



SPIRASI: IN TOUCH

**AN ETHNOGRAPHIC, CASE-STUDY BASED
ASSESSMENT ON THE UNDERSTANDING OF
REHABILITATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF
SPIRASI CLIENTS**

NARRATIVES WRITTEN BY JAMAL BURNS

Table of Contents:

Background Information	3
Profile 1: Checkmate	5
Profile 2: Building Love, Breaking Barriers	7
Profile 3: Love has no Language	9
Profile 4: A Representative Republic	11
Profile 5: Dreaming of Confidence	13
Composite Story: The Intern I was...	15
The Strong Song	19
Acknowledgements	23

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

SPIRASI currently serves as Ireland's only organisation focusing on the needs of survivors of torture who are asylum seekers, refugees, or members of other disadvantaged migrant groups. SPIRASI offers a range of integration and rehabilitation programmes including, but not limited to, educational courses and psychosocial therapy. The overall aim of the programmes is to help clients transition into the workplace, mainstream training, and education. Through the uniqueness of SPIRASI's integration programmes, SPIRASI has successfully empowered more than 2,400 individuals— from diverse nationalities, cultures, religions, languages, and educational backgrounds— achieve various places and levels in Irish society.

SPIRASI recognizes that rehabilitation and integration are concepts that are not new. Though, in recent years, these concepts have garnered wide attention in public and educational spheres. What is clear from the contemporary discussion of rehabilitation and integration, is that, depending on who is talking, their understanding of the concepts vary. SPIRASI thus recognizes the importance of interpreting rehabilitation and inclusion from the perspective of those who are being rehabilitated

The continued advancement of SPIRASI's clientele has been at the core of its ethos. There have been few studies conducted on the quality of the services through a qualitative lens. Hence, the following ethnographic survey was developed to provide an essential platform for clients to express their understandings of rehabilitation.

Through the narration of client’s actual stories, *SPIRASI: In Touch* highlights SPIRASI’s acute awareness of its rehabilitative practices.

¹The narratives presented in this piece are derived from client interviews. With consent from each client, the interviewer transformed the conversation into the stories shown below. These stories give us a glimpse into the lives of SPIRASI clients with a particular emphasis on their interactions at SPIRASI and desires for rehabilitation and integration. The overall goals of this document are to describe the intangible benefits of SPIRASI, present SPIRASI’s motives and highlight the total connection—to clients and other individuals impacted by the organization—that SPIRASI promotes through their services.

The ethnography further explores the ongoing conversation of rehabilitation by paralleling the stories of the clients to the everyday lives of those who work in SPIRASI. SPIRASI works to transform any individual who enters the organisation, from interns to clients themselves. Additionally, SPIRASI recognizes the impact of rehabilitation as dual folded: each involved in the rehabilitation process is bound to change by the other’s presence. *SPIRASI: In Touch* works to describe a select few of those impacts.

¹ For confidentiality purposes, the specific names of clients were not revealed.

PROFILE 1: CHECKMATE

Chess, tennis, and backgammon are all games of strategy and wit. The perfect tilt of a racket against a ball traveling through the air at an unmeasurable velocity, the calculated movement of a bishop, and the subtle repositioning of a red-checkered piece, all require the understanding of the object in front of it. By their very nature, these games cannot consist of sporadic movements, any slight miscalculation and you will face an incredible defeat.

English is much like these games; it requires strategic maneuvering and mental acrobatics. Unlike the games of my pastime, when I first arrived in Ireland, I did not find joy in English. It was an arduous journey. I could not understand a word of it. Distant from the games mentioned above, it was not an activity one could, "pick up" and try. It was a necessity for survival, and I was slowly slipping. Wherever I went, I required someone to accompany me, acting as a translator.

English was my checkmate.

I did not foresee myself surviving in Ireland. I watched as the River Liffey rose, and it felt like I was slowly going to be engulfed by those waters.

My friends who accompanied me on my trips to the doctor, dentist, and more, most likely grew tired of how overbearing I had become. It was at a moment of wonder and desperation where a close friend of mine mentioned English classes at, "SPIRASI."

By the time I discovered SPIRASI, it was toward the close of their academic year. I was only in my first course for two months, but the wealth of knowledge that rushed through me slowly began to make me feel empowered.

I returned the following school year and began to become more immersed and entranced by the language. I started to understand that a sentence's structure was merely a precise movement of my tongue.

After the close of my first complete academic year, I desired to advance my English even more. I was beginning to make it not a task but a hobby. Due to this desire, I enrolled in a summer English course. I recall one of the first classes. It was there that I mentioned that, "A subject comes before a verb in a sentence." My teacher's reaction was visceral and positive; a pleasantly surprised grin reached each corner of his face.

As the class went on, I continued to absorb information. Words that were once locked like an elusive video game character were starting to unveil themselves to me. The most memorable day of that summer class was one where our teacher suggested that we play a game, "Kahoot."

The game consisted of eight questions related to vocabulary we discussed in class. It was a combination of wit and speed. The quicker one went, the more points they accumulated. Toward the end of the game, the top 3 players were ranked, and there I saw my alias for the game, "Dynamic Rhino" on the screen. I had attained first place.

English was once a field I did not venture toward, a board that represented a cataclysmic future, but now I do not require anyone to translate once unintelligible sentences for me. I can speak with the freedom of knowing I have conquered the game that is English.

I have won and, with a sigh of relief, can say:

Game. Set. Match.

'I have devoted myself to a life of spreading love, using my extra heart for good.'

PROFILE 2: BUILDING LOVE, BREAKING BARRIERS

Upon my arrival in Dublin, I was intimidated. I knew nothing of Ireland, let alone Dublin. How was I supposed to navigate a vast and seemingly never-ending place? All I knew for sure was that my ability to exist here was due to the family reunification program. My husband settled in Dublin quite some time ago and now I had the opportunity to reunite with him.

Knowing virtually no English, I was taken to SPIRASI by my husband. I recall sitting idly—my eyes raced across an unfamiliar office space, my hands were tightly locked together, and I aimlessly twiddled my thumbs. I attempted, and failed, to interpret anything my husband was saying to Andreas, then a stranger to me. The next thing I remembered was being handed a form. I was perplexed. I examined the paper before I grasped it entirely; it was at this moment where I completed registration for English classes.

Before I knew it, I was in a classroom. My eyes, outpacing the speed of my mind, again began to race. I was utterly frightened. We went around the room and introduced ourselves. In a muted voice, I spoke my name. A million thoughts rushed through my mind, none of which were in English. I recalled what I left behind. I abandoned my studies completely. I wanted to be a medical doctor, and now I was starting from what felt like square subzero. The very same goals that graced my fingertips before I arrived, now felt like a near impossible journey.

As the days passed by, I felt little change. I held onto my thoughts as if they were sacred. I had no desire to communicate. Each passing day

felt like a month in a vacuum. And, as the science goes, in voids, there are no sounds, only silence.

Despite these feelings of doubt and dismay, the teacher of my course pushed my classmates and me toward incredible heights. The words that sat in front of me began to dwindle from a disorganized mountain into a comprehensible mound.

The subtle interactions I had with my teacher were a causal factor in our closeness. The relationships that SPIRASI promoted began to tug at the curtain of fear I had. All along, I was not only able to understand the language that once consumed me in fear, but I was able to read it in victorious glee.

My motivation and recollection of my time turning pages and pages of medical language did not leave me. My dreams, coupled with SPIRASI's generosity and commitment, unlocked a new feeling inside me- an unstoppable, tenacious insurgency. I began to emerge from the cocoon of that vacuum into a butterfly. In a way, I feel like I always had those wings. But, it was only the fact that I was pushed—like a bird—by the hardworking, tireless individuals of SPIRASI, which allowed me to spread them.

A little less than a year later, I gave a speech at our graduation. In glory and gratitude, I exclaimed to a wide-eyed audience that I now have the confidence to speak English, mistakes included, triumphantly.

My dreams of entering the medical field have not faded. I will complete my goal no matter the barrier associated. If we as refugees can chip away at the stone of language, we will be able to chip away at any barrier that presents itself along our paths. My dreams have not faded but have metamorphosed into a more perceptible reality. For that, I can never thank SPIRASI enough.

"I knew that politics held an importance to me. I did not and, in some ways, still do not fully understand how I am a politicized object."

PROFILE 3: LOVE HAS NO LANGUAGE

I arrived in Ireland in March of 2015. I escaped the clutches of a war that was waging on in my home country of Syria. Although I was here physically, I was not whole. There were people in my country I left behind. People that I loved. People that I knew I was never going to see again. Some of these people had died, and others were bound to live in destitute for the rest of their life.

Upon my entrance to Ireland, I knew a little English. Quite frankly, I had little desire to remove myself from the comfort that Arabic and Greek— the two tongues I have grown an affinity for— granted me. I lived my life in Ireland, for a long time, in a hollow shell. A shadow. When I first arrived, I did not live in the greater Dublin area. I was a bit north of the region. I kept to myself often. It was not that I was afraid to speak English. I was fearful of losing the connection I had to my motherland.

As I moved from my initial housing to my new house in the greater Dublin area, I realized that there was a dramatic shift from a lively murmur of Arabic to a world of accents, all trying to speak English.

Time passed, and while my comfort with Arabic and Greek remained, I started to understand that English was a prerequisite for a fundamentally happy life in this country.

I heard from a friend about SPIRASI, and when I approached the off grey, manila building, I was contemplative. Could this be a place of rehabilitation? Of happiness and growth? When I rang the reception button and entered, I was greeted with great joy. These individuals wanted nothing but the best for me.

I spoke little English, then again, I hadn't attempted to practice. I shielded myself from the sharpness of a foreign language. But, when I began the beginners' English course, my teacher was a woman with a beautiful soul, so kind and willing. I was able to let down my wall. The hollowness I once felt began to be filled with happiness and love. I knew that the necessity that drove me to learn English was now the unexpected granter of my joy.

I continued with English, even discovering meetings that were outside of SPIRASI for learners who wanted to practice communication skills. The more and more I practiced English, the more laughs I shared, the more glee filled my face and cheeks, the more I saw the smile that once engrossed my face reveal itself once more.

Recently, I have discovered that my heart beats at faster than average rates. I attribute this to having a heart larger than average. Honestly, it is scary to think about sometimes. But, now, I have devoted myself to a life of spreading love, using my extra heart for good. Through the help of SPIRASI, and practicing English, I have come to realize the truth of it all.

The reality of life speaks volumes; people die. Words don't. Words live forever. Solidifying my love for those who fell victim to acts of violence is something that can only be conveyed through language. The goal in my life now is to free others from the shadow that I once walked in. Whether it be Greek, Arabic, or English, I can cement my love for an eternity.

αγάπη

حب

Love.

"If we as refugees can chip away at the stone of language, we will be able to chip away at any barrier that presents itself along our paths."

PROFILE 4: A REPRESENTATIVE REPUBLIC

The current political climate is one rooted in humanizing, or dehumanizing, individual existence. It is a scale that holds my life on one end and the tipping weight of money on the other. Am I not supposed to be enamored in the very thing that controls my existence?

I have always enjoyed politics, even before arriving in Dublin. I was an avid searcher of ideas, commentary, and political ideology. But coming here, the commentary I once avidly searched for was now something I avoided. I knew that politics held importance to me. I did not, and, in some ways, still, do not fully understand how I am a politicized object. From the moment I stepped foot in Ireland, I felt as if I were nothing more than a label stamped on me by an industry.

I am naturally introverted, so turning into myself was not abnormal. I kept to myself in various ways when I arrived here. The most notable was not speaking English. It was peculiar. I could never tell whether or not people thought I did not know English or that I was shy.

Nevertheless, I heard about SPIRASI and quickly enrolled in a class. As someone keen on politics, I knew that English was an essential tool in understanding not only the current political climate but my existence within it.

Admittedly, English was much tougher than I thought it would be. It was filled with subtle nuances. I was not the star pupil in my courses. Instead, I sat in the back, listened attentively, and wrote. The only times I spoke in class were when took breaks or did verbal exercises.

The fear of being marketed as a political ploy, the intimidation of the world judging my existence, it all controlled me. It all ran through my mind, but as I sat silent, most would not be aware of the complexities of my thought.

SPIRASI has slowly but surely marked my transition away from the fear of being something purely political. I am treated, as I should be, as a multi-dimensional being when I enter a classroom. I am not merely a refugee, but a scholar, a political scientist, I am anything that I can muster up the thought to create.

English has become more natural to me, but I have only been in SPIRASI for two months. I am not a connoisseur of the language. I have some ways to go until I can fully feel as if I had made English something I've mastered. Political commentary still confuses me, but I am sure that in its current climate, it confuses just about anyone.

"I can speak with the freedom of knowing I have conquered the game that is English. I have won and, with a sigh of relief, can say: Game. Set. Match."

PROFILE 5: DREAMING FOR CONFIDENCE

I do not have an expansive life behind me. Unlike many of the people I see at SPIRASI, I am significantly younger. I am eighteen. Most people are well into their forties; they have experienced twice the life I have. Naturally, anyone with my vantage point would be afraid. And I was.

My hands clamped up, my stomach in knots, the fear bolted down my face in the form of sweat. I was terrified. How was I supposed to exist in Ireland? So young, so susceptible. I had a few family members here, but I was no longer in my infancy. I was expected to learn life on my own soon. I was terrified. I lacked all confidence. When I began taking classes at SPIRASI in May of 2018, I was quiet. I did not attempt to break out of my shell. I sat in the middle of the classroom so that I could have a human blockade to cover my face.

I would listen attentively, each and every day, with the occasional drifting thought. I would catch myself dreaming about what my life would be like if I were a part of Ireland's National Cricket team. I love cricket, but I often snapped right back into place. I never allowed my thoughts to roam for too long. As much as I loved cricket, I loved learning more. It was a muse for me. But, the confidence that I lacked would beg to differ.

All I wanted was confidence. I mean, how was I supposed to have confidence in myself when I never stayed in one place long enough to find out who I was? Before arriving in Ireland, I lived in Greece for a year and a half. It was there where my love for learning grew. The history and art, the math required to build such a marvelous landscape, it all fascinated me. Before then, I lived in Pakistan and spent my pastime playing cricket, watching as the brown sand rose with every play, creating a million dust clouds. I had barriers in those places. Social situations would send my body into states of shock. I could not let anyone in, due to the fear of my existence being temporary.

In both of my former homes, my fears materialized. My existence was temporary. Spirasi was just another foreign land. Yet, I managed to find some familiarity in this new space. One student in the class reminded me of my mother. She was calm, funny, and rather lax. I slowly started to speak to her and her husband. From this speaking grew my telling of jokes and the spread of overall laughter. Unlike the cold, rainy weather of Dublin, my soul grew overwhelmed by love and warmth.

Shortly after befriending the two, I started to gain a bit more traction when it came to being confident. No, I am not wholly confident. But I am willing to speak more in class and introduce myself to new people.

Spirasi has helped me continue to foster my love for others. I now see my dream of self-confidence as feasible. In a way, it takes confidence to dream in the first place.

COMPOSITE STORY: The Intern I was...

Author's note:

SPIRASI works to understand the overarching conversation of rehabilitation. This composite story will serve as a basis to highlight yet another dimension of that story. When developing this study, we noted several commonalities between individual descriptions of the day to day interactions that occurred in SPIRASI. Despite these similarities, when developing the individual stories above, there was an organic distinction between each narrative. Read together, these individual stories highlight common themes of empowerment, language, and togetherness.

An essential aspect of this piece is to capture multiple dimensions on the conversation of rehabilitation. Thus far, the piece has centered, rightfully so, on the voice of a SPIRASI client. Below, we create a composite story to capture the common threads of everyday life at SPIRASI. The composite story is told from the perspective of SPIRASI interns. As this further dimensionalizes the conversation of rehabilitation and provides an accurate portrayal of daily functions within SPIRASI.

I was a receptionist:

I am at the front desk, unenthusiastically awaiting one of my first independent activities: being a receptionist. The glitz and glamour of reception do not exist, I thought to myself. You pick up a phone, open doors, respond to emails; I could not foresee the fun in that. To my

surprise, my first day manning the reception desk was enthralling.

Reception was not just phone calls, it was communication. It was not just opening doors physically, but metaphorically. It was interaction. What I did not realize when I was reluctant to the concept, was that many individuals start their initial interaction with SPIRASI at the reception desk. This was a position of trust.

I was a teacher:

A whirlwind of clients stepped into the classroom. Their faces are lively. The room increasingly filled with energy. I could not believe how committed to learning these students were. Before I began to teach, I shadowed teachers and created lesson plans. However, no amount of preparation could have prepared me for this class.

Each student had a personality unique and bright. They kept me on my toes. I made mistakes along the way, those inevitable mishaps on worksheets, or the occasional mispronunciation of a word. It happened consistently. After seeing my students be unnervingly themselves in the class, I decided to relax a bit. I danced and frolicked across the room. I slipped. I got back up, and everyone laughed.

These times being in the classroom truly taught me how to be myself. I was not only an instructor but a student as well. My student's confidence transcended onto me, and that was a gift I will hold forever.

I was a Historian:

Piles of files sat in front of my face. They needed sorting, filing, and transcribing. I viewed this not as a cumbersome task, but as an opportunity to be an excavator. What was before me were the stories

of clients who were seeking asylum, who set out on dangerous voyages to touch the glistening sparkle of peace.

I was to transcribe these paper files into online documents. I was transitioning written word into a vast, floating database. As I shuffled through these papers, the stories that existed between them transformed my view. I interacted with clients that went through treachery, yet they enveloped me in a blanket of happiness and joy. Further discovering their files, I realized they underwent a plethora of psychosocial assistance from SPIRASI.

These files were not complete. One can never get the full story of someone in between the folds of sheets paper. All I knew was that I mentally marked each file, "triumphant" in my head. As their stories continue to unravel here in Ireland, I recognize that their armor of peace will continue to be molded out of the iron of trust, tenacity, and time.

I was an interviewer:

I am sitting in a room with yellow walls. Adjacent to me is a large window, which allows for beautiful rose-colored sunlight to grace the faces of all that are in that room. There is a bit of murmur before the interview starts; we are just chatting about anything that comes to mind. There is neither rhyme nor a reason for our conversation, and that's the way we liked it.

I had to quiet the conversation down and begin to ask questions. I wanted to stay on track as much as we could, to obtain the information I was told to retrieve: how did these clients feel about SPIRASI?

After my first question, I realized even more so than usual, how connected everyone in the room was. We all had certain expectations of one another, and those expectations were shattered. We did not fit

into any one box. We were singers, actors, spectators, comedians, and we were family.

We use that exact word to describe it, family. It was simply that.

After getting enough information, I could have just closed the interview. Instead, I sat and spoke to the clients as long as they requested-- an additional 25 minutes.

The laughter and joy that spread across the table were fulfilling. We started to discuss food. Most of the clients were vegetarian or had vegetarian based diets. I, on the other hand, loved meat. We discussed different varieties of meats and vegetables, all laughing at the other's reaction to the food we liked.

It was a moment of freedom; none of us thought about our position in this world or the life we would lead after its close. It was about food.

There was a moment where one of the clients was attempting to explain what a green-bean was, but the English term slipped his tongue. As he typed away on his google translate app, we hear a robotic, "Bean," tell us the answer to this mystery. We laughed. Everyone laughed.

I was Important:

Intern, in my mind, was a term that denoted menial labour and inexperience. Before arriving at SPIRASI, I was expecting exactly that. I was not going to be a key pivot in the grander machine that was the organisation. I was going to be delegated to the bureaucratic activities associated with the work: The paperwork, the fetching of coffee, the shortcomings.

I was shocked when I was not met with those activities. I was asked my opinion on several issues and was allowed to interact with clients. No, I was a critical person. SPIRASI viewed me not only as an intern to delegate simple tasks but as a person who had their own thoughts and ideas, who possessed opinions and who had the intelligence to convey their points. An intern at SPIRASI is not a job, but a life.

I was changed.

THE STRONG SONG:

SPIRASI hosted a day of remembrance for victims of torture on 26 June 2018. The day was ushered in by speeches and a welcoming, uplifting song about the triumph of survivors of torture. The song was composed by Maeve Stone. The lyrics were comprised of stories from actual interviews conducted by therapists at SPIRASI. The song serves as a strong accompaniment to this narrative at large, as it reminds us of the real-world perseverance of clients.

The following are the melody and lyrics of the piece:

Strong Song:

Ooo

Ooo

Give me a reason to feel human again,

I'm caught in a system

I'm caught in a system

Give me a reason to feel human again,

I'm a caught in a system

I'm a caught in a system

Sitting at home afraid of every knock

Knowing that no matter what

Everything will be wrong.

Those days play back

Rewind themselves and playback, playback, playback.

I got bad times when the militia arrived

Every single day was the nightmare of my life

No matter how small, how big, how little it is.

Ooo

Trauma is trauma

Ooo

Just Breathe with me

Take my breath every second

Breathe x3

x4

Breathe with me

Just Breathe with me

Take my breath every second

Breathe x3

x4

Breathe with me

I was running away from the land I loved

Leaving everything behind- everything behind
May never see again the people or places that I love
Leaving everything behind- everything behind

If you lose someone in a brutal way
Or if you were tortured to renounce your
Faith.

You're still trying to recover
Trying to recover x3

No matter how small,
how big, how
little it is
Trauma is
Trauma x2

Give me a reason to feel human again,
I'm caught in a system
I'm caught in a system

Give me a reason to feel human again,
I'm a caught in a system
I'm a caught in a system

So, I decided that I would see
A brighter part of life
I found hope
I started working on the things I'd like to be

This is my future - I want to be free

Until I'm happy, stronger and proud of myself

Hope shining in my life

Until I'm happy, stronger and proud of myself
Hope Hope Hope Hope

Hope Hope

Hope shining in my life
Hope Hope Hope Hope

Hope Hope

Until I'm happy, stronger and proud of myself
Hope Hope Hope Hope

Hope Hope

Hope shining in my life
Hope Hope Hope Hope

Hope Hope

Acknowledgements:

We thank all the staff and volunteers of Spirasi for their continued hard work and dedication to the mission and vision of this organisation.

A great respect and thank you to the clients and students whose valuable feedback provided the basis for each of the narratives presented in this piece.

Thanks to the Board of Spirasi, backed by the Spiritan Trustees, for their courage in initiating and supporting such admirable goals for the future of their clients.

We would further like to acknowledge and thank the interns who have worked with us since our founding. The work they do will not only provide them with essential life skills, but has provided us the ability to advance several of our programmes. We additionally would like to thank the dedicated, devoted teachers who have consistently worked to provide and instill strong English skills within our clients.

A final word to all of our funders and supporters without whom this work of SPIRASI simply would not be possible. Thank you.



"There is hope, help, and a future."

SPIRASI

213 North Circular Road

Dublin 7

01-838 9664 www.Spirasi.ie