is ensured, it encourages trust between the participant and researcher, as well as open and honest accounts (Kelly & Coy, 2016).

In this particular research, the principal researcher used data cleaning to remove details and elements that might have made it possible to identify participants’ identities from the data to ensure confidentiality and avoid potential harm (Berg & Lune, 2014; Sotuku & Duku, 2015). If she had not done the data cleaning carefully, then accidental deductive disclosure might have taken place (Sotuku & Duku, 2015). Qualitative researchers are more vulnerable to deductive disclosure than quantitative researchers because of the nature of rich descriptions and the research environment (Sotuku & Duku, 2015).

Discussion

This methodology could be time-consuming, especially where vulnerable people, such as CST survivors, are involved. It is thus essential during the proposal stage to consider all the ethical aspects needed to make the study successful.

After establishing the research problem, gaining access to participants is one of the first ethical challenges to meet. Establishing a relationship based on trust with gatekeepers is essential. Once the trust of gatekeepers has been gained, researchers need to spend quality time to build a rapport with possible participants. A researcher should be open and honest with gatekeepers and participants about the purpose and expectations of their study.

From Lewis’ (2016) experience, it is vital to clearly explain all aspects of a study to a participant, before attempting to gain informed verbal consent to audio record the interview. Before the interview, the researcher should provide the participant with a letter that clearly sets out the salient aspects of the research, including exactly what will be recorded in the interview (Lewis, 2016). This is to ensure that the participants’ decision to give their consent to take part in the research is fully informed.

There should also be full provision for the participants to reflect on what they said during the interview and to be able to redact some of the information they shared during the interview (Lewis, 2016). Researchers should not compromise participants’ confidentiality in any way, should stringently ensure that they meet all of the relevant legal requirements, and should be meticulous about data cleaning.

When research is well designed and reflexive, it has the power to minimize harm and to recognize and respond to the participants’ needs (Easton & Matthews, 2016). Their well-being should be regarded as more important than the study at all times. At the commencement of data generation, researchers should clearly describe their role in the research process and establish at an early stage that they are not a counselor or therapist to the participants. It is important to refer them to a professional person rather than to intervene themselves. A researcher should create a physically and emotionally safe space for interviews with participants at a convenient time of the day (Easton & Matthews, 2016; Lewis, 2016). Interviews should be spaced out to ensure time for reflection for both participants and the researcher (Kelly & Coy, 2016). To protect the participant(s) and researcher from harm, the participant’s counselor or psychologist could be invited to sit in on the interviews, so that they could intervene if needed.

Researchers need to carefully prepare themselves mentally for employing research on CST. They have to be cognizant of their own psychological well-being and actively reach out for and receive psychological care when needed. Siegel (2016) provides three rules to protect a researcher against harm: to keep a distance from participants by remaining an outsider; to know one’s limits and explain these limits to participants; and never to provide information to anyone, even research outputs, that could harm participants. Sessions with a psychologist before, during, and after data generation and data analysis would be helpful to minimize psychological harm for a researcher. The researcher should take some time off after data generation and before data analysis (Kelly & Coy, 2016).

Each LDNI phase poses its own challenges. It is important to be realistic about the aims of LDNI studies and realize that it
might be more difficult for traumatized participants to engage in the process of exploring, reconstructing, and constructing narratives. They should be encouraged to be reflective and be given time to process their thoughts. In some cases, a follow-up interview should be scheduled, and some participants would need more than one interview for each phase of LDNI. These types of narratives should not be the only aim of an LDNI study. It would be an academic fallacy to assume that reconstruction such as a constructivist enterprise is not impacted by the real events that led to the participant’s status as a CST survivor. The possibility that those events can never be reconstructed beyond a particular point, as they were essentially damaging and negative. Other aims of LDNI could be to provide participants with the opportunity to speak, to be heard, to reflect on their experiences, to become aware of their choices, and to identify how to change future choices.

A strength of LDNI is the complementary phases of data generation, which contribute to rich descriptions of CST survivors’ experiences. Data generated through this methodology address the need for primary data on the experiences of CST survivors. This methodology seems to have the potential to empower participants to be active agents in the research process. It opens up new possibilities for CST survivors to reconstruct their past, to interpret it in different ways, and to construct future aspirations. LDNI seems to be an effective means of generating data on the experiences of CST survivors. It creates an opportunity for participants to make a personal change and also to initiate social change. Researchers and practitioners from diverse disciplines can apply LDNI to gain a deeper understanding of CST survivors’ experiences and consequently initiate social change to combat CST.

Conclusion
In this article, we highlighted the possibility of synthesizing life design with narrative inquiry as a research methodology for conducting research with CST survivors. Reflections on LDNI revealed that it was essential to adopt an individual approach in research with CST survivors. CST survivors who participate should be provided with a safe space to narrate their narratives to enable them to be heard by different audiences. Ethical requirements pose the danger of silencing or censoring their voices. However, the challenge to innovative researchers is to find ways of ensuring that as little harm as possible is caused to participants and to them, so that ethical committees can provide permission for research with CST survivors. Future researchers might consider conducting research with survivors who are already reintegrated back into the society. These type of participants might have a lesser need to have their narratives censored.

Despite the findings, more research is needed on incorporating complementary methods such as photovoice, collages, and a memory box during the phases of LDNI with children as participants to compare data from LDNI of children as participants and adults as participants. Other forms of child trafficking should also be researched. LDNI could be employed to compare the experiences of child survivors of trafficking for different purposes.

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