

## CHAPTER FIVE: METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter provides information on the research methodology used in the current study of trauma narratives of individual members of the South African Police Service. The central aim of the study is to tell the story behind the statistics of trauma in the SAPS by examining the subjective experiences of members. The separation of chapters into theory, method and analysis is in a sense contradictory to the epistemological orientation of this work, which conceives knowledge as developing simultaneously out of theory, method and analysis. Nonetheless, these divisions are applied to enhance clarity in the presentation of the study and to conform to the task of writing a dissertation (De la Rey, 1999).

At this point it is perhaps apt to acknowledge the blurring of terms like methodology and method, a tendency that is widespread in the literature (De la Rey, 1999). Harding (1987) tries to deal with this by specifying that epistemological position(s) (assumptions about the foundations of knowledge) should be distinguished from methodology (a theoretical analysis defining a research problem and how research should proceed) and that this in turn should be distinguished from method (research strategy or technique). Despite Harding's attempt to achieve clarity the blurring of terminology continues in the literature. De la Rey (1999) suggests that this need not necessarily be viewed as problematic, since there are no clear lines of demarcation between epistemologies, methodologies and methods in qualitative research. Again, for the sake of clarity in writing this thesis, these divisions will be adhered to in this chapter.

The epistemological orientation of this work falls within what is termed social constructionism. One of the principles of social constructionism is that all knowledge is socially constructed (Hoffman, 1993). The following section speaks more to this issue. The possibility of objectivity as the ideal stance from which to generate knowledge (as proposed by quantitative methods) is thus rejected and it is rather

assumed that people's representations of the world are always mediated. As a result of this there is always an interpretative component in research (Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor & Tindall, 1994). The interpretative study of an issue or phenomena is widely noted as the defining feature of qualitative research methods (Banister et al., 1994, Babbie & Mouton, 1998). Given the theoretical framework and objectives of this study, there is a clear argument for the use of qualitative research procedures.

## **5.2 Qualitative research**

Qualitative research refers to any kind of research “that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification”(Strauss & Corbin,1990, p. 17). Riessman (1993) points out that the term qualitative research refers to many diverse approaches that have some similarities but also differ on many substantive issues. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) thus refer to qualitative research as an umbrella term for several research strategies that share certain broadly defined characteristics.

The following key features of qualitative research contribute to the applicability of this research method to the current study. Research is conducted in the natural setting, the focus is on process rather than on outcome, the insider view is emphasised and the main concern is to understand social action in terms of its specific context (Babbie & Mouton, 1998, p.270). Qualitative research emphasises that human behaviour cannot be understood without reference to the meanings and purposes that individuals attach to their experiences (Cresswell, 1998; Silverman, 1993). Further, it allows a window of opportunity for researchers to approach and examine the context of their study more holistically and with less rigidity (Bannister et al., 1994; Becvar & Becvar, 1996; Greene, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Advocates of qualitative research have argued that human behaviour cannot be explained through a deductive form of logic with its accompanying intent on developing generalisations, such is the case with quantitative research (Cresswell, 1998; Silverman, 1993). Instead, the objective is to understand and interpret the meanings and motives that inform everyday human action (May, 1993; Mouton, 1990).

One of the broadly defined characteristics of qualitative research that is especially applicable to the current study is the focus on the study of meaning (Cresswell, 1998; De la Rey, 1999; May, 1993; Mouton, 1990; Silverman, 1993). Across the variety of qualitative approaches it is recognised that the meaning of human experience is worthy of examination and that research based exclusively on the examination of observable qualities is fundamentally limited. The main purpose of chapter six is the exploration of the experience of trauma in the context of the South African Police Service. Stated differently, what meaning is ascribed to the experience of trauma by members of the SAPS? The nature of the study, following Hollway (1984), is exploratory and intends to provide depth of focus and understanding rather than broadly representative data. The explorative description is the manner in which we try to understand experience (Guba & Lincoln, 1981).

Qualitative research places emphasis on studying human action through the eyes of the role players themselves, together with an emphasis on detailed description and understanding phenomena within the appropriate context. This might be done by listening to (or analysing) the voice, story or discourse of the participant. A primary feature of the qualitative framework is to ensure that the voices of participants are heard (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Oleson, 1994). Miles and Huberman (1984) note that a major characteristic of most qualitative research is that, when collecting data, the focus is on naturally occurring, ordinary events in natural settings so that the researcher has a strong idea of what “real life” is like. Many social psychologists such as Habermas and Giddens (in Haug, 1987) have argued that it is crucial to contextualise individual experience within specific sociopolitical and ideological structures. These both construct human subjects and their behaviour and give meanings to social events (Levett, 1988).

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) points out that “qualitative research, as a set of interpretative practices, privileges no single methodology over another”(p.3). Proponents of qualitative research highlight and acknowledge that this method of enquiry permits a considerable amount of flexibility (Crabtree & Miller, 1992; Griffin, 1986). Qualitative research involves the use and collection of a variety of materials,

such as case studies, interviews, vignettes, photographs, personal experience and life story texts to understand and describe experiences and meanings in people's lives (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). It has been noted that data collected in this manner offer qualitative (rich, context bound) descriptions as opposed to quantified (observable, measurable) descriptions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The nature of the research question in this study lends itself to a qualitative methodology in that this study attempts to understand what lies beneath a phenomenon by gaining "novel and fresh slants on things" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p.19). The qualitative approach is of particular value in this study because it does not seek to achieve a broad or global statistical representation of a phenomenon. Rather, emphasis is placed on individual experience and the person's subjective understanding of his or her everyday life. Although ideas about psychological trauma seem to be widely encountered in the general clinical psychological and psychiatric literature, these ideas are rarely subjected to conceptual examination: "The effects of socially-loaded experience cannot be dealt in a simple way with the 'raw data' of what is perceived, but must incorporate social representations of the phenomena in question"(Levett, 1988, p.158).

Qualitative researchers highlight the socially constructed nature of reality, the intrinsic relationship between the researcher and what is being researched, as well as how the context shapes the inquiry (Banister et al., 1994; Burr, 1995; Griffin, 1986). Griffin (1986) points out that the epistemology of qualitative research acknowledges that human behaviour is significantly influenced by the context in which it occurs and also emphasises the socially constructed nature of reality. Furthermore, researchers have invariably found that qualitative methods are more suitable for sensitive and complex topics which require insight into the social tensions and realities of people (Griffin, 1986; Ragin, 1994; Silverman, 1993).

One of the most distinctive features which strengthens qualitative research is said to be reflexivity which encourages the researcher to be continuously self-reflective on the dynamics of the research design, process, evaluation and his or her integral

involvement in knowledge construction and dissemination (Bannister et al., 1994). The notion of reflexivity broadly refers to the position and role of the researcher both with reference to the definition and formulation of the research topic and with regard to the research process and the participants (Bannister et al., 1994; Dubois, 1983). The role of the researcher is thus brought into focus through his or her reflexivity and recognition of power dynamics in the research process (1985; Bochner, Ellis, & Tillmann-Healy, 1988; Krueger, 1981, Wilkinson, 1988). Reflexivity is thus about acknowledging the integral role of the researcher in knowledge construction, acknowledging that all findings are constructions which are continually changing and “being” reconstructed (Bannister et al., 1994). Instead of trying to eliminate the influence of the researcher’s understanding through detachment, the researcher’s perspective is embraced and addressed as a component of the knowledge generation process (De la Rey, 1999; Wilkinson, 1988). I play an inherent role in the construction of knowledge in this dissertation and I acknowledged this as such. This aspect of reflexivity will be expanded on later in section 5.6. In seeking to provide a starting point for this kind of enterprise, the limitation must be kept in mind that the author too has grown up and been trained in a particular sociohistorical moment, within similar dominant ideological structures (Levett, 1988). Researchers never simply collect their informants’ perceptions, rather they produce knowledge about them by means of a particular technology and social relations of production (Young, 1980).

I value the individual’s narration of experience and consider it meaningful to grant people the space to tell their own “truths” or stories. I strongly believe that the human world of experience is worthy of examination and as such I do believe that this study will contribute to new ways of understanding the experiencing of trauma in the SAPS. These are, however, the exact grounds on which qualitative research is being criticised by the quantitative methodologies which rather focus on the examination of “observable” qualities.

### 5.3 Social construction of narratives

A social constructionist perspective, like any, has implications for the way in which the world is viewed and made sense of, and as such affects the way in which research is conducted. Social constructionist research methods are qualitative, interpretative and concerned with meaning (Bannister et al., 1994).

Social constructionism in psychology developed from second order cybernetics and constructivism (Joubert, 1987). Constructivism is a development emerging from the field of cybernetics in the eighties. This paradigm believes all knowledge to be a construction rather than a reflection or presentation of an objective reality. According to this perspective, one cannot know or observe the truth about people (or other phenomena in the world) in any objective way. Rather, it is assumed that all we can know are our constructions of people and other world phenomena (Becvar & Becvar, 1996). The implication for psychology is a shift away from an observed-system reality, based on the assumption that it is possible to have an objective truth about others and the world, to an observing-system reality, based on the assumption that it is only possible to have a personal construction about others and the world (Hoffman, 1993).

The essence of constructivism can be summarised in the viewpoint that human hypotheses about the world can never directly be proven. The implication is thus that researchers in this paradigm need to acknowledge the active role that they themselves play in the interpretation of any perspective or observation. In line with this paradigm, I kept a journal during the research process which forms part of the data set of the current study.

The idea of self-reflexivity is central to an ecosystemic approach and follows from the idea that people, from within their position as observer, are not “objective” in relation to that which is being observed, but that observers influence the process of observation by their presence and thus forms part of that which is observed. As Rollo May says: “We don’t investigate nature, we investigate the investigator’s relationship

to nature” (May et al., 1958, p.97). The researcher thus becomes co-creator of the context that is researched. My own reflections on the research topic and process form part of this exploration and are discussed later in this chapter. Constructivism does not deny that there exists an objective world outside that of the individual or that one can ever know that world, but rather emphasises that all individuals form part of a broader ecology of relationships and that all human hypotheses about the world are thus based on their relationship with the world.

Social constructionism believes that all knowledge develops in the space between two or more people and questions the idea of an one and only truth. According to Bruner (1991), the existence of a single truth would imply that the world is unchangeably there to be observed. Social constructionism does not view the world as static. “Knowledge, being socially arrived at, changes and renews itself in each moment of interaction” (Hoffman, 1993, p.18). According to Potgieter (1997), all knowledge is culturally and historically relative: “The varied and multiple ways in which knowledge is constructed lends itself to different form of action from the particular society” (p.23). For example, a society which sees traumatisation simplistically and linearly as a weakness of someone being exposed to an traumatic incident would treat members exposed to trauma differently to a society which acknowledges the role of social support in traumatisation.

The effort to try and understand the world within the framework of social constructionism is thus not based on empirical evidence but rather on social processes. The researcher in this domain often encourages the emergence of a number of explanations or stories, rather than defining one single “truth”. As Vance (1989) puts it: “Social construction theory strives for uncertainty through questioning assumptions rather than seeking closure. We need to tolerate ambiguity and fluidity. The future is less closed than we feared, but perhaps more open than we hoped” (p.30).

Constructivism argues that language helps to construct reality and is concerned with broader patterns of social meaning encoded in language (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). In keeping with the constructionist perspective, there is agreement that

language does not just convey meaning but in fact is used to construct versions of the social world, that it is through language that experience is interpreted and made understandable (Bowers, 1988; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). In simple terms, the principal idea is that we make sense of our lives and our relationships through constructing stories: stories about childhood, our school days, our families, sexual relationships and working experiences. “Through these stories we make ourselves intelligible to self and to others” (De la Rey, 1999, p.78). Ochberg (1994) demonstrates that people live out the events and affairs of their lives in storied form. It is thus suggested that there is no way to disentangle living a life from telling a story. This conception of knowledge production allows for different versions of experience and requires an understanding of the conditions which produce different accounts (Hollway, 1989; Levett, 1988).

The narrative methodology is positioned within the broader context of social constructionism (Baillie & Corrie, 1996; Hamilton, 1995; White, 1995). The data in this study are gathered by means of narrative methods. In recent years numerous writers have advocated a turn toward narrative modes of scholarship in the social sciences (Bochner, 1997; Crites, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1988; Richardson, 1990; Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992; Sarbin, 1986). As Richardson (1990) suggests, “narrative is the best way to understand the human experience because it is the way humans understand their own lives” (p.183). According to Bruner (1991), we organise our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative - stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on. As Hoffman (1993) puts it, “it is becoming increasingly common in talking of social fields of study to use the analogy of a narrative or a text” (p.8). Hamilton (1995, p.29) adds that “the idea of narrative needs to be seen within postmodernist notions of deconstruction, with its conception of the text as a fluid entity with which one can engage playfully, evolving a multitude of new stories”.

Social constructionism maintains that no irrefutable social truth exists, only stories of the world that we tell ourselves and others (Hoffman, 1993). “Narrative ‘truth’ is judged by its verisimilitude rather than its verifiability” (Bruner, 1991, p.13).



According to De la Rey (1999), the social constructionist approach holds that narratives do not reflect but rather create what is understood to be true. Bruner (1991) states that the illusion that can be created by a skillful narrative, that a story “is as it is” and needs no interpretation, is produced by two quite different processes. He calls the first “narrative seduction” (Bruner, 1991) and says that great storytellers have the artifices of narrative reality construction so well-mastered that their telling momentarily preempts the possibility of any but a single interpretation, however bizarre it may be. The second route to making a story seem self-evident and not in need of interpretation is via “narrative banalization”. This means that we can take a narrative as so socially conventional, so well known, so in keeping with the canon, that we can assign it to some well-rehearsed and virtually automatic interpretive routine. The effect of trauma on members of the SAPS may thus seem to be so well known that it is virtually automatically interpreted.

Research using qualitative methods has regularly been criticised for not being able to stand the traditional tests of reliability and validity. Responses to this criticism have been varied. In the following section I address issues of reliability and validity in relation to qualitative research.

#### **5.4 The issue of reliability and validity in qualitative research**

Qualitative research has been criticised by persons working from a quantitative research perspective on the grounds that it is subjective, interpretive and not scientifically credible (Bannister et al., 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). However, the criticisms levelled at qualitative research have been viewed mainly as politics within the field of research and not sufficiently substantial to dismiss it as a credible source of knowledge (Carspecken & Apple, 1992; Reason, 1994). Qualitative researchers not only challenge the notion of “scientific objectivity” in quantitative methods, but also question how objectivity is defined. According to Ragin (1994), objectivity has also been referred to as an “illusion” because there is nothing from which one can be distant. Marshall (1986) points out that researchers form part of any social situation which they explore and always have attitudes, values, feelings and beliefs about it: “I

do not therefore believe in, or aspire to, objectivity” (Marshall, 1986, p.195). She rather advocates for researchers to acknowledge and explore their stances and value judgements. Banister et al. (1994) expresses the view that rather than making claims about “objectivity”, qualitative research offers a different way of conceptualising the relationship between objectivity and subjectivity, that is, reflexivity. From the beginning of this dissertation my own position in relation to the research topic was acknowledged and will be explored and expanded upon later in this chapter.

Smaling (1992) states that it is possible to define objectivity at a higher level of abstraction where paradigms are no longer determinant of the nature of objectivity. He briefly describes this objectivity as “doing justice to the object of study” (Smaling, 1992, p.307). One of the main objectives of this study was to respect participants’ accounts and certainly to aspire to do justice to their experiences. According to Smaling (1992), this may be achieved by designing methods so open that they do justice to the complexity of the object under study. This influenced my choice of narrative essays as a data gathering technique. Objects are not reduced to single variables but are studied in their complexity and entirety in their everyday context (Uwe, 1998).

The issue of reliability and validity has always been a contested and controversial area of debate by empiricists (Altheide & Johnson, 1994). Qualitative research transcends rigid formality and objectivity by introducing transparency without comprising the research process, therefore creating possibilities for addressing reliability and validity (Bruinsma & Zwanenberg, 1992). As such, it is possible to overcome and address these assumed “shortcomings” through a process of linking results to other work of similar genres as well as by checking theoretical assumptions (Corradi, 1991; Strebel, 1993). Another possibility for addressing reliability and validity is to assimilate subjective bias into the research process which would contribute to and strengthen the research instead of crippling it (Mama, 1995; Seedat, 1992). Qualitative methods take the researcher’s communication with the field and its members as an explicit part of knowledge production instead of excluding it as far as possible as an intervening variable (Uwe, 1998). The subjectivities of the researcher and of those being studied

are part of the research process and my reflections on the research process are included as such.

According to Bannister et al. (1994), an alternative means of increasing reliability and validity is to keep a reflexive journal where both the experiences of researchers and participants are acknowledged and validated (Kirk & Miller, 1986; Klein, 1983). In addition, a journal serves as a source of cross-checking, guides the process of data gathering and requires researchers to reflect on their interpretation and behaviour while conducting the study.

Marshall (1986) highlights an extremely befitting point on validity:

We need to re-cast the traditional concept of validity to apply it productively to new paradigms ... We certainly need to detain ourselves from any notion that validity tells us ‘how true’ any piece of research is on anything like an objective scale of truth ... validity instead becomes largely a quality of the knower in relation to his/her data and enhanced by the different vantage points and forms of knowing, it is the personal, relational and contextual (p.197).

Banister et al. (1994) state that completely valid research which represents an ultimate truth is not possible within a qualitative paradigm, which holds that all knowledge is socially constructed. Furthermore, qualitative research recognises a complex and dynamic social world. It involves the researcher’s active engagement with participants and acknowledges that understanding is constructed and that multiple realities exist. It is theory-generating, inductive, and aims to gain valid understanding by illuminating the nature and quality of people’s experiences. Participants’ accounts are valued and emergent issues within the accounts are attended to. The developing theory is thus firmly and richly grounded in personal experiences rather than being a reflection of the researcher’s framework. In this way insight, is gained to the meanings people attach to their experiences (Jacobs, 2000).

Debate on different forms of research methods is still going on and features prominently in the literature (Altheide & Johnson, 1994). However, it is refreshing to read that in the social sciences, more innovative, challenging and alternative research paradigms are beginning to emerge, and that their usage is encouraged. It is obvious that researchers' assumptions about the foundations of knowledge will greatly influence the way that they examine knowledge.

The following section deals with the pragmatics of the present research project, namely, the collection of data, the research question, the instruments used and the analysis of data.

## **5.5 Collecting the data: Recruitment procedure and description of the participants**

### **5.5.1 Recruitment procedure**

The participants were recruited from within the South African Police Service. I selected three units. The selection of these units was influenced by practical and logistical factors. The selected units are the Special Task Force, Highway Patrol and the Crime Combatting Unit. Although members from these units are often exposed to traumatic incidents, there are other units that might experience a higher frequency of exposure to trauma or differ in their experiencing of traumatisation. However, this lies outside the scope of the current study.

The Special Task Force (STF) operates nationally and has three major bases: Pretoria, Durban and Cape Town. As the name indicates, it is a highly specialised operational unit with the most stringent selection and training procedures (nine months) in the SAPS. Out of the 362 members that were selected for training in 2003, only ten completed the training process successfully (De Beer, 2003). As such, the members are relatively homogenous with regard to their level of functioning. This is an elite unit which is mostly involved in high risk operations and functions in an urban and rural environment. The Special Task Force has a strong in-group identity and the unit is

relatively small or contained with functioning managerial structures in place. There are no operational female members in this unit. Members wear camouflage uniform and their identities are protected. Publishing pictures of members is strongly discouraged.

The Highway Patrol Unit (HP) operates on a provincial level, and members are stationed at Flying Squad centres in different Areas. Highway Patrol forms part of the Police Emergency Services structure, together with, for example, the Radio Control Centres and the Water Wing. The unit is quite visible in their marked BMW motor vehicles. As Kopel (1996) puts it, “the elite Highway Patrol unit is manned by hand-picked, experienced officers ... with high-speed car chases characterizing their daily experiences” (p.23). Members are mostly male, they undergo a selection procedure and are trained in advanced driving skills and survival-weapon-and-tactical training (SWAT). They wear a blue field uniform and a bulletproof vest. The command structure of this unit seems to be more cumbersome and clumsy than the previous unit. The unit is also larger and less contained in a managerial sense.

The Crime Combatting Unit’s main function is aptly described as crime combatting. Until recently the Unit was called Public Order Policing with the primary functions of crowd management, riot control, control of public unrest or disturbances and the control of disaster sites. This Unit is probably historically the most visibly connected with the enforcement of apartheid regulations for its involvement in township unrest. Members are mostly male, they are not selected into the unit and the level of functioning is diverse. Members wear a blue field uniform with a distinctive red name badge. This is, according to the researcher, by far the largest and least managerially contained unit of the three included in the study.

In qualitative research there are no simple sets of guidelines for determining sample size (De la Rey, 1999). The literature on qualitative research methods generally presents decision-making about sample size in terms of a tension between providing an in-depth analysis of the specificities of each case versus skimming over as wide a surface as possible (e.g. Banister et al., 1994). The same applies to narrative studies. Riessman (1993) notes that sample sizes in narrative studies are generally small, and

presents the issue in relation to a tension between generalisation on the one hand, and close attention to narrative detail, on the other. For the current study, five participants were recruited from each unit, making 15 in total. Practical considerations mainly informed the sample size, keeping in mind that police officers do not readily partake in psychological research.

Recruiting the participants turned out to be no easy feat. From previous experience I had learned that police officers are not keen to volunteer for participation in matters concerning mental health research. This is supported by the literature (see previous chapter; Benner, 1982; Bonifacio, 1991; Silva, 1990; and Fay, n.d.). The study further called for “healthy” participants oppose to officers who label themselves or are labelled by others as “traumatised”. This eliminated the option of recruiting members receiving therapy or those in the process of being medically boarded. I informed the commanding officer of each unit about the study (as police protocol requires), and decided to ask him or her to identify five members to participate in the research. This method was chosen because it acknowledges the role of the commander as leader and it proved to be successful in a previous study on organisational stressors in the South African Police Service (mentioned in chapter 4). The commanding officer was also eligible to participate in the study.

Identifying and contacting the three commanding officers proved to be less simple than expected. Only one of the three unit’s commanding officers could be identified immediately. This is partly because of the frequent changes to the organisational structure and the often unclear and clumsy line of command. This factor will be expanded on in the following chapter. The first commander gave his consent for members of his unit to participate in the study, but he did not nominate members and referred the researcher to his operational officer who nominated five members. At the second unit, both the commanding officer and the person second-in-charge were on “stress-leave” and could not be contacted. The person who was temporarily in charge of the unit was situated at another office and was not acquainted with the members. Eventually an operational officer, who is not technically in command of that particular unit but under whose command the members currently function, nominated five

members. The third unit's commanding officer was not sure if he was still in command since he was placed at two different offices and the unit was in the midst of yet another restructuring process. He too referred me to an operational officer for the nomination of members. All of the above people were contacted telephonically. I had first envisaged telephoning the commanding officers in order to set up an appointment at which time I could discuss the study with them in person. Upon hearing about the research, all the commanders felt that the matter could be dealt with telephonically and either referred me to another person, or gave me the names and contact telephone numbers of the members that they nominated to partake in the study. My impression was that the commanders did not have the time for a face-to-face meeting. None of the commanders volunteered to participate in the study themselves.

The only requirements was put to the officers who nominated members was that the nominees must be able to write in either English or Afrikaans and that they had to have been a member of that specific unit for at least five years. The language requirement was included for practical reasons and because the researcher did not want nuances in meaning to be lost in analysis through the translation processes. Fluency in English is a prerequisite for employment in the SAPS and this requirement would therefore not eliminate any possible participants. The time requirement was necessary to ensure enculturation into the unit. This was done in order to allow possible differences that might exist between units' experience of policing to evolve during the analysis of the data. Although it was mentioned to the nominating officers that the research topic was trauma, it was not specifically requested that the nominated members should have been exposed to trauma or not. No race or gender requirements were made. This was done in order to keep the process of nomination as open as possible.

The members who were nominated were contacted individually and asked if they would volunteer to be part of the study. Again it was envisaged at first that I would contact members individually and personally. This process proved to be extremely tedious and cumbersome. Some members were on extended study leave, others were unavailable due to their involvement with clandestine operations and some were

deployed to different provinces. Other participants perform shift duties and were often on rest days, some were on leave or not available, or were reluctant to make an appointment. It eventually happened that most participants were only contacted telephonically. The face-to-face meetings that did take place were at a venue that was convenient for the participants and it so happened that I met with two participants under a tree while they were on duty. Most members that were contacted seemed positive to participate in the research. Of the fifteen members nominated originally, three did not want to participate and three other people were nominated. Two of these were on extended study leave and two other members were nominated in their place. Three of the members who initially indicated that they would participate in the study “disappeared” (did not answer their phones and did not respond to messages) and I could not get hold of them, and so three other members were nominated. It was made clear that participation was voluntary with no consequence for non-participation and that participants’ identity would be withheld. Each participant signed an informed consent form.

<b>INFORMED CONSENT FORM</b>
<p>I, _____, herewith give my written informed consent to take part in a study on trauma in the South African Police Service. I declare that I participate of my own free will. I understand that I may refuse to be part of the research and that I will not be penalized in any way for not participating. I understand that my identity will be regarded as confidential and that raw data will only be shown to the researcher and the relevant supervisors. The published material will be written in such a way that the identity of individual participants will be impossible.</p>
<p>_____</p> <p>Signature</p>
<p>_____</p> <p>Date</p>

I collected the data personally and it took over seven months to collect it. Participants from the Highway Patrol Unit proved to be the most conscientious in returning their essays while the members of the Crime Combatting Unit were the most difficult to engage.



## 5.5.2 Description of the participants

Before proceeding to describe the instruments used to gather the data, I will sketch an overall picture of the persons who participated in the study and comment on some aspects of the sample. All 15 participants were male. The age of participants ranged from 27 to 47 years of age, with an average age of 34,1 years. Both White and Black<sup>1</sup> police officers participated in the study. One held the rank of Senior Superintendent, one of Superintendent, two of Captain, eight of Inspector and three of Sergeant. Nine had Afrikaans as mother tongue, three were English speaking and three spoke an African language. Thirteen participants were married and two were single, with only one participant in a second marriage. Fourteen participants had children. Regarding level of schooling, all the participants had passed Grade 12 and eight had a National Diploma in Police Administration. To protect the participants' identities no further information, such as the years of service or religious affiliation, is provided.

## 5.6 The instruments

With the aim of the study as well as the specific terrain of inquiry in mind, instruments were chosen with the specific aim of optimising the gathering of an exploratory data set. The instruments of data collection are a biographical data form and a written essay or career narrative, as well as my journal. The latter will be discussed in conjunction with my reflections on the research process.

### 5.6.1 Biographical data questionnaire

This brief questionnaire was designed to elicit information pertaining to age, educational level, marital and employment status, number of children as well as a short description of job functions. I included the question on marital status and whether participants had been married before because the literature indicates that policing

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<sup>1</sup> These terms are in widespread use in present-day South Africa and the meanings of these terms have been shaped by the apartheid history.

places a heavy burden on relationships (Maynard & Maynard, 1980; Parker & Roth, 1973). The biographical data questionnaire was sometimes given to the participants at the first meeting, but because of practical considerations it was mostly faxed to them after the initial telephonic discussion. The rationale for obtaining background information was to contextualise the participants' accounts. The questionnaire was available in English and Afrikaans.

<b>BIOGRAPHICAL DATA FORM</b>	
Name:	_____
Age:	_____
Marital status:	_____
Have you been married before?	_____
Number of children:	_____
Ages of children:	_____
Highest educational level:	_____
First language:	_____
Rank:	_____
Years of service in SAPS:	_____
Present station/unit:	_____
Job title:	_____
Years of services at present station/unit:	_____
Where were you stationed before:	_____
Give a short description of the functions that your job entails:	

### 5.6.2 Career narrative

Each participant was presented with the following request:

“You have worked in the Special Task Force/ Highway Patrol/ Crime Combatting Unit for the last couple of years. In all jobs there are highs and lows, events that are good and those that may cause a lot of stress and trauma. Write an essay in which you explain what you like about your job and that which you do not like about your job. You may comment on changes you experience in your working environment (if any) and how that has impacted

on you. Explain what you think causes the difficulties that you might experience.”

In the current study it was decided to utilise the written language, rather than interviews, since it is a novel way of collecting data in the context of the SAPS<sup>2</sup>. I could find no other research in the SAPS in which this method was used. Practical considerations provided another reason why data was collected through essays rather than interviews. In a period of seven months I only managed to arrange meetings with two participants that lasted for more than twenty minutes. Nine participants were seen for approximately five minutes each and I never met any of the remaining participants<sup>3</sup>. According to Penn and Frankfurt (1994), by adding writing to conversations in research, the discovery of new voices is hastened and thus promotes the creation of new narratives. Writing and speaking are both expressive modes and both set up a reflective process, each influencing the other. The writing, a tangible object as well as a process, serves as an artifact of the relationship between the client and the therapist (Penn & Frankfurt, 1994). In this case, the participants’ relationship with their work becomes the artifact.

Research within this domain often utilise vignettes as a method for data collection (Jacobs, 2000; Levett, 1988; Potgieter, 1997; Strebel, 1993). A vignette is used for participants to project their own experiences, and implies a distancing from the material (Perkel, 1992; Strebel, 1993). According to McNamee and Gergen (1992), telling one’s story is a re-presentation of experience; “it is constructing history in the present” (p.37). According to Bruner (1990), narratives depend on sequential unfoldings across time. Events that have occurred in one time are narrated in another, and written in a third. In each of these time schemes the writer reconstructs and re-experiences these events. By the time something is on paper, it is, indeed, an *invented*

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<sup>2</sup> In hindsight, this decision proved to be useful if one considers the quality and richness of the data collected in this manner.

<sup>3</sup> These face-to-face meetings had as purpose to brief the participants and not to interview them.

narrative. Penn and Frankfurt (1994) state: “We have observed repeatedly that, in the act of writing, meanings that have been ignored or have remained unsaid are invited into the relational field by way of the text” (p.76). According to these authors, writing slows down our perceptions and reactions, making room for their thickening, their gradual layering. The act of writing, like vignettes, thus has an effect of distancing one from the material. For this reason, I decided against the simultaneous use of both.

These essays are personal documents and the use thereof as means of data collection is directed at understanding the human element. This embodies the true spirit of the qualitative approach to the study of human behaviour. Redfield (in Gottschalk et al., 1942) states:

A human or personal document is one in which the human and personal characteristics of somebody who is in some sense the author of the document find expression, so that through its means the reader of the document comes to know the author and his views of events with which the document is concerned (p.vii).

It is important to remember that the essays were written with the researcher in mind and are as such not “private” documents.

The research is focused on one “consequence” of a police member’s career, namely trauma. According to Weiland (1995), career is a construct used by individuals and societies to represent a major segment of experience in the life of a person. Therefore, the very concept of career can be viewed as part of the narrative of self. According to De la Rey (1999), the linking of career with notions of self is certainly not new, as there is a long history of research which has probed the connection between the self-concept and occupation.

## **5.7 My reflections on the research and the process**

The idea of self-referral is central to research that is conducted within a social

constructionist paradigm and as such the researcher's positioning within the research process needs to be addressed. As Riesmann (1993) says, "the construction of any work always bears the mark of the person who created it" (p.v). In view of this, what follows is an account of the way I understand my mark on the research process. In doing this I will describe fragments of myself, my experience and my life. The issues raised through engaging with this question are, in a crucial sense, part of the research.

Several authors have commented on the centrality that reflexivity occupies in the qualitative research process (e.g. Potgieter, 1997; Shefer, 1998; Strebel, 1993). Through reflexivity, researchers acknowledge their role in the construction of knowledge. These authors draw attention to the fact that the reason for reflecting in this manner is not to introduce confounding variables that could constrain the research, thereby negatively influencing the result, but rather to increase the understanding of the context in which the analysis is based. In a similar vein, Meulenberg-Buskens (1997, p.112) asserts that, "qualitative research with its emphasis on the interconnectedness and the holistic nature of the phenomena it studies, calls for an attitude of personal involvement". Furthermore, striving toward quality in qualitative research seems to call for the qualitative researcher "to involve the totality of her being, to acknowledge, accept and use her unique individuality" (Meulenberg-Buskens, 1997, p.112). This discussion is based on my experiences and thoughts throughout the research process. It includes paradigmatic decisions and reflections of my feelings during the process.

As was mentioned in chapter one, I have worked as a clinical psychologist in the South African Police Service for several years with my main function being to provide psychotherapy to individual members. As such I continuously experience the organisation's destructive force(s), lack of humane consideration and disregard for members' mental well-being. I often encounter members' severe feelings of helplessness, frustration and sadness regarding their work situation and environment. As a therapist I find myself currently in a position of helplessness and emotional burnout with a limited capacity for empathy. I often find myself in an antagonistic, oppositional position with regard to the organisation. My sympathy and bias lies

mostly on the side of the individual member.

On a more personal level I am married to a functional police officer and share as such in his frustrations and job stressors. We find ourselves in an unique working situation as we form part of the same hostage negotiation team and sometimes attend suicide or hostage scenes together. During my twelve years in the SAPS I have been in various situations that can be defined as traumatic and have often experienced secondary trauma through debriefing sessions and individual or group psychotherapy.

The participants in this research project were all, except one, strangers to me. Our interaction was limited to one or sometimes two brief encounters and I cannot say that a relationship developed between myself and the participants. I believe that this renders the level of disclosure in the essays so much more significant and I wonder about the effect of the in-group/out-group phenomenon that was discussed in chapter two. Does the level of disclosure say something about the researcher being part of the in-group or does it point to a lack of an in-group identity? My experience was that the participants shared experiences mostly with insight, openness and honesty. Some participants even mention names of commanders officers, which might land them in trouble if the facts became known. This, I thought, was done partly to lend more credibility to their stories. They spent much of their own time and went to a great deal of trouble to narrate their stories. I attribute this to a need to be heard. The participants mentioned that this was the first opportunity any of them ever had to tell their stories. They mostly felt ambivalent after completing their stories, stating that it was good to air their stories and get it “out of their systems” but questioned the value of this in changing anything. These feelings of helplessness echoed in my own being and I still question the value of this exercise, other than helping me obtain a PhD degree. Two members mentioned that the process of writing made them angry as they started to think again about things that they mostly try to ignore.

The ambivalence also reverberates in my feelings toward the research process. I felt sad and humbled upon first reading most of the essays. These disclosures must be seen against the backdrop of distrust and persecutory anxiety existing within the

organisation. I found myself in a privileged position and felt quite special because of the trust shown by participants. Then I became angry towards the organisation for “creating” so much hurt, sadness and destructiveness in the lives of members (and their families). What angered me most is the organisation’s apparent disregard of its role in the mental health issues of members. The anger is accompanied by helplessness and a feeling of futility; what will ultimately change in these 15 members’ working environment? I do feel a sense of responsibility; it is as if I owe it to them to make it better after asking them to tell me where it hurts. This holds true even if no such expectations were mentioned during the recruitment phase.

The metaphor of trauma is, according to Levett (1988), a powerful one in the discourses of control. Added to this is the consideration of “who conducts research on whom” which has been raised in the literature (Potgieter, 1997). The issues of power and control are highlighted in such discussions (Bell & Roberts, 1984; Greene, 1994). This consideration also raises the issue of the different spaces occupied by the researcher and the participants. Regarding my position in the present study, I was aware that I am a White woman doing research on White and Black male participants. I am employed under the Police Act and as such am a ranking officer (Superintendent). Professionals were promoted according to a different system than functional members. Thus, although all participants have more years of service in the SAPS than myself, all except two have a lower rank than myself. This, as well as the fact that I am a psychologist, causes a power imbalance with concurrent envy and expectation issues of which I take cognisance. My manner towards the participants was informal and friendly; and I did not use my rank in speaking to them, although my rank was sometimes known. Judging from the level of disclosure it seems as if they trusted me as a researcher and for this I am humbled and grateful. Alternatively, their willingness to participate in the study could be related to the pleasurable experience of talking to an understanding stranger (Dexter, 1970). I was certainly a stranger to the participants, but my connectedness to them through belonging to the same organisation may have been interpreted as my being someone who will understand (and possibly help in some way).

### **5.7.1 Journal**

I kept a personal journal during the time that I started the recruitment phase of participants. Unlike the more “objective” field notes often recommended for quantitative research, this journal represented a recording of my feelings and responses during the process. This was intended to capture some of my reflections on the process, in order to emphasise awareness of the interactional nature of the research method and to facilitate analysis and interpretation of the co-construction process (Kirk & Miller, 1986; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Strebel, 1993). Bannister et al. (1994) suggest keeping a journal as one way to increase validity.

One of the issues that features prominently in the journal is the confidentiality versus transparency question. Most participants wrote about their thoughts and feelings openly and honestly. They often wrote things that might be considered as being incriminating within the context of the specific organisation and yet they trusted me enough to protect their identity. They did this even though they did not know me, or whether I was indeed trustworthy. I am still not clear about the meaning of this. However, I do wonder about the significance of the whole issue of transparency versus confidentiality in the organisation as such (as discussed in chapter two), and its influence on the level of disclosure of the officers.

Another area of interest in the journal is found in my frustration with regard to the organisational structure and getting hold of commanders and participants.

## **5.8 Analysis of data**

### **5.8.1 Thematic analysis**

This section describes how the data collected from the essays was analysed. Analysis inescapably implies representation. What this means is that analysis is not simply about classifying or categorising data, it is about representing or recounting the experiences



of the others (De la Rey, 1999). The analytic task requires that the researcher singles out some aspects of the data as worthy of note and relegates others to the background (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). Again, in keeping with qualitative research, analysis should not be seen as a separate phase that starts only after all the data have been collected; rather, "the different phases shade into each other" (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999, p.154).

These data were analysed using a thematic analysis. The primary method selected for analysis was informed by Marshall and Rossman's (1995) non-linear model for analysing qualitative data. This process has been conceptualised as a coherent way of organising material in relation to specific research questions. Within this framework, themes are not predetermined but rather emerge from the data (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). These authors caution against using data analysing schemes that "often filter out the unusual, the serendipitous" (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p.113). Instead, they advance a model that achieves a balance between efficiency and design/analytic flexibility considerations. This model identifies five procedural steps. These are organising data, generating categories, themes and patterns, testing the emergent categories and patterns, searching for alternative explanations and writing the report. However, the authors stated that there is no standard method for analysing qualitative data. Their recommendation is that methodological decisions are based on "choices one makes in a specific research project and reflection on and justification of those choices" (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p.1). In essence, this means that the most appropriate method is the one which has been designed for a particular study. While following Marshall and Rossman's (1995) recommendations, the methods developed by Charmaz (1995), Ragin (1994), Riley (1990) and Silverman (1993) all proved useful in this study.

**a. Organising the data:** This involved the close and repeated reading of the essays which allowed the researcher to gain a holistic grasp of the data. Strebel (1993, p.87) refers to this process as being "immersed in the data". Riley (1990, p.47) has termed this as the "hear what your data have to say" stage. Throughout the reading and rereading phase, I generated notes regarding ideas related to the text.

**b. Generating categories, themes and patterns:** This phase of analysis involves the identification of salient themes, recurring ideas and patterns which link people and settings together. This required me to question the data and reflect on the conceptual framework upon which the present study had been formulated. The aforementioned analytic exercise was contained within the assumption that there is an interactive participation of personal and social constructions of reality as discussed earlier in this chapter.

The task of generating categories included selecting, simplifying, abstracting and transforming the data (Ragin, 1994). In addition, coding categories were developed to assist with this procedure. I closely examined the data for patterns, similarities and differences, and then wrote down words and phrases to represent these themes. Thereafter, the text was reexamined for omissions. Coding categories were developed to assist with the procedure. In this way, meaning could be ascribed to the descriptive information compiled during the study. This process allowed me to explore the relationships and processes within and between categories (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

Charmaz (1995) argues that categories should emerge from the data rather than coercing them into preconceived categories. The themes were primarily based on what emerged from the data, but were also influenced by the research questions and the literature on the topic. The coded sections of texts, which included sentences and paragraphs, were grouped together in themes. The categories of coded texts were read several times. This process allowed similarities, differences and contradiction to surface which resulted in subthemes.

### **5.8.2 Analysing the current data set**

Miles and Huberman (1984) warn against data overload when pulling themes. They advocate a balance between being mindful of the conceptual lenses one is training on the data, and still remaining open to perceiving the unexpected. Despite my best attempts, at first count, I generated approximately seventeen themes. These included

the following: discrimination, unfairness, nepotism, uncertainty, the way it was previously compared to the way it is now (the effect of change), racial issues, impact on relationships, belonging to an elite unit, specialised training, the need to feel special, religion, working hours, traumatic incidents, what the work is like, financial implications, views on management, and transfer opportunities. During this stage I became aware of a certain clustering of themes around specific units. It seems as if the different units had different issues that emerged from the data. Other themes seemed to run universally through the data. After an extensive process of refocusing on the aims of the study and the research question, and through a ruthless process of shifting and sorting, these themes were merged into related fields and four major themes emerged. These themes, which will be discussed in greater depth in the following chapter, are:

What being a police officer means

Traumatic incidents

Organisational stressors

Transformation

Subsequent to selecting the final themes and mapping their possible interrelationships, quotes were selected. I attempted to select quotes which were representative of the sample and which could best illustrate a particular issue. The quotes are often longer than those normally used in this type of research, but it was the only possible way in which I felt the meanings of what was being voiced could become clear. The participants were assigned letters of the alphabet in order to disguise and protect their identities. The actual essays are not included as the identities of participants might be fairly apparent to those acquainted with them.

After having mapped out a specific theme and its subthemes, I returned to the essays to check that the organisational structure that I had imposed onto the data for the purpose of presenting them, still allowed the participants' voices to be heard. The quotations were translated into English for presentation purposes. The translation was done by an independent source and was counterchecked to enhance textual accuracy.

In reporting the data, I tried on one level to describe the life-world of members of the SAPS in relation to traumatic experiences and the subjective meanings they attached to their experiences. On another level, I tried to make sense of these experiences and meanings by interpreting their latent or metacommunications and looking at these in the light of broader theoretical contexts (mostly psychodynamic), related research and also my own personal experiences of working with police officers. As with all studies of this nature I am aware that my analysis of the text is by no means a definite one and that my making sense of the participants' lived experiences was also tinged by my own subjectivity.

The following chapter describes and discusses the themes that emerged from the study.