“Eish!”: an autoethnographic investigation of the impact of mortality on identity in Cato Manor

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“Eish!”: an autoethnographic investigation of the impact of mortality on identity in Cato Manor

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SIT: Community Health and Social Policy
Spring 2018

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Acknowledgements

I would not have been able to achieve the amount of personal and academic growth that I have had throughout my ISP without the help of many people along the way. I would like to start by thanking all of my participants for their wisdom and patience throughout the interviewing process. I like to joke that my project could win the award for “Most ‘Eish!’ Responses in an Interview,” but I’m very grateful for the profound words and beautiful stories that they shared with me. My topic asks for participants to be incredibly vulnerable, and I was inspired by the times of joy and sadness that they shared with me. I can only hope that they received a sliver of the benefits that I did from the interviews. Their stories will follow me throughout my life and continue to impact me throughout all of its twists and turns.

I’d also like to thank all of the SIT staff for their guidance throughout the process. Professor Clive Bruzas opened my mind to a new style of academic research and writing while pushing me outside of my comfort zone. His lectures and advising have helped me better understand public health, qualitative research, and myself. I will miss our advising appointments that often turned into an exchange of song, book, and documentary recommendations. I’d also like to acknowledge my academic director, Zed McGladdery, for his assistance in organizing interview opportunities and in-depth discussions on life in South Africa. Thank you to Thula, Tarry, Thando, Lungelo, and Hlobi for all of your assistance throughout the semester. You made every day more fun, and our program would not be possible without all of your help. A special thanks to Mr. Stanford Mandlenkosi Phehlukwayo for your assistance and direction in my ISP’s research, analysis, and writing.

Finally, I’d like to thank my fellow SIT classmates for challenging me to expand on my ideas and open myself to new opportunities. I greatly appreciate our late nights discussing our ideas and experiences, and our friendships. I’d like to specifically thank my roommates, Makayla Lagerman and Emily Smith, for their patience in listening to my brainstorm sessions and advice.
Abstract

Attempting to come to terms with one’s mortality and its implications is a fundamental aspect of the human experience. The process of dying is, at its core, a loss of control, and forces us to evaluate the meaning behind our experience and how our existence can continue to impact the physical world after our biological life ends. It has been shown in previous studies that finding meaning from life is highly correlated to memories that are associated with tension or conflict, and particularly mortality. The power in mortality lies in the fact that confronting this phenomenon requires the revision and reorganization of an individual’s identity, a goal that can be achieved using narrative techniques. In this study, I investigated if playing an active role in determining one’s identity and legacy before death allows an individual to reclaim control and derive continuity and meaning from their life. Through narrative interviews with community members from Cato Manor, a township in Durban, I have learned about the ways in which we tell our stories, understand life and death, and plan our legacies. I have outlined the lessons I learned from other’s experiences through a reflexive autoethnographic approach. As a result, I have obtained a better understanding of myself through my research and the planning of a tangible representation of myself that can carry on a sense of my identity and legacy.

Key Words: identity, mortality, autoethnography, death, life, legacy
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Introduction

My roommate, Makayla, sat across from me as I anxiously fumbled with an old receipt.

“How would you answer the question, ‘Who am I?’” she asked nonchalantly from the guide I had used to interview my participants previously.

“That’s the scary one. That’s the one received a lot of ‘eish’ responses from all of my participants. I don’t really know for sure yet,” I responded as the dissatisfaction in my answer settled in the air around me (Stephan, interview 2018).

I cautiously decided to expand on my original response, “That’s why I wanted to study this. I think not knowing who I am and not being confident in who I am has really resulted, or at least contributed to, some of the eating disorder stuff, or the depression stuff, or the anxiety stuff I’ve dealt with in my life because I’m always unsure of myself. Unsure if I’m meeting my own expectations and meeting other’s expectations. I don’t know. I guess trying to get the best out of myself, but I don’t know what that necessarily means.”

The orange and pink that once danced across the sky was replaced by darkness as our interview topic changed from life to death.

In our second interview session, she asked, “What are your views on your own mortality?”

“The rationale for this project was how my perceived lack of identity and whatnot had caused me to be fearful of life in a way, and death was seen as a deadline…not to be punny. It’s not so much that I’m scared that I’m going to die, but rather ‘Is this the way that I should be living?’”

“Does death have power over us?”

“Yes, whether that power lies in fear, or avoidance, or unhealthy coping mechanisms, or avoidance all together. It definitely holds some sort of power over us and affects the way we live, and I think that changes based on the individual. The purpose of this project was to see if people

1 Eish is a Zulu interjection used to express surprise, agreement, disapproval, etc.
can reclaim that power in a way that would be most beneficial for them. As long as you’re not letting it define how you live and act and think, I think you’ve reclaimed that power.”

I’m aware that this thought process may seem a bit dark for a 20-year-old, but I do think that the connections between identity, death, and their impacts on life are ideas worthy of exploration. Identity and death are integral components of a person’s life experience, yet it often takes a lifetime or more to completely understand and accept both. I’ve struggled to define myself in life and, for this reason, I’ve found fear in death. I tried to ignore it, to be apathetic to it. Yet, it never stopped acting as a pressure pushing down on me. I was rushing through life to get to where I thought I should be. I was so focused on who I felt I needed to be before dying that I was missing out on different parts of life. It had that power over me, and I’ve seen that it has power over most people in some way.

Upon starting this exploration, I thought I would learn how our views of our own identities are affected by thinking about our mortality. I wondered if exploring our life stories and our identities while also considering our mortalities and legacies could help us achieve a better sense of self. I outlined this hypothesis in my original proposal,

“...by acknowledging one’s own mortality, it is possible to allow death to act as a servant to life, rather than the driver. By claiming one’s own mortality earlier in life, individuals can reclaim the power to write the narratives of their identity and continuously cultivate the memory that will be referenced after their time. By acknowledging humans’ innate mortality within this project, the participants and I will confront the universal human issue of dying, and in effect, obtain a better understanding of self.”

Of course, there is no definitive way to answer this question after only three weeks of research, or possibly ever. Yet, this process has allowed me to glean new insights into myself, life, and death through the stories and words of wisdom of others. I hope that you can also find new understandings in the experience of others, just as I have. My project quickly evolved from trying to answer, ‘Can thinking about our mortality affect the way in which we see our identities and live our lives?’ definitively to exploring many of the different possibilities and their implications. During the search for an answer to my original question, a quote from my professor’s first lecture came to mind often:
“We prefer our knowledge solid and like our data hard. It makes for a firm foundation, a secure place on which to stand. Knowledge as process, a temporary state, is scary to many,” (Eisner 1997 in Bruzas 2018).

This quote greatly resonated with me, as I have always found it difficult to come to terms with uncertainty. With my research question, I had to accept that the lessons I was learning would continue to change and take on new meanings throughout my experience. This project brought this idea to life for me, and I ask that you, as the reader, hold this idea with you as you continue to read this ISP.
Background and Significance

Humanity, as a whole, has created a number of theories about the manner and aftermath of death as well as a variety of practices to combat or accept it—through religion, spirituality, and the like. Yet, people cannot rely solely on organized philosophies to address the unanswerable questions surrounding death and the continuation of one’s self-identity post-mortem. While institutions like religion can help us imagine what will happen to our souls after death, these systems do not help us address what meaning our earthly existence takes on after our passing. In death, Catherine Exley (1999) argues, self-identity is brought to focus as one can no longer rely on their body to represent their true identity,

"[Death] is this degenerative and prolonged process which necessitates the reorganization of individuals’ lives and the renegotiation of self-identities, if they are to continue to actively participate in normal everyday social encounters with others," (255).

Identity, or the interpretation of one’s self, including long-term goals, major affiliations, and values, is acquired through a sense of social belonging and interaction (Tsarenko and Polonsky 2011). Yet, what happens to one’s identity when one can no longer be social following death? This line of logic contributes to the distress associated with dying as the loss of the ability to interact with the living can be interpreted as the end of existence in all regards for a person.

For this reason, death, although inevitable, is often swept to the periphery of human consciousness due to the uncertainty that accompanies it. Mellor and Shilling (1993) have argued that as medicine and science have become more advanced and life expectancy has increased, people have been able to better ignore the presence of death in their lives and push the concept from their thoughts (Mellor and Shilling 2003). Furthermore, the individualization and privatization of death in modern society has exacerbated the difficulty of coping with death, as a death no longer affects the continuity of society. This reluctance to address death due to fear has been correlated with the perception of a lack of control and negative feelings towards life itself (Gesser et al. 1988).

In fact, Anthony Giddens (1991) argues,
"The process of dying cannot be seen as anything other than the incipient loss of control. Death is unintelligible exactly because it is the point zero at which control lapses,“ (Exley 1999, 265).

When starting this project, I wondered if it was possible to change the perspective of death from a source of fear to an opportunity to reclaim control and power in writing the narrative of a person’s existence. I argued that through the influence of memories that remain with the bereaved, people can continue to live a “social life” when their “biological life” ends (Exley 1999). I had read studies that found that claiming control over illnesses and one’s life led to better long-term wellbeing in patients and the health promoting and restoring benefits of adopting a strong sense of identity (Tsarrenko and Polonsky 2011, Poll and Smith 2003). The application of these findings has been addressed in populations that are closer to death due to disease or geriatric populations, but very few have explored this idea within healthy populations. This gap in knowledge served as a starting point for the rationale behind my research question.
Literature Review and Context

Given the autoethnographic approach to the analysis of my findings, I’d like to allow the participants’ stories and my own reflections to speak for themselves. For this reason, I have provided a comprehensive picture of the research that inspired this project and aligns with the findings; this literature review will be outlined in the following sections: perception of death in Zulu culture, identity construction, and narrative methodology and identity.

Perception of Death in Zulu Culture

The Zulu people of South Africa have an extensive network of beliefs and practices associated with death within their culture (Du Toit 1960, Jali 2000, Mtalane 1993, Ngubane 2004, Ngubane 2012). At the core of these beliefs lies the idea that a person is the totality of both their physical and spiritual beings (Mtalane 1993, Jali 2000). When one is struck with illness, both of these aspects are affected and must be treated. The Zulu further define a person by breaking down the aspects of a human being into three distinct parts: the body, or umzimba, the spirit or soul, also known as idlozi, and the shadow, isithunzi, which constitutes the morality, influence, personality, and prestige that a person embodies (Jali 2000). However, it is important to note that death itself is not seen as the finite end of personhood in Zulu culture (Ngubane 2012). Rather, death symbolizes the cessation of life on earth and the passage of the isithunzi to the spiritual world (Mtalane 1993). Many participants discussed this concept of the spirit separating from the body in order to pass on to the next stage of existence. They explained that death is simply another stage in the life cycle (Interviews 2018).

“I remember one of my grannies died when I was young. I was told she was going up to be with the Lord. I asked how is she going to go up? I now know it’s only our soul,” (Nofoto, interview 2018).

This theme of the separation between body and soul is seen throughout many cultures, and its significance is explained by Gina Copp (1997),

“It is likely that individuals construct this separateness as part of the process of ensuring a sense of continuity and meaning after death. For although embodiment of self (i.e. personhood) makes a person unique during life, death is finite in terms of bodily human existence. What remains is essentially a body
and memories about an individual. An absence of a ‘separation’ would constitute the total annihilation of the person; body and self,’’ (Exley 1999, 261).

In this spiritual realm, ancestors continue to watch over their families and play an active role in their lives through guidance, warnings, and punishments. Existence in the spiritual world is thought to be identical to the experience of life on earth (Jali 2000). One participant, Thandeka, explained the ancestors visit the living through their dreams and will give the living advice or may ask for a special ceremony to be completed (Interview 2018). A portion of the Zulu community subscribes to the Christian faith and may or may not combine traditional Zulu beliefs with the beliefs of Christianity (Mtalane 1993). Christian Zulus also believe that life continues after death, either with God in heaven, with the ancestors, or a combination of the two philosophies. This was evident in the participants’ beliefs. Thandeka, Thulisile, and Ayanda all mentioned that while they identify as Christian, they also believe in the importance of listening to their ancestors (Interviews 2018). On the other hand, Nofoto is a Zulu Christian woman that does not follow ancestral beliefs and traditions (Interview 2018).

Death itself is seen as a way to return home and reunite with one ancestors. It is included as a stage in the natural progression of life and can even be viewed as a positive experience. Yet, the context in which a death occurs greatly impacts the manner in which it is interpreted and addressed. The Zulu have two conceptions of death- timely and untimely death. A timely death, or ukugoduka, occurs in the elderly as a natural result of aging and is seen as a way of “passing on” or “going home” (Mtalane 1993, Jali 2000). For this reason, the family may seek no urgency in nursing a sick, elderly family member or mourning their passing (Mtalane 1993). In fact, excessively trying to nurse an ill person back to health in this instance may be perceived as an unkind gesture as it delays their reunion with their ancestors and true home.

“Sometimes it’s a solution. Like when you are very sick and we have nothing to do to help you. Sometimes it’s the best solution to ask God to please take him or her because we have tried everything. Everything as much as we can to keep him or her alive. So, it’s best if she goes. Even though it’s painful to lose, you have to let him or her go,’’ (Thandeka, interview 2018).

On the other hand, an untimely death, or ukufa, occurs earlier in life due to unnatural causes or is the result of an accident (Jali 2000). This form of death is seen as “the extinction of life” (Mtalane 1993). Furthermore, family members often point to witchcraft or sorcery as the
cause and will seek out assistance from a traditional healer to obtain ancestral protection for the rest of the family. According to Thandeka, the ancestors may play a role in the untimely death of a family member if the family did not perform what the ancestor asked for (2018, April 8). Death in this manner may also be perceived as a curse that has the capability to affect other members of the family through umnyama, or a source of darkness or pollution that brings bad luck, illness, or death (Mtalane 1993). Sources of umnyama include birth, death, and menstruation.

“Sometimes you think it’s umnyama. Maybe it’s something in their home that they didn’t do. Maybe her ancestors wanted her family to slaughter a cow and they didn’t. That person comes back in a bad way to do something terrible. Maybe be in a car accident. Maybe get sick. But maybe after you slaughter the cow everything is fine,” (Thandeka, interview 2018).

Although the culture adopts these two separate categories of death, death, as a whole, is viewed with acceptance. The process of dying is seen as a natural progression of existence and is accepted as an inevitable phenomenon (Jali 2000). The Zulu encapsulate this idea within the phrase that is often used in death, “Ayisekho into eyimi sekusalile ilanga,” which translates to, “There is nothing left of me, it is just waiting for the day [referring to the day of death and rejoining the ancestors],” (Mtalane 1993). In fact, some participants echoed this statement,

“As you grow older, you understand death. You understand why it had to happen, to end suffering. I believe you can’t question why it happened. It had to happen,” (Nofoto, interview 2018).

Identity Construction

Identity has long been a difficult concept to concretely define and outline across disciplines (Sokol 2009). Within psychological research, four major theories are utilized to analyze and define the construction of identity throughout an individual’s lifetime (Poll and Smith 2003). These include the psychodynamic perspective, the cognitive perspective, systems theory, and narrative theory. Proponents of the psychodynamic perspective argue that we establish our identities through interactions with others. These interactions allow us to perceive ourselves in relation to others, allowing for the formation of a sense of self constancy and other constancy. Moreover, this process pushes us to recognize and accept not only our own strengths and weakness, but also the strengths and weaknesses of others. Finally, we are able to identify core beliefs and values that will lay the foundation of our identities.
Similarly, the cognitive perspective places emphasis on the importance of identifying ourselves through organizing the behaviors and input from others in order to differentiate ourselves from other individuals (Poll and Smith 2003). However, this theory argues that it is not purely the interactions that assist a person to form an identity but the meaning that a person takes from social interactions that creates an idea of self. Through this process, we develop an array of ideal possible selves and are able to derive meaning from the outside world and our own experiences. The systems theory takes this idea a step further by stating that not just the interactions, but the contexts, or systems, in which we exist influences the development of self. By determining both our distinctness from and direct relation to others in various systems, we can capture our own identity.

The integration of concepts of identity formation from psychodynamic theory, cognitive theory, and system theory make up the narrative theory of identity construction (Poll and Smith 2003). This perspective states that the “I” is created in coherent life stories, or self-stories. The understanding of narrative memory and a constructed life story helps to define a unique identity (McAdams and McLean 2013). The knowledge that is extracted from these narratives provides a thematic and coherent network from which we can construct a sense of identity. As we strengthen our ability to organize narratives and autobiographical reasoning, the meaning we take from our experience evolves and our identity can be modified. Each alteration to our narrative provides a chance to better understand our own place in the world and what our aspirations are. This practice allows us to find continuity between the past, the present and the future, therefore, the narrative memory can be seen as the building block for ongoing identity construction. As Dan McAdam (1996) articulates, identity is a life story in which the individual is the protagonist (Singer 2004).

Yet, it is important to acknowledge the impact of life stage on the formation of identity within an individual (Singer 2004). The lifespan developmental perspective states that self-identity is under a constant state of evolution due to the different impacts of biological and cognitive changes, role demands, and peer influence that vary throughout a lifetime. On top of this, psychologists, such as Erik Erikson, have hypothesized that individuals are faced with different psychosocial stages throughout life, each of which contributes to the formation of identity (Sokol 2009). Research has indicated that even when transitioning from young to
middle adulthood, individuals frequently change their values, goals, and beliefs about what is important in life. Poll and Smith conceptualize the idea that identity is edited throughout life by defining four stages of identity formation (Poll and Smith 2003). In stage one, we are unable to identify our distinctness from others. Next, this unawareness is challenged by various conflicts and crises that serve as learning opportunities. As time goes on and we accumulate experience, we are able to create a self in relation to the world and others. Finally, the we find meaning and continuity in our identity by integrating our life experience into a coherent and clear sense of self and others.

**Narrative Methodology and Identity**

Human beings are natural story tellers, thus the use of narratives to define identity has been developed in recent years within many disciplines, such as history, sociology, and psychology (Somers 1994). This process, also known as narrative identity, is a way to avoid categorizing identity by time, space, and relationality and involves attentive listening to a person’s life story (Somers 1994, McAdams and McLean 2013). In this way, the story integrates the past experiences with the anticipation of the future in order to acquire unity and meaning in life (Somers 1994). When interviewees share who they are currently, how they came to be that person, and where they think they will be or want to be in the future, they can make sense of life and who they are (Somers 1994, McAdams and McLean 2013). Research on this methodology has demonstrated that people form identities by finding them within stories, make sense of experience and various phenomena, and are guided by the memories and expectations that can be found within social, public, and cultural narratives (Somers 1994). Jerome Bruner (2004) argues,

“Eventually the culturally shaped cognitive and linguistic processes that guide the self-telling of life narratives achieve the power to structure perceptual experience, to organize memory, to segment and purpose-build the very ‘events’ of a life. In the end, we become the autobiographical narratives by which we ‘tell about’ our lives,” (694).

When attempting to define a person’s identity, psychologist, Erik Erikson, outlined key questions to answer: “Who am I?”; “How did I come to be?”; and “Where is my life going?” (McAdams and McLean 2013). Research conducted by McAdams has indicated that the act of internalizing and communicating our life story directs us to find the answers to these questions.
Moreover, the use of narrative identity allows researchers to evaluate identity from a perspective that integrates the complex constitutive influences that form it, thus taking the sociocultural context of a life experience into account. Its importance also stems from its use of humanistic concern, over purely hard scientific inquiry and data acquisition, to understand the fundamental human question of how we can organize our experience in such a way to find meaning and spiritual depth through our identity (Somers 1994).

Yet, we must approach this methodology with caution. Narrative forms of inquiry cannot be used to derive explanations or quantitative measurements for the research question being investigated (Somers 1994). The technique is purely used to obtain a better understanding of the social world and social identity. It is also important that we are conscious of the way in which we listen and analyze narratives. In a study where listener behavior was changed for different participants, narrators provided less detailed stories to non-attentive and non-responsive listeners (McAdams and McLean 2013). Therefore, we must prioritize attentive listening to encourage the disclosure of more comprehensive narratives. In order to earn the trust that is required to share such personal information, we must present ourselves as honestly as possible (Somers 1994). Finally, it is imperative that we recognize that the ways in which the stories are organized and told is a source of information about an individual’s identity (Bruner 2004). We must consider the variety of ways a story can be communicated and why the exact structure of a narrative was chosen in order to attempt to understand the participant’s narrative identity.
Design and Methods

Data Collection

Just last month, I sat in my professor, Clive’s, office trying to explain a last-minute change to my topic. The proposal was due in two days and time was ticking. Just a few minutes before, I had finished reading, “You can spend your life dying or you can spend your life living”: Identity transition in people who are HIV-positive,” by Tsarenko and Polonksy (2011), and by the time I was finished, the study was covered with yellow highlight markings and annotations (2011).

“Death is viewed as scary, an end to existence. Why not reclaim the power and write our own narratives to ensure that our identities are able to continue to have an impact on the world after our biological life is over?...Empowering oneself in the face of mortality through self-identity and legacy,” (Personal Journal, 2018, March 13)

I had the spent the morning frustrated with trying to find the perfect methodology for my original topic, where I hoped to investigate solely the perception of mortality in Cato Manor. However, as soon as I explained my revised question to Clive, the details of my study started pouring out. My new question would study the impact that mortality had on identity. I decided to conduct two interviews with each participant. In the first, we discussed their life story and identities. This allowed participants to cover what they considered important in their experience within their comfort zone.

Researching the narrative methodology of identity construction showed me that we can learn from the way in which we describe our life stories and what we choose to include and exclude (Bruner 2004). By telling our stories, we can extract meaning from our past, present, and future and understand our place in the world (Singer 2004). The perception of identity cannot be encapsulated by a list of interview questions in the same way a person’s being cannot distill a person’s being into a standardized survey. Attempting to extrapolate meaning from a life story also takes the power out of the participants’ hands and limits their ability to accurately portray their ideas. Additionally, it was likely that allowing the participant to describe their experience in their own terms led to realizations that I may have not uncovered using traditional interviewing strategies. After sharing their life story, I used a guide to ask the participants questions about their identities and self-images (Appendix I).
In the second interview, I needed to sensitively approach a much harder topic: mortality. The interview focused around participants’ perceptions of their own morality and its impact on the legacy of their existence. We then discussed a potential representation of their legacy, through art, a collection of important belongings, or whatever he or she saw fit. In determining our preferred legacy, we can find a sense of our identity (Hunter 2008). Legacy is a method of passing our essence to future generations, including values, beliefs, history, symbols, and material possessions, and in doing so, we are given the opportunity to draw meaning from life. Erikson argued that humans must have a sense of generativity, or the ability to contribute to the next generation, in order to seek meaning in life. I was reminded of a quote from Lyn H. Lofland (1978),

“If we know anything about humans, we know that they do not confront meaningless situations for very long. In the face of meaninglessness, they construct for themselves new sets of beliefs, new orientation, new ways of looking and feeling which fill the void,” (Exley 1999, 36).

“I’m interested in the way thinking about one’s own mortality and legacy can change the way we see ourselves and, in turn, choose to live our lives,” I timidly explained to Clive, not expecting that this sort of question was possible to research in a public health course. Much to my surprise, he seemed intrigued by the idea.

Throughout the three-week ISP period, I interviewed nine Zulu participants from the Cato Manor township in Durban. I had lived in Cato Manor during a home stay for 5 weeks and, while I was there, formed a connection with the community. I interviewed community members from the ages of 21 to 62 in the hopes of learning from people across the life span. I tried to meet my participants in private spaces that were most comfortable for them, especially given the sensitive nature of my topic. The 18 interviews were conducted in the participants’ homes, the SIT office in Cowey Park, participants’ workplaces, and Windemere Residential Flats. One of the interviewees was paid for their time through an SIT-organized interviewing event, but all others were thanked for their time with refreshments supplied by myself. Each interview was recorded using my personal device after obtaining the consent of the interviewee and later transcribed. This method allowed me to participate in active listening and make the interview more of a conversation rather than a drill of questions. My participants did not hesitate to take the opportunity to throw some of the harder questions right back at me, and I invited them to do so.
Throughout the study, I reflected on my own concepts of my identity and my mortality through the process of journaling. I completed a free-form journal entry after each interview to reflect upon the thoughts and revelations that were brought to the surface. Additionally, I annotated interview transcriptions with any reactions, resonations, or epiphanies that were brought to light by certain quotes. My final interview was conducted by a fellow classmate in which I played the role of the participant. I was interviewed with the exact same questions as the rest of my participants, and I commented on how my perceptions of myself and mortality had changed after discussing the same topics with the other interviewees. This process put me, as the researcher, in the shoes of the participants and allowed me to better understand their experience in the project. Additionally, I was able to reflect on the lessons that I had learned from the interviews and update my own views on the topics. Finally, I summarized my findings by creating my own tangible representation of my identity as I worked with others to plan what theirs would theoretically look. In this sense, I used my mortality to better understand myself and the world.

Finding Meaning in the Data

As a student who has been studying molecular biology and hard sciences throughout my college career, the process of determining the most ethical and satisfying way to analyze the data was difficult. I had to ask myself if it was within my facility to extract standardized measures of meaning from something as complex as someone’s life story, identity, and perceptions of their own mortality. The topics of mortality and identity are abstract and cannot be measured quantitatively, on both the rational level and ethical level. Studying these ideas entails seeking a deeper understanding of the human experience that is impossible to acknowledge with traditional scientific measures alone. For this reason, this project is based around narratives and guided interviews that are qualitative in nature.

Similarly, the use of a narrative methodology does not serve to provide concrete explanations to research questions being asked in this study. Extrapolating findings from a narrative would violate the trust and respect between myself and the interviewee, and for this reason, it was essential that I sought meaning and resonance from interviews rather than searching for generalizations about identity, life, and death. To do this, I used a reflexive
autoethnographic approach. Autoethnographic research, as defined by Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011), entails,

“Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience. This approach challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others and treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act. A researcher uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to do and write autoethnography. Thus, as a method, autoethnography is both process and product,” (n.p.).

More specifically, the reflexive autoethnographic approach requires authors to portray the changes they see within themselves as a result of their research to the reader. To do this, the autoethnographer studies their own life alongside the participants’ lives in order to reveal meaning in the human experience (Ellis et al. 2011). Writing my findings in the form of an autoethnography allowed me to combine other perceptions of identity and mortality with my own in order to obtain a wider perspective on this aspect of life.

The use of autoethnographic methods allows me to make myself as vulnerable as the interviewees, and in that sense, better able relate to their experiences and find resonance in their answers. To “analyze” their stories, I divided the analysis section of this paper into chapters that focus on an individual participant’s interview. The chapter is comprised of the direct dialogue from the interview that I had transcribed. In doing this, I attempted to allow the participants to share their stories in their own words and allow those stories to speak for themselves. I feel that this allows the stories to remain as authentic as possible. One participant’s story was excluded from my analysis because my recording device failed to record our interview. The chapter also describes the impact that their words had on my outlook through sharing my own stories, thoughts, and reflections. In these reflections, I have decided to be as open and vulnerable as possible in an attempt to derive the most meaning from this experience as possible. This was a difficult decision, as I have struggled with opening up to others in the very recent past. I discuss topics that are both hard to describe and understand, such as the impact of an eating disorder and depression on my own life.

My participants inspired me to share my story just as they shared their stories with me. When I first started writing my paper, I tried to remain distanced from my topic by not sharing
these aspects of my life. I found it incredibly difficult to write as I felt ingenuine, cliché, and disconnected. I now realize that I was trying to hide parts of myself, just as I had in the past. As I opened up more, the words I was searching for began to pour out of me. I had attempted to hide my illness before, and in a way, gave it power over me. I view sharing my experience as a way to claim control over my illness, chip away at the stigma that is associated with mental illness and use my story to help others like my participants have helped me. I learned about myself and the human experience through these stories, so it seemed right to contribute to this exchange of knowledge in the same way.

In summary, I hope that you, as the reader, are able to derive some meaning from the findings that you can apply to your own life, but also that you and I both recognize that this paper does not present any definitive conclusions. I originally struggled with the idea of not answering my original question, but I have found that allowing the question to remain open allows me to continue to expand upon my understanding of it throughout my life. This project represents one possible interpretation to several unanswerable universal questions.
Limitations

The limitations of this paper start with what you are aiming to take away from it. As I’ve mentioned, this topic does not lend itself to traditional methods of analysis. I did not search for generalizable aspects of human nature that can be applied in any context. In fact, I’ve found through the process of my ISP that I, as well as my readers, need to accept that there is no one truth that can be extracted from this project, but many. Autoethnographic approaches do not advertise finding concrete answers as other approaches to research might. Autoethnographies recognize that “truth” is likely to differ depending on the person reading the story and will likely change as that person continues to gain more life experience (Ellis et al. 2011).

The ideas of reliability, credibility, and validity are all important aspects of autoethnography. In fact, the reliability of the findings of the project lies in my own credibility. In this project, I am telling other people’s stories for them, and the reliability of those stories lies in your trust in me. I can assure you that I took every measure, to my knowledge, to accurately portray each of my participants’ views and stories. Furthermore, the validity of the findings lies in your hands. The validity of my work will be far greater if others find meaning from the stories that I have presented and shared (Ellis et al. 2011). It is my hope that others can use this information to obtain knowledge about another culture, new perspectives on life and death, and a better understanding of their place in the world.

More along the lines of traditional research, limitations do arise from the small number of participants to whom I was able to speak with throughout the three-week process. Having a smaller group of participants allowed me to better explore their stories and focus on their individuality. This presents another reason why making sweeping generalizations was not possible within the confines of this study. Moreover, though my participants did speak excellent English, the interviews were not conducted in isiZulu, their first language. This did present some language barriers that could be overcome by rephrasing the wording of a question, but it’s possible that meaning was lost in translation.
Ethics

Talking about death and answering the question, “Who are you?” isn’t usually the first choice for someone’s use of their free time. It could bring up painful memories or feelings, and I had to be prepared for that. I knew that my project didn’t work with a defined vulnerable population, but it is a sensitive topic. In order to avoid exposing an already vulnerable population to this sensitive topic, all of my participants were over 18. I completed an extensive human subjects form to outline the ethical implications of my study and how I would ensure, as a researcher, the protection of my participants.

Before the start of any interviews, I explained to the participants what the project focused on and what questions I would be asking. I explained that the project may be posted online, and that I would be writing a paper based off of the conversation we had. I invited them to sign the consent form \(^2\) after reading it, if they felt comfortable, but I reminded them that they could rescind their consent any time up to the turn-in date for the paper. I ensured their privacy by explaining that they only had to reveal as much as they were comfortable with and could refuse to answer questions they didn’t want to answer. Interviews were conducted in spaces that the participants decided were both private and comfortable. They remain anonymous through the use of pseudonyms in this paper, and consent was obtained for the use of any potentially identifying details. Finally, their data was protected on my personal password-protected iPhone and laptop. All of their data was deleted once I submitted the final draft of the project.

My next step in ensuring my project adhered to ethical guidelines was completing an ethics review board meeting in which I would present my proposal and discuss the possible ethical problems that might arise. The protection of my participants is of the upmost importance to me, so I attempted to organize my research in the most considerate and ethical manner. Yet, I anxiously waited for my 1:30 meeting with the ethics review board.

\(^2\)See Appendix III for consent forms
Three members of the ethics review board sat across from me and probed me with various questions about my methodology and project. We discussed everything from the title to my proposed analysis of the data.

“Why do you want to study death?”

“Consider rephrasing your title. It has religious undertones.”

“We should be able to approve your project.”

And within the span of 30 minutes, my project had the go-ahead. Yet, I still personally worried about the ethics of my study. Would it benefit the community? Isn’t research inherently selfish? Would my participants feel obligated to answer questions they didn’t feel comfortable answering simply due to the researcher-participant power dynamic? I had to come to terms with these fears throughout the course of my project. I continuously revisited a question I had answered on my human subjects form:

“Which informants may feel pressured to participate in the study due to any power differential?

‘As a white American in a researcher position with the financial means to participate in a study abroad program, the inherent privilege that my identity and role exhibit places pressure on all research participants. I am aware of this power differential and will try my best to empower the participants to counteract it.’”

I ask that you please keep this power dynamic, the categorizes the researcher as ‘self’ and the participant as ‘other’, within research in mind as you read through this paper, just as I tried to do throughout the project. Unfortunately, I experienced the effects of this power dynamic first-hand during one my interviews. When an interviewee was unsure how to answer a question, she responded,

“Tell me what to say!”

“Whatever you feel,” I responded.

“Just give me a clue!” (Thandi, interview 2018).

I realized that she was trying to find an answer that she felt I wanted to hear. I tried to explain that I was happy to hear whatever best explained how she felt and what she had learned throughout her life, but this experience emphasized that scientific research has the tendency to separate the researcher and participants into self and other. This separation does not aid in the
acquisition of knowledge, but rather plays into the privileges that already exist and strengthens them. It is my hope that I have minimized this self-other paradigm to the best of my ability within this research, and that I can carry this important aspect of research throughout the rest of my academic work.
What stories do we tell?

“Yes, I'm often reminded of her, and in one of my array of pockets, I have kept her story to retell. It is one of the small legion I carry, each one extraordinary in its own right. Each one an attempt - an immense leap of an attempt - to prove to me that you, and your human existence, are worth it...I wanted to explain that I am constantly overestimating and underestimating the human race - that rarely do I even simply estimate it. I wanted to ask her how the same thing could be so ugly and so glorious, and its words and stories so damning and brilliant...I am haunted by humans,” (Zusak 2007, 584)

These words come from the narrator of The Book Thief, Death. The book is one of my favorites; it’s a beautiful story that follows a young girl that lives in Germany during World War II, and whose foster family hides a Jewish man in their basement during the war. Death argues that in such a demanding job, it must try to find meaning, and often that meaning stems from the human experience. Death explains that it is not a malicious force as many humans tend to fear, but rather that it has emotions just like us (Zusak 2007).

I agree whole-heartedly that every human story embodies both beauty and ugliness simultaneously, and I have found those attributes within my own life story and the life stories of others. I want to share the impact that each individual participant’s story had on my life trajectory in hopes that you are gifted with the same moment of self-reflection and growth. The words we use and the stories we tell reveal something about our outlook and ourselves and on the world around us. Death summarizes this aim well towards the end of The Book Thief,

“The point is, it didn’t really matter what the book was about. It was what it meant that was important,” (Zusak 2007, 8).
Learning to be a Strong Woman

Thandeka’s Story (Thandeka, interview 2018).

The streets were barren. The wind filled the gaps that usually overflowed with laughter of children and the cacophony of the daily routine of Cato Manor. I thought to myself that it was an eerie scene. I recalled that it was the day after the Easter holiday and the community was still coming back together. My heart started to speak up as I turned the corner into Thandeka’s entryway and into my first interview for my ISP. What if she didn’t understand my questions? What if I fumbled and made her uncomfortable?

“Let’s go sit outside,” she confidently suggested.

We sat side by side on a small bench as house music\(^4\) blasted from a nearby home.

The sound waves danced across my recording program.

“Could you please tell me your life story?” I requested.

“I lost my grandma in my childhood. It was very hurtful, painful, very sad even now. It’s ok, but it is still incredibly painful. That’s my experience,” she replied with lowered eyes.

I waited a few seconds. I was not expecting such a short response. I had thought most participants would start from birth and work up to the present.

*It’s beautiful but heartbreaking that the loss of her grandmother is that integral to her life story. Her life is centered around the severing of that bond.*

“Did you grow up with her? Did she raise you?” I asked in response.

“Yes, she took care of me since I was born. I know her as my mother, so it was painful when I lost her. But then I had to accept it, and I had to move on to move forward with my life. I moved to Cato with my auntie, but I call her my sister. I have to be strong and carry on with my life. I can’t hold grudges and hold the past. I can only ever see where I’m going myself and my past. She gave me strength, taught me how to be a strong woman.”

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\(^3\) The following chapters will cover one participant’s story. The interview will be cited at the beginning of the chapter in order to avoid interrupting the dialogue.

\(^4\) House music is a popular genre of electronic music in South Africa
“What does it mean to be a strong woman?”

“Like, never dependent on someone. You have to make decisions on your own. Like, how to handle challenges and problems…you lose someone you love, but then not holding on to that and moving on. Just wake up and work for the future. I’ve lost my mom, the person who supported and loved me, so now I say I’m not useless. I can do what I want to do. Sometimes you need the people you love away from you, so you can learn to do things on your own.”

The word useless lingered in my mind. I tried to conceptualize the strength required to pick yourself up after such a loss and carry on at such a young age.

She’s only 21. Only one year older than me. I still call my mom every day.

“Do they still influence you?” I asked aloud.

“I still have what they said to me. I have to follow the right path and follow their lessons. Even though they are gone, but they are still with me and I am still following them.”

The conversation slowly found its way to exploring Thandeka’s future.

“Do you think your past and what you’ve been through will affect your future?”

“No. Why does it have to? I have to forget about the past and move forward. Make my own path.”

The tears that had filled the corners of her eyes as she spoke about her grandmother and mother were replaced with the look of determination. She explained that she had set her sights on a brighter future outside of Cato Manor as a dentist.

“My words can change anything for me. I direct my life. If it’s wrong, I change and go this way. I am the director. I am in control. I am the leader of my own life.”

I left our first interview with this response still ringing in my ears. Her initiative was palpable. I felt as though I had seen two sides of Thandeka that day, the sensitive young girl who had lost the most important people to her far too early in life, and the strong woman, inspired by her mother and grandmother, working towards a brighter future. Her faith in herself and the control she felt in guiding her life’s direction became a recurrent mantra in my own experience as I recognized the ways I should become the director in my own life.
As I wrote this chapter, I thought of how I answered, “Do you feel like you’re in control of your life?” in my own interview.

“Yes, but sometimes I don’t know if I should be in control of my life,” I replied with a laugh (Stephan, interview 2018).

I have often felt like I have two distinct parts of myself- one that strives for a full life, a life absent of anorexia and depression, and one that feels as though she must succumb to the intrusive thoughts that find a home in my brain. The juxtaposition between Thandeka’s control over her life and my perception of my own was hard to acknowledge, but it has helped me reevaluate my mindset towards life. I’ve spent a troubling amount of time allowing myself to avoid confronting my problems by preoccupying my brain with anxieties about food and body image. This avoidance has had its consequences- I have felt my personality slip away from me in the past years and I have struggled to recover it. I have had health issues that have introduced new limitations in my life, such as not being able to run, a meditative activity that brought me joy in the past. Yet, hearing Thandeka’s story about reclaiming her control over life after the loss of her loved ones has helped me begin the process of doing this in my own life. I think this progression is best demonstrated by journal entries I have completed at different points in the semester:

A poem written earlier in the semester:

She glanced at me
With eyes empty of emotion
Stormy, dark depths meeting my own
The periphery of my borders begins to close
With the warning I’ve come to know too well
A feeble stream has replaced
The roaring river within my veins.
Hollowness has overcome my body’s repeating mantra.
I fade into myself
As it overcomes and engulfs me.
Lungs shrivel. Air escapes.
There is no remedy for yourself.
(Personal Journal, 2018, March 5)

It’s difficult to return to these feelings that I experienced not too long ago. This poem encapsulates a hopelessness that I have felt for too long, but I now have a new outlook to combat the resulting hollowness. Thandeka’s story has repeatedly helped me choose to be the strong woman that has control over these influences. While I personally have not experienced the loss of loved ones like Thandeka, I, like every human being, have experienced similar emotions as the result of my own mistakes. I haven’t stood up for others when they needed a voice to advocate for them, and there have been moments when I haven’t adequately advocated for myself. I have used the lessons I’ve learned from Thandeka and others, like my friends, my family, and my teachers to change this. The mistakes I’ve made in the past don’t have to define me as a person; I always have the power to right these wrongs in my own life.

You have to make decisions on your own. Like, how to handle challenges and problems…Just wake up and work for the future… I’m not useless.

I am the director. I am in control. I am the leader of my own life.

Shortly after my discussion with Thandeka, I was given the opportunity to reclaim the control of my life from anorexia. The director of an internship I had applied for in the past unexpectedly reached out to me to offer me a position the summer. For two months. In Guatemala.

Convincing my family, my friends, my doctors, and myself, that I was well enough to come to South Africa was difficult and required months of chipping away at engrained coping mechanisms. I had silently returned to some of these habits in the first months of my time in Durban. I had reached a crossroads- was I ready to acknowledge my mistakes, hold myself accountable, and become the leader of my own life?

“I got the internship in Guatemala,” I said to my mom over the phone.

My voice did not indicate my mixed feelings on the manner. The combination of excitement and worry I was experiencing had clouded what my thoughts were to any outside observer.
“That’s…great, and I’m really proud of you,” replied my mom, slowly. Cautiously. “I’m just nervous.”

“That’s understandable,” I replied to assure her. “I want to know what you really think. I care about you, and I want to make sure you’re comfortable with any decision I make.”

“Let me think about it over the weekend. I’m just not sure how I feel about it,” she answered.

As our call ended, I tried to remain calm. So many thoughts were swirling around in the confines of my skull. I called my best friends, Haley and Anna, to get their input.

“Nicole, we know you don’t want to hear this, but we want to be as transparent with you as possible,” they gently told me from thousands of miles away. “We care about you. You are a person who is full of life and has so much to offer, but you are not living in the way that’s making you as happy as you could be. We want that for you, and we want you to want that for yourself. We think you should take the summer to focus on your mental health and be surrounded by your support system.”

Tears welled up in my eyes as my feet continued to pace around the courtyard. I needed to hear every word they said, but those words cut into my skin like knives.

“I promise I won’t make a decision yet. I’ll think about it more and try my best to make the right decision for myself,” I offered while trying to conceal the shaky tone my voice had adopted.

My classmates did not know the context of this decision and continued to congratulate me on the good news about the internship.

“Have you accepted it yet? You can’t pass on that sort of opportunity!”

“Not yet,” I replied remaining vague, “Still trying to figure out the logistics.”

Later, I spoke with my classmate, Makayla, about my internal struggle. Should I appease my friends and family while disappointing myself? Should I be disappointed in myself for deciding to prioritize my health over a summer researching one of my passions? Did I have to choose between the two?
“When I’ve tried to overcome struggles in the past, I have made goals for myself that I have to meet before presenting myself with a new challenge,” Makayla explained. “If I can accomplish those short-term goals, then I know I can handle taking on the long-term goal.”

*You have to make decisions on your own. Like, how to handle challenges and problems…Just wake up and work for the future… I’m not useless.*

*I am the director. I am in control. I am the leader of my own life.*

Makayla’s advice reminded me of Thandeka’s words, and I began the process of holding myself accountable. I gave myself a week to prove to myself that I was ready to take on another two months away from home and my support system.

“So, I accepted the Guatemala internship. I feel really excited for it, but I know I have to stop the shit and actually commit to recovery. Which is terrifying. I go back and forth between being proud and motivated to start recovery again and being anxious and feeling horrible and drained by the idea of it. I’m really trying not to let myself get sucked down the hole of intrusive thoughts and depression. I’m not going to let myself. I can’t let myself. I want healthy bones. I want to be able to run. I want to be active without fear of breaking my weak body,” (Personal Journal, 2018, April 5).

In the end, I needed to make the decision, regarding both Guatemala and the desire to recover fully, by myself and for myself. I needed to be the leader of my own life.
Fighting for Yourself

Nofoto’s Story (Nofoto, interview 2018).

The smell of pea dholl welcomed me into Nofoto’s home for our first interview. I shouldn’t have been shocked; she had always extended her kindness to me throughout my stay in Cato Manor and often displayed affection through sharing her love of cooking with me. She had taught me how to make one of her many specialties, steamed bread, just as she had taught many primary and secondary school children throughout the years. At 52 years old, she had been teaching at the local primary school for over 18 years and had been a secondary school teacher for many years before that.

“I was born and brought up in Chesterville. I went to there from preschool until grade 10 because at that time high school was up to grade 10. If you wanted to continue to grade 11 and grade 12, you had to go outside of Chesterville. So, for grade 11 and 12 I had to go to Umlazi to study there. I did not pass my matric at school. The following year I took a gap year, I worked in a factory, and I wrote my matric. In fact, I was very disturbed when I didn’t pass it because I wasn’t expecting it.”

“Do you think your past has or will influence your future?”

“It has. It helps looking at the fact that I did not pass my matric at school, but I was not discouraged. I took a gap year and then the following year I registered as a private candidate and look at where I am. These days young people want things to be done their own way. Wait. Time will come. Keep working. Time will come,” she told me with a knowing smile that told the story of her experience. “Your life depends on you. Your future depends on you. We, as human beings, have a tendency of judging people on their pasts.”

“Wow, it’s like she talking to directly to me when I need it the most,” I thought as I silently thanked her for the meaningful and incredibly relevant words.

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I thought back to earlier that morning. I was forced to decline going on a beach run with friends, an activity I used to love and still ache to do nearly every day. My inner monologue had
chastised me for damaging my bones after years of restricting and engaging in eating disorder behaviors. When I’m forced to face the consequences of my past, I often view myself as weak for allowing myself to damage my own body and mind. It’s hard to forgive yourself for stripping away the parts of your life, and yourself, that you once loved. This process is not productive; it only encourages the damaging thoughts that often lead to eating disorders and lessens the motivation that I have to get better. It’s too easy to focus on the mistakes we’ve made in the past and their repercussions rather than struggling to reach an uncertain, but potentially brighter, future.

Your life depends on you. Your future depends on you. We, as human beings, have a tendency of judging people on their pasts.

Recovering from an eating disorder is not as simple as just eating more. It requires rewiring networks in your brain that continuously tell you that you shouldn’t, or don’t deserve, to eat. In order to remedy this, you have to confront that cognitive dissonance at least three times a day, usually in very public settings. No one can do this for you. People can help guide and support you on your journey, but the real work must start and end with you. On top of this, although people are beginning to talk more openly about mental illness, I’ve found that I am personally more ‘ashamed’ of my eating disorder than my depression. It seems far more intentional, even though I’m aware that it’s not on a rational level. The inevitable slip ups in recovering from an eating disorder sting more because of this. I’ve found that I often become discouraged and impatient when trying to fight these impulses. Why can’t I be normal? This is a basic human function. Why am I like this? Falling into this cycle of negative thoughts only furthers the blame I’ve put on myself for these past mistakes. Nofoto recognized this in her life story and did not allow a mistake she had made, failing her matric, stop her from achieving her goals in life. She didn’t allow negative thoughts to change her course of action.

How much of an impact does your past have on your future?” Makayla asked me.

“I think… after my interviews I’ve realized that your past doesn’t always have to impact your future. When I first came into this, I thought it does. The past makes you who you are. You can’t just ignore that. I think you still can’t ignore it, but you don’t have to let it impact
you. I talked to a lot of people who had harder pasts than I have and I realized, who says you have to let it impact you? You can change who you want to be or what you want to see at any time. I guess, with my experience, I hope to take the good parts of my pasts and let them influence me, and let the bad parts, like mental health struggles, get rid of the bad effects of that past. But use the lessons I’ve learned from them impact my future. I’m more aware that your past doesn’t have to affect your future after going through this project which I appreciate. I think that was a big lesson,” I said with hope (Stephan, interview 2018).

I was not discouraged. Wait. Time will come. Keep working. Time will come.

I’m by no means stating that I am now 100% recovered. In fact, while writing this chapter, I’ve been facing anxiety about going out for pizza with friends tonight. I could allow myself to become disappointed that I feel this way. I could fall into the trap of becoming impatient with recovery and give up, but I won’t allow myself to do this. It’s a hard habit to break, but as I learned from Nofoto, the effort is worth the reward.

Her home was unlike many of the other government-issued homes in Cato Manor. She had expanded it and updated it to her liking. A newly purchased washing machine, a rarity in the community, sat in its box nearby in the kitchen as we talked. It was as though her house stood as a monument for her work ethic and accomplishments.

“I see myself as a millionaire,” she said with a quick laugh. “One day. I used to tell myself, that when I start work, I’m not going to work for more than five years without having a car, and it was definitely like that. I think I had my first car when I was doing my second year of teaching. You need to be positive. I know that one day, I will come and visit you. It will definitely happen.”

My eyes were forced into a squint by my smile. I loved the idea of touring Nofoto around my own hometown and sharing my culture, just as she had done for me.

“Do you feel like you have control of your life?”
Nofoto allowed her stories to speak for her many times throughout our conversations. In order to answer this particular question, she referred to a time in her past where she had to fight to get accommodation for her daughter at her university in Cape Town, an opportunity that was already a stain on Nofoto’s finances.

“Stellenborsch was the most expensive university. I didn’t have enough money to take her, to accompany her when she went there for orientation. So, she went alone. They sent us a letter to say that she’s admitted but that she won’t get accommodation in Stellenbosch, in Cape Town. I then asked her to give me all the papers, all the information about the university. Fortunately, there was a clause that said when a student is under 18 years, under no circumstances can the university not offer her accommodation. I phoned them. I spent days and days. I had to fight with them. I told them I was going to take them to the newspapers. They had this clause! She got accommodation. You have to fight for yourself because no one is going to fight for you, Nicole.”

You have to fight for yourself because no one is going to fight for you, Nicole.

I’ve reminded myself of this line numerous times over the past couple of weeks. When you are fighting against yourself, these words of advice seem even more pertinent.

“Have you always liked being a teacher?”

“Mmm. Initially, to be honest with you, I wanted to be a nurse. Teaching was something that I did not even think about. I applied to hospital and I didn’t get a response.”

“What’s the best part of being a teacher?”

“You know when you are a teacher, you are all in one. You are the priest, you do counseling, the social work, you end up doing everything. Especially where I am at right now because of the environment. I don’t like to see people suffering or being abused. I’ve stayed with so many learners from my school in this house because we’ve got a problem at school. Some children are abused and all of those things. When you try to take them to a place of safety, it’s not a process that’s being done overnight. So, you need to remove the child from that family while you are still waiting for a place of safety or you need to give her a place of
accommodation. So, I do take those learners in to live with me. The last year I had one. She stayed with me for one year,” she said as she motioned for me to retrieve a photo from the table.

The tone of the interview had quickly transitioned from light-hearted to somber. I looked at a picture of the family and a young girl in a bright green shirt that I didn’t recognize. The closeness of this happy girl and Nofoto would fool anyone into believing that they were relatives by blood rather than unfortunate circumstances.

“I believe the most important thing is education. Give your children the best, so when they are gone, they won’t be a burden to anyone. Should anything happen to your parents, you know you can live your own life.”

I nodded as I reflected on how influential my education has been in shaping my life and identity. Hearing about Nofoto’s passion for teaching and the lessons she has shared both with her students and me has helped me realize how strongly my identity is tied to my education.

As our interview drew to a close, I asked,

“Do you think describing your life and focusing in on who you are was beneficial? Or could it have a positive effect for someone?”

“It’s important because if you don’t know who you are, you are like a lost ship. The first thing you need to know is who you are and then you need to know what it is you want in life. Once you know that, there are very few things that will disturb you along the way. Like you are here in South Africa because you know what it is that you want out of life.”

My mind initially jumped to, “Little do you know, I have no idea what I want out of life.” I felt like the lost ship Nofoto described. Yet, as I write this now, I recognize that I don’t have to be that hard on myself for not knowing exactly where I’m going. I’m not as lost as I once thought. I came to South Africa because I’m passionate about public health, and I want to ensure that people have access to the best quality of life possible. This stems from aspects of my identity, such as my empathy and determination. Yes, there are still a lot of uncertainties. There are parts of myself that I’m still figuring out. Being completely sure of yourself isn’t entirely healthy either as it can cause you to become stagnant. Why not leave the door open to allow for
growth and positive changes? Nofoto’s words have helped me amend my definition of fighting for yourself to include allowing room for yourself to grow.

This thought process was hidden within a journal entry I completed after Clive asked our class why we came on this program:

“I came to find fullness. I was hollow and losing sight of what I wanted my purpose to be. I am still struggling with this. I have not found the cure, but I feel as though the experience has put me on the right path. I want to continue following it through all the twists and turns. I came to take this path to undiscovered places, new nooks and crannies that I could never have imagined. These places exist in late night conversations, personal reflections, fun nights out, consoling others during times of pain, and addressing my own strengths and weaknesses. I think I lost a sense of my identity and what parts of me are the most important. I came here to recollect parts of myself I felt I had lost. I came here to find new parts I didn’t know existed. I came here to organize the parts into a coherent whole. I thought I would reach that, but I’ve realized that was an unachievable goal. Maybe it’s ok that it’s a continuing process.”

(Personal Journal, 2018, March 29)
How do you measure who you are?

Nkanyezi’s Story (Nkanyezi, interview 2018).

“Ok, the next question is a big one, so bear with me.”

“Alright, I’m ready.”

“What gives your life meaning?”

“Eish, there are a lot of things. The things that I do, that I get to do. Those are the two at the top. My family and the work that I do. This general feeling that I can do more with my talents.”

I leaned in to signal him to elaborate on that thought; I, myself, have found it cycling through my mind many times.

“I was thinking of… I was trying to read yesterday. Yesterday, I wake up and I had this long-ass week. I took this book that I hadn’t read all week. I couldn’t pronounce the words. I couldn’t read as fast. I panicked. I was like what if I’m getting dementia? It made me realize, ‘Fuck, if I were to lose my intelligence, what would my life mean?’ It was a question I couldn’t even answer. That’s what I pride in myself. That’s been the source of my confidence in anything.”

The air stood in the emptiness for a moment. I tried to decide if I wanted to ask another question or assure him that I have grappled with similar feelings.

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If I were to lose my intelligence, what would my life mean?

Throughout my own life, I’ve used external accomplishments to measure my own worth. The easiest way to quantitatively measure this was through grades and my intelligence. This line of logic has contributed to the development of anxiety around academics and other “measurable” accomplishments, like sport achievements and weight.

We were just getting started with my interview when Makayla asked me, “How did you come to be?”
“My education. I wouldn’t be who I am without the access to the opportunities I had, and I’m so grateful for those. My education made me have the thoughts that I have about the world…it makes up a large component of who I am, how I view the world. I really value education and learning. I never want to stop learning. I don’t think we should ever stop learning,” (Stephan, interview 2018).

This focus on education has been a double-edged sword in my life. My love for learning has made up a large component of my identity, but I have used my intelligence as an attempt to demonstrate to myself, and possibly others, that I am fulfilled. That I am enough. If I appear intelligent, I can appear put together even when I am struggling. In a way, I tried to deprive my body while I simultaneously stuffed my mind with more and more knowledge in order to hide it.

A poem from my journal:

*It begins*

*Mind hollow, body full*

*Irrationality settles over the landscape*

*Rotting the life that once found a home there*

*Of course,*

*Force feed the mind, deprive the body*

*Sharpen and define*

*Appear more, appear enough*

*Even though emptiness permeates every part of you.*

*(Personal Journal, 2018, March 29)*

I’m now able to recognize that my education also allows me to better understand the world, my place in it, and others, rather than acting as a thinly-veiled attempt to hide parts of my experience from others.

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“It sounds like your intelligence means a lot to you,” I responded as I backed down from becoming vulnerable.
“Yeah, it’s like I said, my family gives me meaning, but when you go deeper into that, how does it give you meaning? What’s my role in my family? This [my intelligence] is how I help out. This is my role. This is what they are proud of me for. That became my identity. The smart, crazy one in the family. So, if I lost that…I got really scared. That would be part of my identity.”

Sounds about right in my case as well.

“Why has your life followed the path it has so far?”

“I don’t know, like a lot of it has been going through the motions. Like I can pride myself for being non-conformist, but sometimes I just laugh at myself in the irony of it all. I’m not a conformist, I always argue with my family and parents, but at the same time, stuff that I did, like going to university, I knew it would make them proud. Working for the community would make them proud. I argue with them on how I see life and they see life, but I know they’re proud of me. That’s the progression. Doing things, but realizing I’m not doing them for just myself. I still do, as much as I’m independent from them, but I still crave their respect and their praise because they’re my parents and my family.”

Doing things, but realizing I’m not doing them for just myself:

Do I do this? Probably on some level, but how much of my life is based on this? Is it really a bad thing to focus on doing things for others?

“Do you think it is an important thing to know who you are?”

“I think it is. Again, my fear is always like where do you begin to know who you are. It’s a scary thing. If I were to define who I am, I struggle with that. I identify myself with things I do instead of who I am. I think it’s a good thing to know who you are, at least a little bit. But how do you measure who you are? I don’t know. Can it be measured? That’s a tricky one for me. I’m scared of it. I guess that’s who I am. I’m scared to find out who I am. Not totally scared, but still scared at the same time. Does that make sense?”

“Yes, that really resonates with me. That’s why I decided to do this project. Like you said, I don’t know if I can say who I am.”
“I know, I know. My grandmother said when I was a kid, ‘Wash your body every day because you never know how you smell.’ You live with yourself for so long and all these things are coming at you. I don’t think you have the time to be like, ‘This is who I am.’ Or afraid to take the time in the midst of all this craziness.”

“I definitely chose to do this because I couldn’t define who I was and it’s kind of scary because, with you being who you are and not know what defines you, how do you live your life as you best see fit? How do you reach the potential that you could or want to have?”

“I once talked to a friend about what you said, not knowing yourself and stuff. We were looking at this guy who was this gangster. He was our friend, but at 21 years old, he became a Rand billionaire. He was from Cato. When you talked to him, before he died, he was like, ‘You’re my friends, and I love you. I wish I could have been you. But at the same time, I always notice that you’re afraid of who you are and to show the world who you are. That’s one thing that I wasn’t.’”

He paused for a moment before continuing,

“We didn’t even know what that meant. I wish I would’ve said something like, ‘What do you mean? How did you figure yourself out?’ What is it that triggered him to be like, ‘Fuck life, the way it is right now. I’m just going to show the world who I am.’ He was a man who was just like in touch with his self somehow. It was crazy. I wish I would have asked him. But somehow, I would have been afraid to get the answer just like I’m afraid to find my own answers.”

*Was that really his identity though? Was there more to himself that he didn’t understand?*

“I don’t know. I hope it does though. I’m wanting to travel the world soon, and I hope I get challenged enough. Challenge myself. I think having that mentality opens myself up to a lot of things. I hope it changes but I don’t think it will go to the opposite of what I am now. You never know.”

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His answer stuck with me as I answered this question for myself in my own interview with Makayla,
“For the most part, I’m very happy with where I am, but I know I could do better. Not so much change like a 180 but change in terms of adding improvements. That’s what I would like to change. I’ve come to recognize that as a 20-year-old, I don’t have to close the door on who I am and where I’m going,” I said with a newfound hope (Stephan, interview 2018)

As Nkanyezi and I neared the end of the interview, I asked a final question:

“What benefits do you think describing your life and yourself have?”

“I now know that there are a lot of questions that I need to ask. Maybe realize that there are certain parts that I don’t pay enough attention to. I’m also scared to try things because I’m afraid of failing sometimes. Like that question, ‘Who are you?’ I need to figure out how to ask myself that question. I need to be able to ask myself those sorts of questions and come up with the answers. Or accept that there are no answers.”

“Eish, what if I can’t find an answer to that question...” I started to think, but the thought was cut short once Nkanyezi had decided to turn the tables of the interview.

“I’m going to throw the question right back at you. Do you sit down and ask yourself who you are, and how do you go about that?”

“Yeah, I feel like a lot of what you said in your interview was so similar to how I have felt that it was kind of crazy. Where you put a lot of value into your own intelligence, or what you do, or making people proud of you, and I question if that’s what I should be placing value on. I think a lot of things in my life that I want to change, could be changed by having a better idea of who I am. In the past, probably started my freshman year of college, I had to confront that about myself, and in the past three years, I don’t know if I’ve gotten any closer to an answer. I’m still working on that, and like you said, it’s scary trying to delve into yourself and find things that maybe you don’t like or maybe you do but you wish they were more prevalent.”

“Or socially accepted.”

“Yes. You have to figure out how...I think I have had a lot of anxiety that I’m not going live up to expectations that others have for me and that I have for myself. Um, life is so short and fleeting, so I’m trying to figure it all out. When this project came up, I thought to myself,
‘Why don’t I do something totally out of bounds and totally weird that I’ll never be able to do again?’ To hear from other people, from across generations, how they found themselves and what they think of life. What do they place value on? I’m not going to just take that information and adopt it, but I’m trying to use it to find myself along the way.”

“You know, it goes back. It’s funny. No matter how non-conformist you are, it goes back to other human beings. It always goes back there and how you receive it back again. That’s where we play. No matter how hard we try to see backwards, it goes back to that because we’re really social beings.”

“It’s funny because what really got me thinking about this was a date. It was a first date, and he was like, ‘Who are you? What do you like? What do you do?’”

“That’s a scary question! I can’t even imagine being asked that on a date!”

“I know!”

“My thing has always been like, be evasive when people ask those questions. Even with my age because I’m very guarded about who I let in. Like crack a joke about it. Side step it. I think as we get older, those questions are going to come a lot. Time is the master of everything, so you’ll figure it out.”

“I think that’s kind of what life is all about. Hopefully we find it.”

“Yebo5. I want to find it someday. If I can say anything right now, the reason we have a little crisis when people ask you is because you don’t know how to present it. But now my theory is that I need to find it in my terms. No pressures from someone, not trying to please anyone. Not lying to myself. This is one shelter that I get until death. I like myself, so I can’t do it for someone else. I can’t polish it for anyone else. It needs to make sense to me more than anyone else.”

“I feel like I want to put myself in a vacuum sometimes to see what it’s like when there are no external forces acting on me. Like what am I thinking, what am I going to do, what is everything?”

5 Yebo means “Yes” in isiZulu
“That’s a philosophical question.”

“I’ll let you know if I figure anything out.”

“Maybe at the end of the world,” he replied with a laugh.

I need to find it in my terms. No pressures from someone, not trying to please anyone. Not lying to myself. This is one shelter that I get until death.

No pleasing anyone else. How could I remove myself from the want to please others? I elaborated on the importance of the vacuum analogy within my journal later that night.

“The first thing I drew on my ISP poster was a bell jar. A bell jar surrounded by a gray fog. This is in reference to The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath. Yes, it represents my depression, and the isolation and suffocation that comes with it. The lack of fresh air. The recycling of toxic thoughts like toxic air is recycled in a vacuum. As well as being trapped under it with no way of escape. Yep, pretty dark, pretty horrible. Brains are dumb, aren’t they? Yet, I also have a desire to enter a vacuum. A vacuum where they are no external forces acting on me. Where I’m left alone with just me, and I can figure myself out without the influence of outside forces. This was especially similar to Nkanyezi’s first interview. His worry that he attaches too much worth to his intelligence and other’s opinions. I completely understand that. It was like looking at myself in a mirror. A lot my energy goes towards making others happy and worrying about others. My family. My friends. Strangers. I’m constantly thinking about whether I’m doing good and whether or not I’m a burden. I feel ingenuine because I seek this definition through external sources. Grades. Making others proud. Doing what I “should” do based on standards set by society and not myself. I feel like I’m pushed and pulled by whatever source acts on me. I’m not stable. I’m not grounded. I want to be sure that I’m acting through my true colors and not some diluted form of what I think I should be. I struggle with living for myself because who am I? Yet, humans are social creatures. We are meant to want to interact. We are meant to care for others. That’s why solitary confinement is the biggest form of torture. I guess I’m struggling to identify how much of a problem it is to put so much worth in others and not yourself,” (Personal Journal, 2018, April 10).

Although this journal entry delves into far darker topics, I feel as though it encapsulates the importance of this interview on my outlook. It felt reassuring that a 26-year-old had similar internal struggles. We both are trying to find ourselves and understand our place in a universe ruled by entropy. We are trying to abide by our value in helping others, but at the same time, balancing
that want with the need to determine what we actually want out of lives for ourselves, and ourselves only. I’m still trying to find the answer to this question, but in an hour, this internal dilemma was brought to light in a way I never would have been able to articulate on my own.
Accepting the Unknown

Thulisile’s Story (Thulisile, interview 2018).

I had about three hours to kill until my next interview in Cato Manor, so I walked up the hill to my extended host family’s home. I had missed playing with the kids and the newborn baby and saw it as a good opportunity to catch up. After hearing about my project, their mom directed me across the street to talk to her neighbor, Thulisile. A woman with a warm smile welcomed me into her home with open arms as I pulled out my guide for the first interview.

“So, how would you answer the question, ‘Who am I?’”

“I am me. I’m a girl. I’m a woman. I’m 57 years old. Living in Cato Manor. My other half, Ayanda, we’re married. We live with these two young kids,” she replied.

_Hm, I was expecting a more in-depth answer from the older participants._

“What makes you, you? What makes you unique?”

Another voice answered from a different room in the home.

“She’s incredibly humble!”

The voice’s owner entered the living room holding the hand of a young girl.

“Hi, I’m Ayanda, Thulisile’s wife,” she said extending her hand out for a handshake.

“How long have you been married?”

Simultaneously, they both answered, “Six years, but we’ve been together since 2005.”

After chatting and recruiting Ayanda to be interviewed next, Thulisile and I continued our conversation.

“How did you come to be?”

“Um, I don’t know,” she replied glancing over at the movie playing on the T.V.

“Her values and how she grew up,” Ayanda answered as she fed the girl rice and vegetables.
“Ok, got it! Thulisile, what life events played the largest roles in shaping who you are today?”

“I know a couple of people, like my mother, helping others with school. So I thought, let me do something like that.”

“Has your life experience shaped the way you see yourself?”

“Yeah. I believe…I don’t think I’m there. I don’t think I’m doing whatever I wish.”

Ayanda dropped the spoon she was using to feed the young girl in the kitchen and looked at Thulisile as if searching for the answer to a puzzle.

“You still have more you want to do?” I inquired.

“Yeah. When I was younger, I had to go to work. At work, I wasn’t making that much. I was able to do other things, like coaching. With not going to work, I couldn’t give out to most of the kids. In our town, we only had soccer. There was boxing and karate was introduced. I was doing things like tennis, basketball, swimming. I’m happy with the fact that we have a pool in the township. This all came up with me. I was with the right people to do it for us. Helping these kids,” she paused and smiled thinking about her accomplishments as a coach before continuing.

“A little bit of rugby, but we still don’t have too much doing rugby because they have to go outside of the township. We’ve got basketball of course. I was there when we introduced the township league. They know I came up with the idea. I tried. Even with my kids, I try to get them to play soccer in a better place where they can be exposed. They need transport. I talk to the right people to get it started. The team that I started is still going. They still call me coach.”

Ayanda chuckled from the kitchen and nodded in agreement. I congratulated her on all of her work and mentioned that I had been a soccer player throughout my whole life. Thulisile perked up, and before I knew it, we found ourselves discussing the superiority of the experience of watching women’s soccer over men’s soccer. When we returned to the interview, Thulisile began giving less and less detailed answers.

“What are your values?”
“Um, I’m not sure, pass.”

“Alright, that’s just fine! What makes your life worth living?”

“I’ll pass.”

“Hey! What about me?” Ayanda joked from the kitchen.

“Oh, yes. Ayanda.”

“Why do you think your life has followed the path that it has so far?”

“Oh, I’ll pass again.”

Ayanda squinted her eyes as she glanced at Thulisile, and I wrapped up the interview. I left that day feeling unsatisfied and nervous.

Did my questions make Thulisile feel uncomfortable or if she was just a private person? Did she not have answers to the questions I asked, just like me? Is she sure that she wants to go through with the second interview? I feel like talking about mortality and death may be even harder for her.

I returned two days later to complete her wife, Ayanda’s second interview while waiting for Thulisile to return. The home no longer rustled with the sounds of playing children. They had returned to school after the Easter holiday, and Ayanda and I sat quietly in the living room together. The somber setting matched the tone of the interview until we neared the end.

“After thinking about death, would you make any changes to your life story or does anything stand out more?”

“Actually, my partner and I were talking after you left. I was asking her, you know, I was quite concerned because she didn’t have anything to say about where she sees herself. I said, when I first met you, you were…I met someone who was ambitious. She still wanted to have a soccer team, and she’s not doing that now. She needs to look into what she likes as well even though she’s retired. She needs to go back to what she likes, things she can invest in, things she enjoys doing. Actually, that conversation we had made us look back at what we wanted to achieve by this time. It was positive, but you ask, ‘what happened? Let’s look at life differently.’ It was a reflection on who we are. Once someone starts asking about you, you then realize you
need to relook at yourself. These are important questions as an individual. It’s another confirmation of what has happened to me.” (Ayanda, interview 2018).

“Yeah, it’s a really hard thing to do, reflecting on yourself. That’s why I chose to do this,” I said, trying my best to ignore the fact that I delayed interviewing myself and thinking about those same questions for this very reason.

When I finished my first interview with Thulisile, I worried about what I was going to say in my ISP about our discussion. Many of her answers were vague, and I was unsure why. I didn’t know if her short responses were the result of my interviewing style or her discomfort. Ayanda’s insight into the conversation that followed our interview revealed something I had not previously considered: Thulisile, even at the age of 57, was unsure how to answer some of my questions. The difference between Thulisile and myself is that she was able to accept this uncertainty. Even though she accepted not knowing the answer, she was able to have a conversation about what she would like to see change in her life with one of her most trusted supporters. They confided in each other as they made plans for the trajectory they desired.

I sat in Megan’s office. Her pen stood at attention ready to make record my response on the pad on her lap. *I hate when she makes note of what I say.* The autumn wind billowed outside the window. I was not focused on the session. I worried about biking back to work before my shift started. *This therapy session is a waste of time, I could have finished my lab report instead.*

“Have you talked to your family and friends yet? I know Dr. Smith recommended this at your last appointment,” Megan inquired.

I stared at the ground. My body was stiff. I folded within myself, trying to take up as little space as possible.

“I haven’t told anyone about the diagnoses yet…it’s too hard to talk about. I’m not ready,” I responded, unable to hide the guilt in my voice. I had been diagnosed with atypical anorexia just four months earlier, yet I had only discussed the matter with my medical team.

“Let’s try talking about you more. What are some good things you can recognize in yourself?” Megan offered.
An uncomfortable silence took hold of the room. Megan was accustomed to this atmosphere; I was not. I squirmed and tried to form an answer. I half-heartedly formed a vague response, and Megan’s pen began transcribing.

“Ok, I have some homework for you. Every day, I want you to sit and think about that question. Just for a few minutes. We can revisit it later.”

Megan accepted that I didn’t have a complete answer to the question, yet I found myself growing more and more uncomfortable as I thought about that moment in her office. I let that discomfort settle within myself, offering no escape for it from my mind through talking with loved ones. The conversation between Ayanda and Thulisile seems like an alternative option to the way I had approached my uncertainty. The importance of opening myself up to others has become more and more apparent throughout the semester. Although difficult, discussing my experience with others has been the most beneficial aspect of my recovery. I am able to appreciate the courage that Thulisile embodied when she admitted to herself that she didn’t know the answers to some of my questions. Admitting you don’t know something is the first step to finding an answer. Seeing this process in a 57-year-old was a powerful lesson for me. I’ve felt like I am behind the curve at times when it comes to knowing myself and my life. Throughout this process, I’ve recognized that no one truly knows themselves and can answer any question thrown at them.

I explained this realization to Makayla during my own interview:

“Life is so short. Life is so fleeting. I have to do what I’m supposed to do. I have to make others proud. I have to make myself proud, and I don’t have much time. I don’t what I’m doing, and I don’t know who I am. A flurry of thoughts would come in. I think throughout this time and throughout my time in South Africa, I’ve learned that that’s kind of how everyone is. No one really has their shit together, for lack of a better term, when it comes to that. I think I’ve come to appreciate, this is going to sound cliché but, life is more about working through that and finding yourself along the way rather than knowing yourself right now and going through every step of the way perfectly. I have learned to see more beauty in the fuck ups, more beauty in the twists and turns, more value in those than I had in the past. I think I’m getting to a place where I see I’m 20. I need to chill. Who knows what’s going to happen? I just need to accept these weird feelings or this anxiety. Accept that it’s here. It’s present. There’s nothing I can do about
it, but why should I let it stop be from enjoying parts of life. Why not go with the tide and see
where it takes me?” (Stephan, interview 2018).

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I thought back on my discussions I had with other members of the community. In a
week, I had more insight into myself just from hearing their life stories and views on death. My
heart warmed as I recognized this change occurring in myself, as I had never fully understood
why I have felt the way I have in the past. It was reassuring to see that this transformation was
occurring within myself and the people I had conversations with thus far.
Striving to be Present

Ayanda’s Story (Ayanda, interview 2018).

Ayanda groggily opened the front door and welcomed me into her home.

“Perfect timing,” she said. “I just woke up from a nap. The kids are finally back in school. This will be a nice change.”

The beauty of her words amazed me from the very start of our interview; she is an artist and even her words showed her imaginative talent. She is only 33 years old yet seems far wiser.

“When you look at your life, do you see it in parts or as a whole?”

“When you look at it by yourself, you should definitely look at it as a whole rather than segments. It’s not a movie. Once you look at it all, it will only make sense then. Where I’ve come from, where I’ve been. Where I am right now. It’s full of challenges, full of life. That’s who you are. Don’t dwell in the past because life is not about suffering. I can’t dwell on the points in my life where I’ve suffered from depression,” she pauses to take note of my reaction. I wasn’t expecting her to share such a vulnerable part of her experience, but I nod knowingly before she continues.

“I don’t ignore that because I acknowledge I’ve been there. In order for me to move on to another part of my life, I know I’ve had this experience and I’ve learned this. It’s time for me to just see life as one big ball of fun. That’s when people start looking at you differently when you look at yourself as such, in a whole. ‘

“Do you have any regrets?”

“If you don’t have anything you regret, then your life would be too perfect. As someone who likes growing and wants to see improvement, right now my life is going at a slow pace because I’m also trying to find me. I want to see myself up there, growing, and not stopping. Not only growing as an individual but growing me in order to grow other people.”

“Do you think knowing your identity helps you impact others and the world?”

“As an individual, you need to be alert…be present in everything that you do. You’ll lose yourself if you’re not present in the moment. You’ll lose things that are valuable if you’re not present in the moment. You lose things that other people value in you if you’re not present.”
My reflection stared back at me in defiance. *Focus, Nicole.*

The other participants lay peacefully beside me with their eyes closed and their bodies moved to the rhythm of their breathing.

*Just think about your breath.*

My mind focused on everything but my breath. I sighed in exasperation. I fall into the same pattern of disappointment during every yoga class.

My friend, Haley, presented me with a small rectangular wrapped gift.

“Thank you!” I exclaimed, excited by the prospect of a new book.

The wrapping paper pulled away to reveal the title: *The Mindfulness Journal- Learning to be Present.*

“This is fantastic! I’ve been trying to get into mindfulness!”

“I think it will be a really great practice for you, and this book will guide you through it,” Haley explained.

“I can do one entry a day while I’m in South Africa,” I thought aloud, already appreciating the great revelations I’ll have from the small exercises the book offers.

As I type this, the mint condition book sits in my backpack, undisturbed.

Megan’s office was cold. I sat on the couch trying to focus on her words and not on my upcoming finals.

“I’ve got a new homework assignment for you. I want you to sit for 20 minutes a day and do nothing. I want you to focus on your breathing or music while thinking of nothing else,” she describes.

*“Sounds easy enough,”* I thought to myself while nodding.
Days passed by. “I’ll try tomorrow. I have way too much homework,” I reasoned with myself.

“How do you wish you saw yourself?” Makayla asked me.

“How do I wish to see myself? I guess I’d like to just be content. I don’t know if that’s asking too much. I don’t know if other people are every 100% content. I don’t know it’s dangerous to be content with yourself because does that stop your growth? I don’t know. It’s a big question. Just fulfilled, satisfied, happy with the way I interact with others, happy with the way I interact with the world, happy with the way I am. I’d like to be content with where I am in this moment. So, strive for being better, strive for growth, but be ok with the present. I guess being something like...being present is something that’s very hard for me. Not worrying about other things, not worry about this or this, or I could be doing this better, or I messed up there. Just accepting what it is to be in the moment. That’s something I’d like to see change,” I replied (Stephan, interview 2018).

I can’t dwell on the points in my life where I’ve suffered from depression.

I acknowledge I’ve been there.

You’ll lose yourself if you’re not present in the moment. You’ll lose things that are valuable if you’re not present in the moment. You lose things that other people value in you if you’re not present.

Being present in the moment does not come naturally to me. I sometimes feel like my brain does everything in its power to not be present in the moment. This could mean that I become too occupied in the past or too anxious about the future, and I have seen the effects that this can have on my experience. Like Ayanda said during her interview, it’s easy to lose yourself if you are not focused on what is going on around you, and it’s easy to detract from your relationships if you are not present in the time you spend with others. When Makayla interviewed me, she asked,

“What gives your life meaning?”
“Relationships. Trying to help others. Exploring the world because there’s so much I don’t know and so much to be seen. Whether that’s interacting with animals and nature, reading, or listening to music, or just seeing what’s out there,” I answered.

Reflecting on Ayanda’s interview and my own, I’ve come to recognize that I cannot enjoy the moments in life that provide me with the most meaning if I do not heed Ayanda’s advice. The concept of being present in the moment has been introduced to me in a number of ways—through yoga classes, friends, and even therapy. Yet, connecting with Ayanda over our mutual experience with depression and hearing her cautionary words while revisiting what I said gave my life meaning has helped bring its importance to my attention. There will always be something in the future to plan for or something in the past that fills me with a sense of regret. But, like Ayanda said,

“If you don’t have anything you regret, then your life would be too perfect. It’s time for me to just see life as one big ball of fun.”
The breeze entered the Nofoto’s home as we continued our interview and carried Thadi’s call from the street,

“I’m talking to you next, my child! I’ll see you at 2:00!”

When I approached her home later that afternoon, she excitedly opened her home to me and reminded me that I, her daughter, am always welcome. This love is extended to everyone in Thadi’s life through her hospitality and bubbly personality. At 62 years old, she was my oldest participant, but she remained young at heart.

“Could you please tell me your life story?” I asked to begin the interview.

“I was born in Overport. My mother worked for a white family, so that’s where I was born. I had a very good white family and we still get along at this time. Both our parents passed away, but Lane and I are still sisters. She calls me her black sister, and I call her my white sister,” she said with a laugh. “We still get along. She’s got 4 children and I get along with them.”

“What was it like growing up with a white family?”

“You know when you’re still small, you don’t see that this is black and this is white. To me, it was just a family. Until you get older. Then you start to…I would say they didn’t treat my mother badly. As I grew up, I could tell that they felt that she works here and I’m the family. But I’m so grateful for that family. I had a very nice upbringing.”

“How would you answer the question, ‘Who am I?’”

“I’m kind. I’m honest. I’m bubbly. I just love people. I love people. I love children and animals. I love my dogs.”

I smiled as I thought back to a night earlier in the semester where my classmates and I hung out on Thadi’s patio together. One of her dogs followed me wherever I went that night and would sweetly rest its head on my lap.
“What life events played the largest roles in shaping who you are today?”

“Just regret. I wish I had my own child. It’s not that I didn’t want one, I just couldn’t have one. It’s hitting me now. When you’re young, you don’t care, but now I feel that sting. I wish I had a child of my own. Everyone has children and grandchildren, and I have nothing. It’s something…it wasn’t by choice.”

My heart broke for Thadi in that moment. Her eyes usually shined with laughter, but in that moment, it seemed as though they had clouded over. She had been every students’ mama while we stayed in Cato and called us all her children.

“Would you like to be remembered after you pass?”

“Personally, to be honest, who will remember me?”

I was shocked that Thadi, one of the most outgoing and loveable people I have come to know, felt like no one would remember her after she was gone.

“Lots of people! Friends? Family?” I said in hopes that she would realize that she has been a positive presence in so many people’s lives.

“All my friends? Yes, I believe…I think if I had children, yes. I know you guys will never forget me. In a good way.”

Again, my heart slowed as I heard the sadness in her voice.

“Do you think your life experience has influenced the way you see yourself?”

Thadi struggled to find an answer and asked me the same question in return.

“For me, I would say my family. I get along with my parents really well. They are some of my best friends. Being so close to them has shaped me into someone that wants to make them proud.”

As the words came out of my mouth, I was reminded of Nkanyezi’s interview,

*I, again, focused my perception of myself on making others proud. Whoops.*
“I would say everyone that I meet has made me who I am today. You guys made me who I am. My parents passed away a long time ago. I would say it’s the people I meet. Not even just people close to me. Just everyone I meet.”

“What are your values?”

“My partner. He’s played a big role in my life. Yes, love,” she processed.

“What gives your life meaning?”

“The people around me, my partner, everyone I’ve met.”

What are your values?” Makayla reads from my interview guide.

“The same word has come up so many times but relationships. I don’t know what I would be without the people in my life. I love having strong relationships.” (Stephan, interview 2018).

In fact, I said the word ‘relationship(s)’ in my personal interviews a total of 17 times and referenced friends, family, people, or others a total of 85 times.

Just like Thadi, a majority of my interview focused on the impact that other people had on my life. Yes, this may contribute to the fear that I discussed in Nkanyezi’s story that I place too much emphasis on other’s perceptions of me and my accomplishments, however, Thadi’s love for others demonstrated that there is a way to find a balance.

“What is more important, how you see yourself or how others see you?” Makayla asked me towards the end of our first interview.

Whoa, whoa, whoa. That question wasn’t in the guide.

“At first, I was like, ‘How you see yourself!’ but then I was thinking that serial killers may see themselves as fantastic people,” I said laughing. “I guess it’s a balance. You should feel good about yourself. You should never let not knowing yourself or not feeling confident in yourself hinder you in any way. Or stop you from doing what you want to do. Or decrease the enjoyment you get out of life. But, you should also interact with others in a way that you’re not
taking anything from their lives. In a way where you’re not negatively interacting others while you are living your own life.”

*I guess I should start practicing what I preach.*

The importance of relationships even worked its way into my own perception of death and its implications. Most of my responses to the idea of dying incorporated the manner in which death would change relationships.

“Is it important to be remembered after passing?” Makayla asked me.

“I think it’s important to be remembered. I think everyone on earth has had an impact in some way, shape or form. You might not be someone that every person knows or hears about at some point, but I think everyone impacts someone through their relationships with family or friends, or people you work with. You have small influences that make a difference, and I think to not remember those influences is to do humanity a disservice.”

“How would you like to be remembered?”

“I guess I want to be remembered as a generous and kind person. Someone who tried their best to help others and make life more enjoyable. Fun. Genuine. Someone who stood up for their principles and others. Just made people happy.”

“Why?”

“Because thinking about the idea of my interactions with someone helping them in some way or another or adding some enjoyment to their life that sounds like…that makes my time here worthy, not for nothing. It did something for someone. I think the generosity and the genuineness and the wanting to help others all stems from that idea.”

To ignore that I find meaning from caring for other people and their experience is to ignore part of myself. Of course, I care about what people think of me; I want to make sure that I have a positive influence on their life rather than acting as a burden.

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“Why didn’t you tell me you were having a bad day?” Haley asked me.
“I…I don’t know you just seemed busy. There’s a lot of stuff going on in your life too. I didn’t want to add to it.”

“Nicole, think about what you would want me to do if I were in your shoes. Would you think I’m a burden?”

I fiddled with my thumbs and shook my head.

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You should also interact with others in a way that you’re not taking anything from their lives.

Looking back at this sentence from my interview has shown me that I often view myself as a burden if I feel I’m not working at 100%. This has caused me to pull away from people in the past to minimize this guilt when I am not quite myself. In doing so, I pulled away from a part of life that gave me the most meaning. Thadi’s interview, and the way she interacts with those around her, reminded me of the importance of allowing yourself to fully immerse yourself in each relationship. From her upbringing in a white home during Apartheid to her role as loving neighbor in Cato Manor, Thadi has most definitely influenced the lives of people she surrounds herself with. She is unapologetic in her love for humanity but doesn’t allow that love for others to overtake her. For me, Thadi is an example of finding balance.
Death’s Push

Lwazi’s Story (Lwazi, interview 2018).

Lwazi proudly walked me around the school’s campus, saying hi to every employee and learner we passed along the way. We walked into the next classroom to give the student teacher their updated time table.

“Sawubona! This is Nicole, our new student teacher. She’ll be teaching maths with us for the next five weeks,” he said with a sly smile.

“I wish!” I said with a laugh. “I’m just here to talk with Lwazi and visit the school.”

Lwazi cracked jokes throughout the rest of the tour. Even though I had just met him, I felt like I was talking to a good friend. His openness and humor even found its way into our interviews.

“How would you answer the question, ‘Who am I?’”

“Who am I? Eish. I’m the guy who grew up in the small township. Who was exposed to a lot of things. Drugs. At that time, there was violence, but I survived. My friends, some are dead, some are in jail, and some made it. Both my parents have passed on. My dad in ’93 then my mom passed on in ’99. When they died, they were alcoholics and had nothing. I’m just the guy who is trying to make a good living out of somebody that grew up in that environment. I want better for my kids. I’m not living for myself. I’m living for my kids. I want to leave them something when I’m no longer here.”

You would have no idea that this incredibly positive, happy, and accomplished man had seen so much suffering in his life.

“It’s more that I look at my life and what my parents did, they left nothing for me. You think, I would have been somewhere. I want to lead a good life for my kids. They mustn’t go through what I went through.”

“How did you come to be?”

“I think it’s all up to the individual. How you see yourself, where you see yourself, and you keep giving yourself targets.”
“What are your values?” I asked later in the interview.

“They are my values,” Lwazi replied, pointing to a number of pictures of his children that line his window. “I value them more than anything in life. I’m living for them now. I’m not living for me. As long as my kids have whatever they want, then I’m satisfied.”

He went on to tell me the ages of his three children and their year in school while smiling proudly.

“Do you feel in control of your life?”

“Eish. Yeah, I try. Life is life. You can’t say you’ve got everything under control until I succeed in whatever I’m hoping for. That everybody is happy. Once everyone who surrounds me is in good health and everything is fine, then I’m fine. But for now, I just have to keep going until I’m where I want to be.”

Lwazi described that he wants to leave his painful past, including the loss of unavailable parents and poverty, behind him to focus on working towards where he wants to be in life.

“Has your identity changed throughout your life?”

“I think it keeps changing and it is constant. Some values you keep with you and some you change. We live in a revolving world. You have to keep changing. Some things we have to change in life and some things stay with you as you grow.”

The role of death in Lwazi’s life came up frequently his first interview. I wondered if his frequent exposure to death during his upbringing had affected his current views on the matter.

_I’ve barely had to confront death in my own life. I’m definitely coming from a place of privilege._

“What are you views on mortality and death?”

“It comes to everyone. I think about death when I look at my life. How far I’ve gone and am I happy with what I’ve done. Will I die a happy soul? When I die, what will happen to my kids, my family, my loved ones? Did I have an impact in life?”

“Does it bring up any emotions?”
“Yeah, when I look at my life, I don’t feel like I’m where I can say if I die now, I’m happy. It gives me that push. To keep on pushing and do what you can. Whenever I think about it, I always feel that I’m still young. I’m lucky. Most people I grew up with are dead or didn’t even reach the year I’m in. You know you’re still living and know that you must do the best you can. I want people to remember me for the things I’ve done.”

*He seems to subscribe to my original reason for conducting this research, ‘Can we use death to better ourselves?’ I’ve been getting mixed opinions on whether or not thinking about death can be beneficial.*

“Do you think death can act as a motivator to live your best life?”

“Yes, you must tell yourself to live your life as if it is your last day. You do the best you can and keep on pushing. Keep on working. In that way, it keeps you motivated to keep on growing in whatever you are doing. You’ll never know when time will run out. It keeps on pushing you.”

“Do you think death is the final ending of life?”

“Look at people like us, teachers. We teach thousands of people. The people we taught, even if I’m dead, they still carry what I taught them. Even with other people. That’s how it must be. I have students who I taught 10 years back, they are something now. They are affecting other people with what I taught them. They don’t even know if I am still teaching or dead. Even if I am dead, they still have that to pass onto others. That’s how it should be. It all goes with what you choose to do.”

I thought back to the influence my teachers have had on my life and silently thanked them for their guidance.

“Does thinking about death affect how people live?”

“Yes, I think so. Some people won’t be doing what they are doing now because some people don’t even think about death. The way they are living now, they don’t care. Whatever happens, happens. Eish. Their loved ones wish they can change. If we all think that death is coming, we must live this life because it is too short. I think it can change the way we live and behave.”
“Do you think death affects the meaning of life?”

“Yes, it does. Here in South Africa, even in our schools, we have children who are the heads of houses because of death. They have no one, they look after their siblings even though they are a young age. Death has changed the life of that person and their siblings. If I die now, they will have that impact.”

Wow, I was not expecting him to interpret the question that way. I originally intended the question to ask if death affects the meaning of his own life, but he views death as affecting the meaning of life for the living that are left behind.

“Would you change anything in your life story after our discussion or does anything stand out more?”

“Now you made me think more of, do I still have time? I need to protect my kids and for them to be well educated. It makes me think of time. Do I still have time to do all the things I need to do? What if something happens to me? I have to do that. Now I’m thinking, I’ve achieved all these things I want, but how much time do I have? Will I achieve all these things?”

Oh God, I hope I’m not causing a midlife crisis right now.

“Will it change you in the future? Will recognizing death affect the way you carry yourself?”

“It is as of now. Because of that happening, I keep thinking, I mustn’t die like that. I’m where I am because of this person. That’s what I’m trying to do for my kids and people who surround me. In life, you can’t do everything by yourself. You need a small push and small guidance.”

While Lwazi is one example of a person who used death as a motivator to drive himself out of poverty and a toxic environment, many of my participants argued that thinking about death has the opposite effect. To my surprise, many participants believed that thinking about death causes a person to either rush through life, due to the pressure of mortality, or makes a person apathetic. In their view, that apathy can lead a person to drugs and crime.
“Do you think death is a motivator?” Makayla asked.

“I think it definitely can be. When I was starting this project, I was trying to investigate this in a way. I think it’s very much based on the individual. A lot of people said they saw friends adopt the philosophy of, ‘Oh, I’m going to die anyway, I might as well become a gangster or do drugs.’” I said thinking back to my interviews. “Whereas I thought about it in the sense of where I was going and how I could be the best version of myself. That can be problematic too. You have to take the middle ground of the two. You can’t be too hyperfocused on being the best version of yourself and you can’t be too hyperfocused on the life is short, nothing matters, I’m going to do whatever way of life,” (Stephan, interview 2018).

Confronting my own health issues brought the concept of death up close and personal.

“How do you cope with death?”

“I think I just don’t process it. I think that’s always been how I’ve been. It was always on the periphery of my mind, but I never let it enter into my consciousness. It was something I knew was there, but it was best not to think about it. I was able to separate myself from the emotional chaos that accompanies death.” I thought back to the uncomfortable realizations that I’ve been forced to make in the past years. The effects of a deteriorating body.

“I think when I got older it made me more uncomfortable because I was able to grasp what it actually meant. I was able to apply it to myself more and think about what would happen when I die and what would happen if people I know die and what that looks like. I think also dealing with the mental health issues and thinking about my life made me think more about death.”

When death entered my consciousness, I had to make a choice—would I allow myself to continue to spiral closer to it, or would I use death itself as something that presented me with an opportunity to better myself? On the surface, the latter may seem like a healthier way to look at mortality. That’s what I thought originally. However, by focusing too strongly on how to be my “best”, if anyone can ever truly be at their best, I was limiting myself. I feared failure. I feared falling short of my own expectations. I feared leaving the world before I left my mark.
Will I die a happy soul? When I die, what will happen to my kids, my family, my loved ones? Did I have an impact in life?

You do the best you can and keep on pushing. In that way, it keeps you motivated to keep on growing in whatever you are doing. It keeps on pushing you.

Lwazi’s words echoed my sentiment, yet he seemed to find a way to allow death to motivate him without crippling him. He found a way to enjoy life while recognizing its transient nature. He had been exposed to the worst death has to offer as a young child. He was exposed to its impacts throughout his life, yet he still finds a way to frame it in a way that is productive. Throughout his interview, he presented a better way to approach death in life while teaching me about the role of death in a different environment than my own. While many participants didn’t agree with our view of death, I came to understand that our views of death stems from our paradigms:

“What differences would you get if you asked these questions back home?”

“I think if I asked these questions to different socioeconomic classes, I would have gotten very different answers. Including here. I even saw that in my interviews. I think the closeness of death in certain communities due to unfortunate circumstances and seeing it take people too early makes you view it in a different way.” I stopped to think for a moment.

“Death had never affected me really. I came from a privileged view, so I came at this project from a privileged view. The people I interviewed said their mother died and I had to take care of 9 siblings and death put them through hell. When you come from that sort of relationship with death, how can you reframe that after one interview with a random student? It did put them through hell. From a young age, they saw graphically violent deaths of people not much older than themselves in their communities. Death had a very different relationship with my interviewees than it did with me. I understand the way they answered their questions.”
Defining Moments

Bonginkosi’s Story (Bonginkosi, interview 2018).

I’ve never seen a 25-year-old that is so sure of his faith.

Bonginkosi sat across from me and elaborated on the role of Christianity in his life.

“I’m Catholic. In the year 2007, I became an altar server and it was once of my greatest achievements. In 2006, I was baptized in the catholic church. In 2008, I was a member of the church. In 2006, I received holy communion. I’ve been serving for seven years now. When I finished my matric I wanted to go the seminary, but my mother was not keen about it. Two years back I wanted to go in, and my mother blocked me from going. That was one of the most troubling parts of my life. At the front of the year when people were leaving for seminary and I couldn’t go, I just didn’t want mass to end that day. After mass, many boys would be going into seminary, like my best friend, and I couldn’t. They say pain does not kill a person, but that day I felt like I was dying.”

In the time I had known Bonginkosi, I had no idea that he dreamed of becoming a priest and that he was told that he couldn’t follow that dream. That desire and the sense of identity that stemmed from his religion was expressed throughout the interview.

“How would you answer the question, ‘Who am I?’”

“Wow. Who am I? It’s not something that’s easily asked about. Bonginkosi is a 25-year-old male who is trying to find his space, his value in the world, what am I, what is my purpose here. I’m still at a crossroads.”

“How did you come to be?”

“It was the teachings from home and church. I’m very grounded in what I believe in. There is nothing I love more than church. An hour doesn’t go by without me mentioning God. I’m so determined in being with God and getting my degree. When people see me they call me priest. I’ve become that light and they see where I’m headed to.”
I could see why people could see him becoming a priest. He was wise beyond his years and had a calming and understanding presence. This love for God even protected him against the impact of death.

“What are your views on your mortality?”

“I was scared once, but now I’ve made peace with it.”

“How did you get to the point of accepting it?”

“It was always with homilies in the church. At church, the priest speaks about death. He gave me courage. He said at the end of the day, we are to die. From dust we are created and to dust we shall return. I came to the conclusion that I am going to die so I should make peace with it.”

“When you were younger, what were your views on death?”

“Scared. Terrified. I would ask why my family members are dying and my grandma would say they are going to God. Why are they going back to God? Why was God not being arrested for killing people?” He said with a laugh. “He is the creator, He is the giver of life, but He takes away life. I was terrified. I didn’t want to die. I loved living. When I was younger, I didn’t speak about it, I hated death.”

“Do you like the path that your life has followed so far?”

“Yes, exceptionally. I love it. I enjoy it. I would never change it. I love it too much. It’s what I love, but I fail to explain how much I love it.”

He loves his life more than anyone I’ve ever talked to. A sense of happiness surged through me as Bonginkosi beamed about his feeling of contentment.

“Do you feel like throughout your life your identity has changed?”

“It has changed.”

“What caused you to change?”

“Me being grounded in spiritual life and aspects of home teachings. Following the route of this is what your father is doing to your mother so you do it to girls and do the same things. It
doesn’t have to define who you are. Are you your father or yourself? You need to choose your path. It was one of those things in life. God said men must honor women and women must respect their man. How I was raised at home, it was something I was taught later as an adult. It was a pretty good hiding.”

“Did talking about death change the way you view your life?”

“Yes, there are units of time that seem more important. Like when I became a server. That’s where I found God, spirituality, and peace within me. That part stood out from all other parts and shaped me. It has also made me able to face death. To have a clear understanding of death and not be afraid of death.”

Makayla and I sat around the dinner table in our apartment discussing our ideas for our ISPs.

“I’m thinking about researching something about identity,” I mentioned while beginning to explain that I struggle with this concept myself.

“I used to feel very lost, but I’ve come to realize that my identity is being a child of God. I am a child of God, and that is enough. I am enough,” Makayla explained.

Though I am not religious myself, hearing that Makayla and Bonginkosi were able to find peace and a place of belonging in their faith gave me a sense of comfort. Their faith gives them confidence in themselves and their paths. It clearly changed their outlook on life. I personally don’t feel like I’m missing an aspect of myself by not having a religion, but I can appreciate that a religion can serve as a platform of meaning for others. For me, I’ve found that choosing to come to South Africa and immersing myself in a new context has done for me what religion has done for Bonginkosi:

“What life events played large roles in shaping you?” Makayla asked me.

“Going to South Africa! I can’t forget that one. This has been very transformative. Talking with people, living with people who have cultures so different from my own, but feeling so loved and welcomed and meeting new friends. Having such close relationships in such a
short time really amazes me. Learning things differently than I ever had before. Thanks, Clive,” I replied with a laugh (Stephan, interview 2018).

“How has going to South Africa differed from the rest of your life story?”

“Going to South Africa was a risk in itself. I had doctors and family members who weren’t totally confident that it was the right move for me. I felt like I needed to challenge myself. I felt like I needed to get out of my realm. I was stuck in a rut. I really believe in the power of two-way learning, and this sounds very cliché, but being a better global citizen by having a better understanding of how other people live outside of your own bubble. This experience has given me that and so much more. I definitely struggled a lot; I’m not going to lie. I had periods of time where I was not doing well, and I wouldn’t say I’m 100% well right now. That might not even be possible for anyone maybe,” I pondered.

“It definitely forced me less into denial and this quasi half recovery stage and to recognizing my own mistakes, holding myself accountable. Also, I’ve been far more open than I have in my entire life on this trip. I don’t know if it’s the people, or being forced outside of my comfort zone, learning so many new things about the world. I’ve definitely opened up and found myself a bit more.”

Journeying outside of my comfort zone gave me the same sense of self that Bonginkosi received from his faith. I have felt like I understand myself and where I come from far better after these past four months. I believe the fact that I’m now able to accept the mental illnesses that have followed me throughout my life thus far and discuss them openly is a mark of this progress. I also have gained a better sense of purpose. Just as Bonginkosi understands his purpose as serving God, South Africa as showed me that my purpose is based in helping others.
Writing Our Last Chapter
Determining Our Legacies

"Legacy is the fiber of a net that connects people, societies, and cultures," (Hunter 2008).

When I asked my participants what legacy they would like to leave and how they’d like to represent that for their friends and family, I got a variety of beautiful and unique answers. Yet, they all shared a common thread. Everyone hoped that the physical representation of their legacy would represent what they did in their life and the love that they put into their relationships. They hoped that it would comfort their loved ones in one of the hardest moments that a person has to face. Often, joy would spread across their faces as they described the significance behind certain pieces that would be included, and the stories that would accompany them. Ayanda beautifully described that the stories behind the material objects are the most important components of her representation:

“I believe that every person that I meet has impacted my life. Therefore, I have made an impact on someone else’s life, and I should be remembered. Even in a small way. Even if it is such my favorite song. Like if that song came on, they should remember that was my favorite song and just start dancing. I do want to be remembered, but I want to be remembered in memories that we shared good times. Things that we cherish. Things that we talk about. Things that we share. I would leave something that is a piece of me. My artwork. Like with music, it will always be there. Something like that for me will always leave an impact,” (Interview 2018).

“What would your music and art say about you?” I asked.

“It’s storytelling. When I give you my CD, there will be a story behind it. They will be there to pass on the story because they understand who I am from the perspective of family. Therefore, that person will be able to tell my life story through my CDs.”

Other participants, like Nkanyezi, thought about their legacy in a much more abstract manner:

“Let’s say you have great great grandchildren down the road. What would you want them to know about who you are?” I asked.
“He would see the best in you no matter what life choices you made. He’d always be by your side and see the best in humanity. Basically, a guy who saw all the humanity in life. It’s not easy. Sometimes it’s shitty, but I strive for that. I want them to know that I was that sort of person. Sentimental sometimes. Hardworking. Those are the kinds of qualities that I want them to remember me by. Who struggled to talk about himself,” he laughed (Interview 2018).

“How have you ever thought about what legacy you want to leave?”

“The way I see it, my legacy is not something I can write down like a will. It’s through actions. Those are the things I want people to remember me by. They have to be based in my human interactions more than anything else. My affection because I’m an affectionate person. I want to pass on the love, whatever that means. Even if they don’t get it at first, at that critical moment in their life, this guy really loved me. I feel that’s what my grandpa has done for me,” he paused before continuing. “The familial legacies. Those are the kinds of legacies that I would look forward to rather than anything materialistic. That’s the love you talk about. I hear my grandmother, who is in her late 70s, talk about her dad in the fondest of memories. I wish to be remembered like that. Not every day, but that’s the legacy I want.”

Finally, participants also felt that their loved ones should listen to the lessons that they had learned throughout their lives. They hoped that future generations would remember what was important to them and use those principles to guide themselves through life:

“A child must go to church and know where he comes from, but he must still respect his Zulu culture. I would say go to church and pray. You must respect the creator and your elders,” (Thulisile, interview 2018).

“I would talk about how I love doing community work, how they could help out with that in some sort of way, especially in education. Also, for them to live their life as best as they could,” (Nkanyezi, interview 2018).

“Mm. I think it’s important that they must know what you like and what you don’t like. I believe the most important thing is education. To be honest, I think I’ve given my daughter the best education and she must pass it on,” (Nofoto, interview 2018).
Throughout my interviews, I heard some of the most personal parts of my participant’s lives, and I am so grateful that they were willing to share those stories with me. Hearing what they wanted to pass on to the next generations and the way they wanted their experience to have meaning after their passing was something I have never had the chance to do with members of my own family. I now know how I can do my part to pass on their legacies in my own life, and I obtained a better understanding of how my life can have an impact on others. It has helped me understand myself better and encouraged me to share parts of myself that I felt I couldn’t in the past. I began this project thinking I would discover the impact of mortality on identity. Instead, I found how other’s lives have an impact on my own identity.

Who am I? I don’t have a definite answer, and that’s ok. I can say that I’m an empathetic person. I’m determined. I’m determined to have meaningful relationships. I’m determined to help others. I love both people and animals, and I want to make the world better for them. I have had my own struggles, but I’m ready to overcome them. I now realize that those parts may be able to help others, so they are worthy of sharing rather than hiding. Thinking and talking about mortality has helped me understand life. It has helped me value my own. It has helped me identify parts of myself that I am proud of and parts of myself that I want to work on. It has helped me make a plan of how to get where I want to be while realizing that I should enjoy the journey there. I’m able to accept the mistakes I have made and move past them. I’m starting to see the impact I want to leave behind, and I believe this project is one step in forming my legacy.

****************************************************************

“Let’s talk about death, baby,” I sang to Makayla before we began my second interview, focused on the topic of mortality.

“Alright then,” she laughed. “Is death the final ending to life?”

“I don’t believe that death has to be the final ending to life. Not even in the sense of an afterlife, I’m very unsure of that, but more in the sense of the impact of one’s existence. I think that you can affect life on earth through your time here and what you chose to do with that. Whether that was a grand gesture that impacted history or the relationships that you had and
memories that you made with people impacting them after you are no longer here. I think that’s a really cool concept,” (Stephan, interview 2018).

“If you were to make something for your loved ones, what would you make and why?”

“I feel like I’m still so young, so undeveloped. That’s how I see myself still, kind of like a blank canvas that has to be… or a sculpture to be molded by all the life experiences to come. I was thinking of painting the different aspects of my life\(^6\) that I wanted to pass on and be remembered by. The last piece would be a blank canvas to represent all the life experience that I have ahead of me and that they can add to. I definitely think that’s going to be a component. I definitely want to include pictures of real life events. It’s really important to me to embrace that history and see what it was like in real time. I know I appreciate looking back at life in that was because it’s almost like being there alongside them.”

“Have you thought about this before?”

“Actually, no! Even though I wrote these questions, I didn’t think about it,” I said laughing at my own avoidance of the topic of death.

“What would it say about you?”

“I guess I want to be remembered as a generous and kind person. Someone who tried their best to help others and make life more enjoyable. Fun. Genuine. Someone who stood up for their principles and others. Just made people happy. It would show how I think. My sense of humor. I want to incorporate my life history, so they can understand where I went. Maybe some interests. Like a collection of music\(^7\) that meant a lot to me so that can be appreciated.”

“What would your family think about it?”

“I would hope that they’d enjoy it. I would hope that they would think of the good times we spent together. The fun things we did. Find solace and joy in a very hard thing. I hope they could look back at it if they were having a hard day and feel like it was a source of comfort. I hope that they could use it to tell stories with. One of my interviewees mentioned that. She said it’s more about storytelling, and I thought that was beautiful. Collections of photos aren’t just

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\(^6\) Pictures of the paintings I have created can be found in Appendix II

\(^7\) The playlist that I have made can be found in Appendix II
about the photos themselves, but also the stories that are told with them. I definitely want those stories to be passed down. Pictures, artwork, and recommendations can only say so much about an entire human life. A lot of things that came up throughout my interviews was the power of words. I really enjoyed that, so I think the way to incorporate that in my own would be that the living would pass down the words for me.”

“How do you think your future family will view it if you start now?”

“I think they would like it. I would definitely like it. I think being…if I continue to make things throughout life and you could see how I changed, it would be like a time capsule almost. All the changes along the way would be really cool to see. I would feel like they would resonate with different parts of my life depending on where they are in their lives. That might guide them through something they’re going through or make them feel like they have a connection with a person they never met.”

“Do you see your life in parts or as a whole?”

“I’d like to say I see my life as a whole. That’s what I’d like to answer this question with, but realistically, I see it in parts. Like childhood, that version of me, high school me, college me. Even in college, I see it as freshman Nicole who was very different than Nicole recognizing mental illness Nicole. I even think South Africa Nicole is different. Again, I think that stems from the fact that I am so young and I’m going through so many transition periods, but I think I’ll get the most out of my experience in life when I can look at it as a whole. But right now, I’m still seeing it in parts. I’m still figuring out how it all pieces together and how it will direct me.”

“Do you think it’s important to know who you are?”

“Yes. I think it’s very important which is why I did this project. I think knowing who you are helps guide you in where you are going. It helps ground you in where you are. It helps you be more available to others. I think it gives your life a certain stability or foundation of contentment if you can define who you are. A foundation to work with. If you know who you are and you’re happy with who you are, that’s a good place to start when it comes to thinking about your life.”
“What benefits did describing your life have?”

“I think it’s not something I think about often at all. Going over it now and thinking about it during my project has given me some aha moments into why I am the way I am and why I’ve had the struggles I’ve had. Before I came on this trip, I didn’t know why I was the way I am and why I had those struggles because I didn’t see a reason. Honestly, I still don’t see a reason because I do feel like I’ve been very lucky with the way my life has played out. I know brain chemistry and other things comes into that, but it has made me a little more understanding of why I am the way I am and how I can get to where I want to go. That has been very transformative and has given me more hope for the future than I’ve had which I greatly appreciate. In summary, it helps me make more sense of myself, my experience, and it’s helped me make a game plan to get where I want to be.”

“How has it helped you understand life more?”

“I think when I entered this project I saw life… I love life, I do enjoy it, but thinking about it gives me anxiety. I think throughout this time and throughout my time in South Africa, I’ve learned that that’s kind of how everyone is. No one really has their shit together, for lack of a better term, when it comes to that. I think I’ve come to appreciate, this is going to sound cliché but, life is more about working through that and finding yourself along the way rather than knowing yourself right now and going through every step of the way perfectly. I have learned to see more beauty in the fuck ups, more beauty in the twists and turns, more value in those than I had in the past.”

“How does death affect the meaning of life?”

“I think death makes us value life more. Knowing that it has to come to an end, but not knowing when the end is coming forces us to reconcile with the beauty that is life. This entire interview sounds so cheesy, but how crazy it is that we are actually here, and how crazy it is that we have autonomy and free will. I think death acts as a reminder that that’s not how it’s going to be forever, and that you have to figure out how you want to play your cards.”

“How does thinking about death change the way you view your own identity?”
“I think thinking about death makes me think more about the person I want to be, if I’m not that person yet. Or recognize parts of myself that I see as something I’m proud of. Thinking about death helps me keep in touch with who I am and how I can be the best version of myself and how I want to live.”

“Has death played a role in your identity?”

“A lot of people in my interviews said it did play a role in their identities because they were exposed to it so much. It changed their life so dramatically that part of their identity had to change with it, and that could have been for better or for worse. That was really shocking for me. When I asked that question, I didn’t think they would think about it in such literal terms. I thought they would think about it in terms of their own death rather than the death of others. I think that shows how social we are and how important it is to have other people in our lives that we care for. I think everyone’s life story included the death of a loved one. I guess for me, it hasn’t affected me in that way. More so in the way of contributing to the anxiety and the intense drive for perfection and drive to find something that I couldn’t define. I think that shaped me in a way.”

“How does death change the way we live?”

“Death is something that humanity has wondered about forever and will continue to be wondered about forever because it’s both the biggest certainty in life and the biggest uncertainty. We know it’s coming and we can’t stop it, but we don’t know what’s going to happen or what the result of it will be. Afterlife or what your impact was, or what your life meant for humanity and history. Death definitely changes the way we live because we have to confront that. You can see that in the way people approach religion and faith. The way people choose to do certain things. It’s normalized in that sense yet still completely taboo to talk about. I learned a lot from my interviews about how people let death affect their lives. I always saw it as something that made us put life back in perspective. To recognize how transient, it is and how fleeting it is, and direct that in whatever way you see fit. Hopefully, you take it in a positive way, but there are ways to take it in a negative way. Like not valuing life because life is short.”

“Does death make you think of the bigger picture?”
“Death makes me think of the bigger picture. Again, just thinking back on life and being someone who has struggled with the anxiety of not doing enough or not reaching my potential, and finding fulfillment, I think it definitely has forced me to look at the bigger picture. Before this project, I thought I was looking at the bigger picture, but I really wasn’t. I was focusing on the details that, in the end, really don’t matter.”

“In what way?”

“Now, I see it as…when you’re focusing so hard on what you want to accomplish and what you need to accomplish and what you should be and how you feel, you miss out on different parts of life because you’re trying so hard to live it. I know that sounds stupid, and I hope it makes some sort of sense. You’re focusing too hard on what you should be doing or what you think you should be doing that you’re not actually doing it. That’s what I’ve learned through talking to people about death more.”

“Do you like the way you think about death?”

“I think after this project, I like the way I think about it now. I definitely still have fear associated with it, and I don’t know if that will ever go away. I’m thinking about it in a much more manageable way. Before, I either didn’t think about it and was almost to the point of being apathetic about it, and I don’t know if that was because it was too big a concept to wrap my mind around or what, or it would overwhelm me. A lot of my interviewees, a lot of the older interviewees, would mention that death is a part of life. Part of the revolution of life. Part of the cycle. I always knew that on some level. Thinking about it in that way, by excluding it from the story, you’re excluding part of life. I don’t think you can completely fill your experience without addressing that part of life.”

“Are there any points in your life that seem more important?”

“Thinking about death definitely made me think about my relationships more. I talked a lot about my relationships in the first interview, but it just made it even more powerful how much I value them. Thinking about death also made me, not just right now but throughout this entire project, it made me recognize that I can slow down, and that I don’t need to rush through life. I don’t need to be 100% right now. I may never be 100%, but that could be ok.”
“Anything you’d like to add?”

“I’d like to add an ‘eish’ to be consistent with my other interviews. The presence of an ‘eish’ in an interview is statistically significant with a p value of less than .05,” I joked.

I would like to leave you with a quote from Ayanda that has summarized the lessons that I have learned throughout this project:

“I meet people daily. Different individuals. You get to take things and values from people. If I meet you and I like the way you carry yourself, that is something I cherish as well. You learn from what they are going through, and what is their journey in life,” (Interview 2018).

I was able to come to these conclusions through hearing other’s stories and lives. This process has emphasized the importance of sharing more of ourselves with those around us. Before this semester, I had only talked about my mental health struggles with my immediate family and three of my best friends. I decided that I had to reach out for support only 8 months ago, I was unable to even say what was going on out loud to the people I loved most. I had to text them about the way I had been struggling for years because I was so closed off. On this trip, I have talked to more people about my mental health than I ever had before. It has showed me the value of sharing your life with others, a process that is beneficial for both members of the conversation.

My classmate, Sophia, helped me realize how little we know about those we are closest to when she asked to view my interview questions one day while working on our projects together,

“Wow, I don’t think I would know the answers to these questions for my best friends or even my parents. You must feel really connected to your interviewees.”

She was 100% correct, and I recommend that you investigate the answers to these questions for yourself and your loved ones. Talking about our lives, our identities, and our ideas on death has allowed me to develop stronger bonds of friendship with my participants and a stronger understanding of different perspectives on the world. I have appreciated those
conversations more than they will ever know, and for that reason, they have inspired me to share more of my own experience in this ISP in hopes that I can do the same for you.
Primary Sources


Thandeka. (2018, April 4 and 8). (N. Stephan, Interviewer)


Secondary Sources


analysis (Doctoral dissertation, Stellenbosch: University of Stellenbosch).


Appendix

I. Interview Guides

*Interview 1*

1. Introduce myself and the study to the participant

2. Create a more comfortable environment for discussion and sharing
   
   a. What is your name?
   
   b. What is your age?
   
   c. How long have you lived in Cato Manor?

3. “Could you please tell me your life story?”

4. Reference interview guide 1 to gather any additional information that has not been covered

*Interview 1 guide:*

- Erik Erikson questions of identity: how would you answer the following questions:
  
  o Who am I?
  
  o How did I come to be?
  
  o Where is my life going?

- What life events played large roles in shaping you as a person?

- How has your life experience shaped the way you see yourself? The way others see you?

- Do you see your life in parts or as a whole?

- Do you think your past has/will influence your future? How so? How much of an impact does your past have on your future?

- What are your values?

- What are your goals?
• What makes you similar to other people in your life? What makes you different?

• What gives your life meaning?

• Why do you think your life has followed the path it has so far? Do you want this path to change?
  ○ If so, how would you change it?

• Do you feel in control of your life? Why or why not?

• Do you have any regrets?

• Has your identity changed throughout your life?

• Do you think it’s important to know who you are?
  ○ Does knowing who you are help you impact others/the world?

• What benefits did describing your life have? Did describing it have any negative effects?
  ○ Did describing your life help you understand yourself more?

**Interview 2**

1. Introduce the topic of mortality and death
   
   a. See interview 2 guide

2. Now that we’ve talked about death, are there parts of your life that stand out or seem more important?

   a. Are there any things you would like to change or add to your life story?

**Interview 2 guide**

• What are your views on your own mortality? On death?
  ○ How often do you think about death/mortality?
  ○ Have any events made you think about these ideas? Which events and why?

• Is death the final ending to life?
  ○ Is there way a person can continue to "live" if they are no longer alive?
  ○ Is there a way a person can affect life on earth through the memory others have of them?
• What are your feelings towards death?
  o How do you cope with the idea of death?

• Do you think your identity has changed as you have grown older and more aware of your mortality?
  o How did you view your mortality when you were younger? My age?

• Is it important to be remembered after your passing?

• How would you like to be remembered after your passing?
  o Have you ever thought about this question?
    ▪ Examples of legacy: genetic (children, family), material (personal belongings), Historical (rituals, stories, traditions), symbolic (attaching name to something that will exist after death), values (passing down of beliefs) (Hunter 2008)

• What do you want people to know about you?

• If you were to make something for your loved ones to look at to remind themselves of you after you pass on, what would you make and why?
  a. What would be included?
  b. What would this say about you?
  c. What would your family think about when seeing it?
  d. Do you think it would be beneficial to make this? Why or why not?
  e. *construct a plan to create the product of their choice*

• Does death make you think of the bigger picture?

• How has death played a role in shaping your identity?
  o Does thinking about death change the way you view your identity?

• Do you think death can be a motivator?

• Do you think death can change the way we live?

• How does death affect the meaning of life?
II. My Representation of my Legacy

a. Paintings

In this painting, I hoped to represent the importance of relationships and interactions in my life. The different primary colors of the hands represent the unique perspectives and experiences each person holds. When we come together, this knowledge is allowed to blend together to create something new and often beautiful. The interactions between myself and others has brought me to where I am today and an integral component of my legacy.

The interweaving loops of this painting serve to represent the connections between humanity, animals, and the environment. I have learned throughout this semester that everything lives in relationship, a concept that I believe is important to remember in our daily lives (Bruzas 2018). When I think of this philosophy, it helps remind me to be respectful to everything and everyone in my world.

The focal point of this painting is a representation of a viewpoint. There have been times in my life where I felt that all I could see was darkness, and the potential for a happier life was just on the periphery. I still feel this way often, but my experience is South Africa has made me realize that the life in the periphery is obtainable. I hope that this can remind others to search for light in the darkness.
Music has always played a large role in my life. From listening to The Beatles with my father as a child to bonding with new friends through the exchange of songs, music has served as a source of comfort for me. In times of happiness and sadness, I have used music to guide me. These songs have helped me throughout my life and remind me of certain memories. I was also inspired to create this playlist after Ayanda mentioned that music can be used to share stories. Music can bring me back to an exact moment in time and brings me closer to those around me. I
hope that this playlist can help others in my life experience this and facilitate the exchange of stories.

III. Consent Forms

Consent Form For Adult Respondents in English

CONSENT FORM

1. Brief description of the purpose of this project
   My ISP will research the impact that mortality, or recognizing that life ends eventually, has on how someone views themselves and lives their life. I’m interested in this topic because it affects all people and people have very different ways of addressing mortality. In this study, you will be asked to participate in two interviews on two different days. The interviews will ask you to describe your life story, answer questions about your identity, and describe your views on death and mortality. We will also talk about what you would include in a piece of art that is meant to help your loved ones remember you after you pass on. All of the interviews in this study are a conversation between the two of us, so please feel free to ask me any questions about my personal beliefs or anything else if you are curious. By signing this form, you are agreeing to participate in all aspects of this study and have the information that you share published in the final ISP project. You have the option to refuse to participate in the study or end your participation at any time you wish.

Rights Notice
In an endeavor to uphold the ethical standards of all SIT ISP proposals, this study has been reviewed and approved by a Local Review Board or SIT Institutional Review Board. If at any time, you feel that you are at risk or exposed to unreasonable harm, you may terminate and stop the interview. Please take some time to carefully read the statements provided below.

   a. Privacy - all information you present in this interview may be recorded and safeguarded. If you do not want the information recorded, you need to let the interviewer know.

   b. Anonymity - all names in this study will be kept anonymous unless you choose otherwise.

   c. Confidentiality - all names will remain completely confidential and fully protected by the interviewer. By signing below, you give the interviewer full responsibility to uphold this contract and its contents. The interviewer will also sign a copy of this contract and give it to you.

I understand that I will receive no gift or direct benefit for participating in the study.
I confirm that the learner has given me the address of the nearest School for International Training Study Abroad Office should I wish to go there for information. (404 Cowey Park, Cowey Rd, Durban).
I know that if I have any questions or complaints about this study that I can contact anonymously, if I wish, the Director/s of the SIT South Africa Community Health Program (Zed McGladdery 0846834982)

_________________________                                 _____________________________
Participant’s name printed                                         Your signature and date

___________________                                 _____________________________
Interviewer’s name printed                                        Interviewer’s signature and date

I can read English. If the participant cannot read, the onus is on the project author to ensure that the quality of consent is nonetheless without reproach.
Consent to Use of Independent Study Project (ISP)

Access, Use, and Publication of ISP/FSP

Student Name: Nicole Stephan

Email Address: nstephan2@wisc.edu

Title of ISP/FSP: “Eish!”: an autoethnographic investigation of the impact of mortality on identity in Cato Manor

Program and Term/Year: Community Health and Social Policy, Spring 2018

Student research (Independent Study Project, Field Study Project) is a product of field work and as such students have an obligation to assess both the positive and negative consequences of their field study. Ethical field work, as stipulated in the SIT Policy on Ethics, results in products that are shared with local and academic communities; therefore copies of ISP/FSPs are returned to the sponsoring institutions and the host communities, at the discretion of the institution(s) and/or community involved.

By signing this form, I certify my understanding that:

1. I retain ALL ownership rights of my ISP/FSP project and that I retain the right to use all, or part, of my project in future works.

2. World Learning/SIT Study Abroad may publish the ISP/FSP in the SIT Digital Collections, housed on World Learning’s public website.

3. World Learning/SIT Study Abroad may archive, copy, or convert the ISP/FSP for non-commercial use, for preservation purposes, and to ensure future accessibility.
   - World Learning/SIT Study Abroad archives my ISP/FSP in the permanent collection at the SIT Study Abroad local country program office and/or at any World Learning office.
   - In some cases, partner institutions, organizations, or libraries in the host country house a copy of the ISP/FSP in their own national, regional, or local collections for enrichment and use of host country nationals.

4. World Learning/SIT Study Abroad has a non-exclusive, perpetual right to store and make available, including electronic online open access, to the ISP/FSP.

5. World Learning/SIT Study Abroad websites and SIT Digital Collections are publicly available via the Internet.

6. World Learning/SIT Study Abroad is not responsible for any unauthorized use of the ISP/FSP by any third party who might access it on the Internet or otherwise.

7. I have sought copyright permission for previously copyrighted content that is included in this ISP/FSP allowing distribution as specified above.
Withdrawal of Access, Use, and Publication of ISP/FSP

Given your agreement to abide by the SIT Policy on Ethics, withdrawing permission for publication may constitute an infringement; the Academic Director will review to ensure ethical compliance.

☐ I hereby withdraw permission for World Learning/SIT Study Abroad to include my ISP/FSP in the Program’s office permanent collection.  
Reason:

☐ I hereby withdraw permission for World Learning/SIT Study Abroad to release my ISP/FSP in any format to individuals, organizations, or libraries in the host country for educational purposes as determined by World Learning/SIT Study Abroad.  
Reason:

☐ I hereby withdraw permission for World Learning/SIT Study Abroad to publish my ISP/FSP on its websites and in any of its digital/electronic collections, or to reproduce and transmit my ISP/FSP electronically.  
Reason:

Nicole Stephan  29/4/2018
Student Signature  Date

Academic Director has reviewed student reason(s) for withdrawing permission to use and agrees it does not violate the SIT Study Abroad Policy on Ethics.
# Human Subjects Review

**LRB/IRB ACTION FORM**

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<td><strong>Date Submitted:</strong></td>
<td>23 March 2018</td>
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<td><strong>Program:</strong></td>
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### Type of review:
- Exempt  
- **Expedited**
- Full

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<tr>
<td>John McGladdery</td>
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<td>Clive Bruzas</td>
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<td>Robin Joubert</td>
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### LRB REVIEW BOARD ACTION:
- ✔️ Approved as submitted
- — Approved pending changes
- — Requires full IRB review in Vermont
- — Disapproved

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**Form below for IRB Vermont use only:**

**Research requiring full IRB review. ACTION TAKEN:**

- __ approved as submitted  
- __ approved pending submission or revisions  
- __ disapproved

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