

# Chapter 1: POSITIONING

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The landscape of mentorship expands over various fields and contexts. This study focuses on the narratives about mentorship in a local congregation. These narratives will be listened to and described. Other voices will be added to the greater research narrative in this study. In the process we will try to come to a better understanding of mentorship in this particular context.

The focus of this study can be summarised as follows:

- Describing and listening to narratives of mentorship
- from a local and specific context
- through the use of a narrative research approach
- within a postfoundational practical theological positioning

During the next few chapters I will position myself, listen to the narratives, try and come to a better understanding about mentorship and develop suggestions that can make a contribution to other contexts beyond this particular context.

The process of this research expands over almost five years. All of the research wasn't written down or documented. All of it wasn't formal. It wasn't even always meant to be research, but somehow it is all part of the written and unwritten research story that is told in this thesis. As the research story unfolds through the following chapters you will meet the co-researchers and participants in the narratives of mentorship over these years – to them my acknowledgement and thanks. They will be introduced along the way.

Within the positioning that will be described in this chapter it is important to acknowledge my own participation and contribution to this research. For this reason I give a brief personal background in this introduction. I also share how this research came about. More details of my own narrative will be discussed in a later section.

I am a 32-year-old man, living and working in South Africa. I have been a youth minister in the Dutch Reformed Church Lynnwood for the past seven years. I am married. I have a few mentors in my life. I am a practical theologian that works and thinks within a postmodern context.

The story of mentorship in my ministry emerged in 2004 when I developed a training programme for young leaders in Lynnwood's youth ministry. These leaders were involved in teaching Sunday school classes for High School youths and helping in and around the youth ministry. We decided to assign mentors to each leader to assist them and help them with the various tasks they had to perform. This became the basis for a mentorship programme that grew in the various contexts of the youth ministry and the congregation as a whole.

My involvement with the programme as minister and co-developer opened up my interest in this field, which led to the research about the narratives of mentorship, described in this thesis.

Since my involvement in the development of the mentorship programme at Lynnwood I have been on the lookout for similar programmes and narratives of mentorship in a local congregation. I have not found many. The interest in our story has been growing in the last year and many people ask about it. All of this interest and narratives experienced in this programme made me decide to enter into this process of researching some of the narratives in this programme.

In this first chapter I will spend some time positioning myself within three broad headings:

- Epistemology
- Theology
- Research

In the second and third chapter of this document, narratives of mentorship in this local context are listened to and described. Various co-researchers that have volunteered to be part of this research will reflect on their own narratives individually and collectively. Other voices will be added and the process of interpretation and reflection will be described in chapter four. In the final chapters the voice of literature will be listened to and final suggestions and concluding remarks will be made.

I start by positioning myself in terms of epistemology.

## **2. EPISTEMOLOGY**

How do we acquire knowledge? How do we understand knowledge? What is our knowledge about knowledge? How do we interpret knowledge? Who can claim knowledge? These questions all relate to epistemology. In a thesis like this it is very important to be clear on epistemology from the start. Epistemology prefigures methodology and the way claims on knowledge are made.

Understanding how systems work, how various fields, interests and institutions fit together is the aim in the efforts of the epistemological endeavour. This is a dynamic and ongoing process. It is comprehension that keeps us motivated in our search for better and more understanding and knowledge.

Catherine Elgin (1998:26) says the following about epistemology:

Epistemological theories typically share an abstract characterization of their enterprise. They agree, for example, that epistemology is the study of the nature, scope and utility of knowledge.

They (the theories) differ however in what the questions are and in procedures by which knowledge is justified and ascertained. They differ in what is seen as conclusive and they differ in the procedures necessary to reach an outcome.

There are three classifications according to Elgin (1998:27) for epistemological theories:

- Perfect procedural theories want their reasons to be conclusive. These reasons need to be permanently accepted. The procedures in which the knowledge is reached need therefore to be perfect.
- Imperfect procedural theories seek conclusive reason, but acknowledge that these might not be permanently accepted or conclusive.
- Pure procedural theories see reasons as constitutive. The outcome from pure procedural theory is simply the truth within that community because it was the product of a pure procedure.

The epistemology that I position myself in is within this particular classification of theory a pure procedural theory of epistemology. The knowledge is the consensus of a particular community. “When consensus is achieved – when, that is, the community agrees that its objectives have been realized – a result becomes part of the corpus of knowledge” (Elgin 1998:38).

In this section we will focus on certain basic epistemological starting points that will form the basis of the research and methodology in this thesis. We will

discuss four topics here: narrative, social constructionism, context and the move beyond foundationalism.

## 2.1 Narrative

### 2.1.1 Narrative, Ricoeur and hermeneutics

It has always been known and often repeated that life has something to do with narrative; we speak of a life story to characterize the interval between birth and death.

Stories are recounted and not lived; life is lived and not recounted.

(Ricoeur 1991:20)

Ricoeur is a world-known scholar and philosopher. He is famous for the three part work *Temps et récit* (Time and narrative). This is been known as one of the most impressive works on the paradoxical nature of time. He grapples with the difficult subject and works through the theories and paradigms of many philosophers on the subject. This work and its relation to narrative are at the basis of the above quotation.

He discusses narrative theory in depth. He started his work firstly on symbols and metaphors: “From the beginning, Ricoeur has been fascinated by the power of words and symbols and by the creative capacity of human beings to make sense of their world” (Joy 1997:xxv) He then moves on to narrative. Ricoeur focuses on two important aspects in his theory: the text and the reader (each in their own world and time). To understand the narrative theory of the text or story, he develops a term called *emplotment* from the theories of Aristotle. He defines the operation of *emplotment* (that which a story consists of) as “a synthesis of heterogeneous elements” (Ricoeur 1991:21).

This synthesis happens between various elements. There are events or incidents that happen and are unified to make one plot in the story. So the plot is a synthesis. Then the plot is also a synthesis from the point of view that it organises heterogeneous components like people, circumstances, encounters, different characters, and so on. When all of these different elements are combined into one story it becomes complete. Ricoeur calls the plot in totality at once concordant and discordant. It is a synthesis of heterogeneous elements but it is at the same time one plot or one story – thus his term *discordant concordance*.

Schrag (1992:94) also speaks about narrative and knowledge. He says: “The multiple and changing discourses, text, beliefs, desires, and institutions that make up the panoply of human experience comprise an interwoven web of interdependencies.”

The story is put together by the synthesis of events and elements that happen as a series of incidents. When Ricoeur is busy explaining and talking about time and the different issues surrounding time in philosophy and knowledge, he refers to it as paradoxical. In a narrative this is also true. The series of events happen one after another in time and are combined in a story. But this story receives, what he calls a certain *configuration*, in a specific temporal aspect. “In this sense, composing a story is, from the temporal point of view, drawing a configuration out of a succession” (Ricoeur 1991:22).

Aristotle said that in every well-told story something is taught. And in any story there are certain universal aspects of the human condition.

A story is a combination of various different elements that happened in a series of events over time, combined in a configuration that is temporal and therefore *discordant concordance*. In this story there is meaning, knowledge and something universal.

Ricoeur would now ask, if stories are recounted and life is lived, how would you bridge this paradoxical gap?

The process of understanding the narrative (hermeneutics) and bringing it “to life” (the process he calls *reconfiguration*) happens when the “world of the text and the world of the reader” intersects (Ricoeur 1991:26). This is one of the most important aspects to understand in hermeneutics. There is a world behind the text and there is a world behind the reader. These worlds are important to understand in order to make the process of reconfiguration possible. Ricoeur borrows the concept of “the fusion of horizons” from Gadamer. He uses this language to describe what happens in the process. The reader is pulled into the horizon of knowledge of the text and the expectations and knowledge of the reader. These horizons are in constant interaction with each other.

Ricoeur argues that a life is nothing more than a biological phenomenon till it is interpreted. Thus stories, when they are interpreted, come to life. Gadamer (1998:193) says that the fundamental dimension of hermeneutics is the dialogue between two people. Words and narratives try to reach another human being. Hermeneutics try to understand and interpret this dialogue.

In the hermeneutic process or spiral (as he sees it), there is one other important concept: the pre-narrative capacity of life (or pre-figuration).

All the different actions in our lives constitute what he calls the semantics of actions. There are various actions such as suffering, behaviour, meaning, et cetera that act pre-narrative. There are also symbols in our lives that form resources of our own interpretations. These symbols inform our narratives. Lastly he calls the last pre-narrative element the pre-narrative quality of human experience. (Ricoeur 1991:29). This is the action in which life itself is always

passionately in search of a narrative. We want to tell stories. We find our lives caught up in stories.

Ricoeur sees the hermeneutical process as a spiral in which there are three basic, re-occurring processes: pre-(con)figuration, configuration and re(con)figuration.

After ending the process of explanation, we again arrive at the – now new – prefiguration. With a new configuration, with a new text, a new refiguration can take place. That is why Ricoeur does not speak of a hermeneutic circle, which would imply that the prefiguration has remained the same after the refiguration has taken place, but of a hermeneutic spiral (Demasure & Müller 2008:4).

This gives us a narrative identity. The fact that we passionately live our lives and recount the narratives of our lives. The narratives, when they are interpreted, bring life. It brings meaning. In the process of hermeneutics we find a way of interpreting the stories that are recounted.

If we apply this approach to this research study it can be seen as follows: The discourses, ideas about mentorship, narratives, my own story, emotions and expectations all form part of the pre-figuration. The narratives of the co-researchers in this context are the configuration. Through the interpretations and development of this configuration they are refigured. We then arrive at a new prefiguration.

### **2.1.2 Narrative theory from the world of therapy**

If you ask anyone how they are and they care to elaborate more than just a simple “good thanks”, they will start telling you a story – a story that may describe their day or their week. This story will contain things that happened, events, time and characters. If they bring all of these elements in their story in

relation to each other, they will attach meaning to it. And this meaning will give you your answer.

This small example from everyday life serves as a metaphor for understanding the basics of narrative epistemology, the understanding that narratives form the basis of human experience and knowledge.

Research is not therapy. We do not aim to do therapy in this study. The narrative approach in the work of some of the narrative therapists helps us to add another voice to the understanding of a narrative epistemology. The work of Freedman and Combs, Epston and White play a part in the development of narrative thought, not only in terms of therapy but also in terms of narrative theory. Before these scholars move to therapy, they discuss narrative theory. This discussion helps us in our narrative positioning in this chapter.

Freedman and Combs (1996) tell their story as therapists and how they came about to understand narratives as the basis of human experience. In their story Michael White played a big role in their understanding of using narratives as metaphor in therapy.

White and Epston (1990) start to explain the birth of narrative theory in the social sciences with the start of the text analogy. The social scientists' observation led to the understanding that people's behaviour is set in a certain time. Meaning is attributed to behaviour but meaning (unlike behaviour) survives across time. The text analogy was applied to this insight. "This enabled the interaction of persons to be considered as the interaction of readers around particular texts." (White & Epston 1990:9).

People came to knowledge through lived experiences. The question remained then how this knowledge was organised and stored. From the text analogy, the social scientists argued that this happened through the process of storying.

People organise meaning through the narratives or stories that are linked to experiences and meaning.

In Freedman and Combs's further studies of the narrative metaphor they were introduced to social constructionism. We will look at social constructionism in depth in a later section, but let us say here that social constructionism is the belief that knowledge, beliefs, truth, values, customs, labels, narratives, et cetera are socially constructed between people or members of a culture or community.

These two metaphors (narrative and social constructionism) are the guiding metaphors for the work of Freedman and Combs.

They discuss the worldviews of Paré (Freedman & Combs 1996:20) as a basis for understanding their own positioning in a narrative/social constructionist worldview. Paré basically says there are three beliefs:

(1) Reality is knowable – its elements and workings can be accurately and replicably discovered, described, and used by human beings; (2) we are prisoners of our perceptions – attempts to describe reality tell us a lot about the person doing the describing, but not much about external reality; and (3) knowledge arises within communities of knowers – the realities we inhabit are those we negotiate with one another.

Freedman and Combs position themselves as narrative/social constructionists in the third worldview where knowledge is constructed/formed/created within a community, culture or society. This is of course a post-modern worldview that we will discuss in a later section. It is however important to understand that for Freedman and Combs (1996:22) there are four ideas associated with a postmodern view of reality or if you want, a postmodern epistemology:

1. Realities are socially constructed.
2. Realities are constituted through language.
3. Realities are organised and maintained through narrative.
4. There are no essential truths.

This is a brief summary of very important concepts within the epistemology that is the basis of my own. We will look at them in more detail in later sections, but the third one is important to us in this section.

Experiences are described through language. This language carries the metaphors, symbols and meaning of our lives and is organised, maintained and formed in the stories we tell and re-tell. We make sense of our lives through stories. The way we find meaning in them and the way they carry knowledge is what makes us human.

At the basis of our epistemology are narratives. Knowledge is carried in stories and knowledge is socially constructed. For this reason we listen to narratives when we do research. The ways in which we listen to narratives and the way in which they are interpreted makes this research process an empirical one. Ricoeur's understanding of narratives and hermeneutics will help us further along on this road of doing narrative research.

I choose to position myself within the narrative metaphor epistemologically, because narratives carry knowledge, meaning, synthesis, elements and pre-narrative configurations. And when they are interpreted (and told), we unlock knowledge and lessons that lie within them. This knowledge is socially constructed and as we will see (in the same way Aristotle said), points beyond the horizons of themselves.

## **2.2 Social constructionism**

In this section I want to examine the important subject of social constructionism. In the previous section I started by looking at narrative epistemology. Within the narrative epistemology it is clear that the way knowledge is understood plays an important role. I started my discussion of this subject by referring to the social construction of knowledge. As this particular understanding of how knowledge is acquired forms the basis of our epistemology in this study, I discuss it here.

Social constructionism is part of the development on various levels in thought within the postmodern context. I choose to discuss social constructionism here, although it strongly relates to the section on postmodernism in terms of the epistemological backdrop it originates from. I start by looking at deconstruction.

### **2.2.1 Deconstruction**

It is difficult to box concepts like social constructionism, language, discourse and deconstruction. They are all related to one another and important for my epistemology and positioning in this chapter.

The very meaning and mission of deconstruction is to show that things – texts, institutions, traditions, societies, beliefs, and practices of whatever size and sort you need – do not have definable meanings and determinable missions, that they are always more than any mission would impose, that they exceed the boundaries they currently occupy. (Caputo 1997:31)

Caputo passionately describes the ideas of Derrida, who is one of the most acclaimed French philosophers writing and thinking about deconstruction. One cannot help but appreciate the way he speaks about deconstructionism and

plays around with it in his book, *Deconstruction in a nutshell*. He personifies it, ironically, telling tales of how Derrida has been misunderstood and how institutions and academics have criticised deconstruction.

The title of the book immediately draws attention. The idea of describing deconstruction in a nutshell is in itself a sign of misunderstanding it. In my own thought deconstruction has always been associated with breaking down ideas and narratives – breaking down the power relations within them and exploiting it. It has always been somehow associated in my thought as a negative process.

When you read Caputo on Derrida it helps you to understand that deconstruction is a positive process in which you open up things. You open up the nutshell. You make it more. You make more nutshells and more nuts. You grow a forest. You crack them open: “One might even say that cracking nutshells is what deconstruction is. In a nutshell” (Caputo 1997:32).

The very idea is to create new possibilities; question; discuss; see what happens. That is why Derrida himself would speak about the “experience of the impossible”. He says if you have to define it – this would be the least bad of all the nutshell definitions.

Within our guide of research and within the context of the previous sections, deconstruction opens up possibilities. It always questions the dominant knowledge. It wants to help you think about the narratives, ideas and discourses hidden in the research. It helps people to open up to different possibilities. It helps you to grow a forest of ideas and new trees.

Although it criticises institutions and established ideas, it is not the sole enemy of tradition or a conservative idea. It is not “anything goes” or relativistic. Caputo makes the gesture that it serves up samplers to be tasted, tried and inviting you

to new possibilities. Thus “keeping on drinking more deeply of the deconstruction well ” (Caputo 1997:35).

Deconstruction is of course a complex theory and not easy to understand. Understanding Derrida himself is a complex journey in itself, not undertaken here. The question is what we learn from the world of social constructionism, deconstruction and the epistemology presented here. Does it help us in our journey towards good research? Does it help us to listen to the narratives about mentorship in a local congregation better?

In dealing with deconstruction I have mentioned the idea that in every discourse or institution there are power relations. Actually, where there are humans there are always power relations at play. The study of power and the critique of institutions come from the works of another French philosopher, Foucault. He is known for his work on power that relates to all spheres of life, sexuality and the normalisation of power.

Power is the thin, inescapable film that covers all human interactions, whether inside institutions or out... Power relations are embedded in the very heart of human relationships, springing into being as soon as there are human beings (Caputo & Yount 1993:4-5).

For Foucault institutions have many forms. There are all sorts of institutions in society and the ‘self’ is itself an institution. Power is in any relationship, any form of interaction and mostly visible when it becomes institutionalised.

Power according to Foucault is intricate (Foucault 1998:388):

It seems to me that power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization.

Power is inherently connected to knowledge. And for Foucault power is applied knowledge in society, in personal relationships, in economics, in politics and in religion. Power is something we cannot do without. Without power no “truth” would present itself.

Foucault is known especially then for the critique on institutions – questioning and critiquing the institutions. He aims at bringing the conflict to the surface. Where there is power there is always conflict. The critique helps to uncover the power relations in the institutions. It is a form of care.

Learning from Derrida and Foucault we understand that any discourse needs to be deconstructed. “A discourse is a system of statements, practices, and institutional structures that share common knowledge.” (Rachel Hare-Mustin as quoted in Freedman & Combs 1996:42). Knowledge, especially the so-called common knowledge should be deconstructed; the power relations examined, new possibilities explored and narratives ‘opened up’. Foucault is known for his deconstruction of discourses on sex (Foucault 1998). He illustrates how discourses change and is influenced by institutions through the ages. He asks questions about power and power relations in this process. This process seeks to ask questions about those on the wrong end of the inequalities in power. It asks questions about who is in power, who is not in power, who benefits from this discourse, who does not, et cetera. It seeks to care for the marginalised voices, those who have no power and have no voice.

### **2.2.2 Language**

There is no world independent of language. Everything that is can be described differently. There is nothing about “what there is” that demands these particular accounts; we could use our language to construct

alternative worlds in which there is no gravity or cancer, or in which persons and birds are equivalent, and punishment adored. From a constructionist perspective our understanding of the world is a linguistic convention. And this convention is not self-evident (Hermans 2002:xv).

Hermans comments in the extreme on language, but language creates the world we describe in our constructs or narratives. Language is the carrier of metaphor and symbol that constructs the world for us. That is why in narrative therapy we know that changing the way people talk (the language they use), changes their world (or narratives, or even 'selves'). Language is powerful in this way. It constructs. It not only communicates – it carries meaning.

Jean-Francois Lyotard (1998:396) follows Wittgenstein by explaining the complexity of language. Language is like a game that has its own rules and language has various ways of utterances. Language is especially important in a postmodern context because it becomes a sword.

Derrida (1998:356) says that language has always been problematic “but never as much as at present has it invaded, as such, the global horizon of the most diverse researches and the most heterogeneous discourses, divers and heterogeneous in their intention, method and ideology.”

Burr (1995) explains how language was always seen as a tool to express your own experience. In this way language is like a set of useful symbols or expressions that you choose out of to express your experience. You have the experience and then pick from your vocabulary of language to put the experience into words.

In the poststructuralist view the complete opposite is true. In this view a person is constructed through her/his language. The language is there and the person uses it to construct an experience. If there is no language to describe the

experience, in a sense the experience cannot be constructed. “The alternative is that language itself provides us with a way of structuring our experiences of ourselves and the world, and that the concepts we use do not pre-date language but are made possible by it” (Burr 1995:33).

If a word in the language used does not exist, it is not a construct that can be expressed through language. Therefore language and the expression of human experience work together in creating expression.

According to Burr there are two implications of this. Being a person or human being and having certain experiences is not something we are by nature, “but becomes available to us, through language” (Burr 1995:34). And secondly it means that there is a diversity of possibilities of different constructions available to us, as far as language allows it. Thus there is no one ‘self’, because the ‘self’ is expressed through the limitations or the possibilities of language.

This is fundamental to the constructionist view. Language carries the construction of knowledge. And if knowledge is socially constructed, it is done through language.

Ricoeur (1998) says that language provides the key to understanding text or narrative. Language is the medium through which we come to new understandings. Without language, new understandings are not possible.

Language changes, it is temporal and it grows. New language is created in its various diverse forms. And it carries within it meaning that changes.

Another important aspect of language is understanding that it finds its meaning within a relation. It is *per se* a social activity. Language happens between people. And people attach different meanings to words and symbols based on context and culture. To understand language it is important to understand the

world and the culture it comes from, and even to understand what a particular language means to a particular person.

If I use the word 'pain' in a conversation it might refer to a very deep emotional pain. But if someone, who is three years old, uses the word 'pain' it might mean something completely different.

In doing research, the understanding of language and the meaning that language carries is extremely important in the hermeneutical process of describing the narratives. In any methodology within narrative research, the researcher should be clear on questions like: Whose language is used? Do I understand language correctly? What language do I use in the telling of the research story?

### **2.2.3 What is social constructionism?**

Social constructionism has its origin in various approaches and subjects. It has influenced architecture, social sciences and theology. It is of course influenced by philosophy and names like Foucault and Derrida from French philosophy.

Gergen is one of the well-known thinkers on social constructionism. He writes the following about social constructionism:

It is not that social constructionist ideas annihilate self, truth, objectivity, science, and morality. Rather, it is the way in which we have understood and practiced them that is thrown into question. In the end, social constructionism allows us to reconstitute the past in far more promising ways (Gergen 1999:33).

Social constructionism adds a dimension to our epistemology that is not added from other sources. The way or method in which knowledge is created happens in a constructionist way. This happens socially, between communities and cultures. This understanding reminds us of a pure procedural epistemology.

This way of acquiring knowledge cannot be separated then from the world of language. Language and the “game of language” (Wittgenstein’s term) is central to social construction.

When you start reading about social constructionism what would you find? There would be a few basic understandings about social constructionism that social constructionists would agree upon.

1. *Knowledge is socially constructed*

Burr (1995) explains that knowledge is embedded in a specific timeframe, culture and worldview. Knowledge is culturally relative. For ages the world was flat, now the world is round. This knowledge is dependant on the specific understanding of each time. We see the world in a certain way within a certain time, with certain limitations and arrangements of knowledge interpretations.

If our knowledge of the world, our common ways of understanding it, is not derived from the nature of the world as it really is, where does it come from? The social constructionist answer is that people construct it between them. It is through the daily interactions between people in the course of social life that our versions of knowledge become fabricated (Burr 1995:4).

Knowledge is constructed within different cultures, communities and conversations. Knowledge is not validated in terms of data or

predictability based on a certain idea of empirical studies and the validation of it. Which brings us to the next basic understanding of social constructionism.

2. *A critical view on absolute knowledge*

Within social constructionism there would always be a critical view on what is claimed as absolute or universal knowledge. Burr calls this knowledge the “taken-for-granted” knowledge – knowledge that is just accepted without being critiqued or questioned. The knowledge we sometime just accept as being absolute needs to be grappled with, that is the so-called conventional knowledge that is based on objectives studies of nature, the world and people.

“Social constructionism cautions us to be ever suspicious of our assumptions about how the world appears to be” (Burr 1995:3).

3. *Social constructionism opens up the path for the deconstruction of power within discourses*

As we will see in the next section, power relations always lie at the basis of discourses. Burr (1995:48) refers to a discourse as “a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, narratives, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events”. There is a certain discourse about marriage for instance in a particular culture. Marriage is seen as a formal relationship between one man and one woman. In this discourse there are certain power relations. By asking questions about this discourse and deconstructing it, it will reveal to us what the power relations do to certain people.

The understanding of knowledge being socially constructed and not absolute opens up the possibility of deconstruction and the questioning discourses. We will spend more time on deconstruction and discourses later. For now it important to understand this point because it leads to action.

4. *Social constructionism goes together with social action*

Burr opens up this essential element of social constructionism for me. To illustrate I refer to a recent process in the Dutch Reformed Church concerning the dominant discourse on homosexuality. The deconstruction of this discourse started within the ranks of psychology, when homosexuality was removed from the DSM IV classification. This would not have happened if social action did not follow the deconstruction of the discourse and the questioning of the power relations within it. The same started to happen in the Dutch Reformed Church when the discussion on homosexuality was opened by a report to the general synod. When knowledge is questioned, especially that knowledge that within theology is seen as absolute (because it has been interpreted from the Biblical text), it led to a discussion that led to social action being taken within the church.

Discourses always exclude when there is power within them. Some are marginalised through these discourses. This always prompts social action.

To clarify our understanding further about social constructionism, I briefly list four assumptions on which Gergen's work is based (Gergen 1999:47-50):

1. The terms by which we understand our world and our self are neither required not demanded by "what there is".

2. Our modes of description, explanation and/or representation are derived from relationships.
3. As we describe, explain or otherwise represent, so do we fashion our future.
4. Reflection on our forms of understanding is vital to our future well-being.

Social constructionism is the basis of my positioning on epistemology. In this research process we will work from the understanding that knowledge is socially constructed. This means that I don't construct knowledge on my own or validate it within a certain empirical way, but work with co-researchers who tell their narratives. These narratives are interpreted not through a process of an individual, but through a process of social constructionism. We construct our knowledge about the narratives of mentorship in a very specific context.

## **2.3 Context**

I title this section context because the two topics discussed here, presents itself in relation to context. The first in terms of the narratives and the research (as we are guided by describing its relation to research) and the second with regards to being the backdrop of most of the above mentioned subjects and concepts. The discussion will serve as a type of summary for us before we move on to theology.

### **2.3.1 Discourse**

Discourses (in narrative language) are in the terms of Ricoeur pre-configurations. They are 'behind' many of our ideas and thoughts about life, concepts and 'truth'. They are pre-narrative to our experiences and actions. They provide the context, if you will, of the narratives that are told in research. There are discourses about mentorship, religion, mentors, meaning, people,

power and research. There are discourses about anything in life. They are powerful.

We have looked at the definition by Rachel Hare-Mustin in the previous section on social constructionism. Burr (1995:48) also refers to Parker's definition as "a system of statements which constructs an object".

He continues to say:

Each discourse brings different aspects into focus, raises different issues for consideration, and has different implications for what we should do. So discourses, through what is said, written or otherwise represented, serve to construct the phenomena of our world for us, and different discourses construct their things in different ways, each discourse portraying the object as having a very different 'nature' from the next (Burr 1995:49).

Listening to discourses while listening to narratives is an important part of understanding the narratives told in research. Deconstructing and opening up discourses within the social constructionist view helps to interpret narratives and see how power in discourses plays a role. People often speak from these discourses as if the knowledge received from them are absolute and often these 'absolute' discourses imprison their capabilities of opening up new horizons. Discourses are often institutionalised and therefore Foucault examines the power relations within these institutions.

Gergen speaks of discourse as our grand language. This language (or discourse) relates to the understanding of our self, truth and morality. The way it is spoken also relates to our future, our families, friendships and stories.

Informed by a constructionist sensitivity, we are challenged to step out of the realities we have created, and to ask significant questions – what are the repercussions of these ways of talking, who gains, who is hurt, who is silenced, what traditions are sustained, which are undermined. And how do I judge the future we are creating? (Gergen 1999:62).

This links with the questions we discussed under deconstruction and the power relations of Foucault. Being busy with discourses can be emancipative. It can open up and set people free. It can balance power and it can give marginalised voices a chance to be heard.

### **2.3.2 Postmodernism**

Fifteen years ago, when I started off my studies, postmodernism wasn't as well known as it is today. When people speak about postmodernism they will do so in various different contexts and with very different meanings attached to the concept. (This is a good example of how language constructs meaning in various contexts with the same word.) Postmodernism finds itself in a multidisciplinary expanse of a terrain.

In a sense it is also a reflection on postmodernism itself. Postmodernism cannot be defined, because not defining is what postmodernism is about. We can try to describe it or we can list all the different descriptions various authors and scholars from various contexts have said about it. But that would be a thesis on its own. "Anyone attempting to provide a sketch of postmodernism has to contend with a somewhat curious diversity of portraits on display both in the academy and on the wider cultural scene" (Schrag 1992:13). Postmodernism is known in philosophy, art, architecture, sociology, the new epochs of thinking in various disciplines and in a sense develops from modernism. Even the media has caught on to the term and for this reason it is used in many ways.

“Perhaps the most repeated definition of postmodernity is the ‘end of all grand narratives” (Hemming 2005:15). Some speak of the postmodern condition (Lyotard 1998), or the space we find ourselves in. Others see postmodernism as relativism in its extreme form. Some understand postmodernism as anti-modernism but Van Huyssteen (2000a:416) says that “it is not the antithesis of modernism, but rather a continuation of the critical aspect of modernism turned against its own basic assumptions”.

Van Huyssteen (1997a:569-570) explains how postmodernism is understood in the world of science. In modernity empirical facts were grounded in objectivity that was seen as fixed. Postmodern science “finds its best expression in postpositivist, historicist, and even post-Kuhnian philosophy of sciences”. (1997a:570). Postmodernism helps us to be occupied with the hermeneutics of science and to be truly cultural.

In the postmodern condition metanarratives are challenged. The way knowledge is seen is altered and the understanding of modern epistemology changed. (Lyotard 1998).

I will highlight a few important aspects of postmodernism:

1. *There are no absolute truth or knowledge*

In terms of epistemology, modernity is known for its foundational view on truth or knowledge. Knowledge or truth is universal, objective, absolute and can be scientifically verified and validated.

Modernity dawned with the Enlightenment. At the centre of the Enlightenment is the philosopher, René Descartes who laid the foundation of the modern era with his principles formulated on the saying *Cognito ergo sum*. This is the basic understanding that humans can think and are rational by nature. Therefore

knowledge is obtained rationally. By studying the world and nature scientifically we can find this universal knowledge and discern it with the human mind.

Grenz (1996) would summarise the modern mind and the epistemology of modernity as:

- Knowledge is certain
- Knowledge is objective
- Knowledge is inherently good
- Knowledge is accessible to the human mind

“Postmodernism represents a rejection of the Enlightenment project and the foundational assumptions upon which it was built” (Grenz 1996:5).

Out of the age of modernity rose deconstruction and post-structuralism. As discussed language is seen in the opposite way in the postmodern mind where language constructs experience. In the dialogue between text and reader, meaning is interpreted.

Postmodern philosophers applied the theories of the literary deconstructionists to the world as a whole. Just as a text will be read differently by each reader, they said, so reality will be “read” differently by each knowing self that encounters it. This means that there is no one meaning of the world, no transcendent center to reality as a whole (Grenz 1996:6).

Knowledge is not seen as absolute, but as diverse from various understandings and viewpoints.

## 2. *Knowledge is socially constructed*

The work of Derrida and Foucault helps us then in understanding the postmodern mind and epistemology in which knowledge is socially constructed. This makes knowledge local and also contextual (an important aspect with regards to the research in this thesis).

Knowledge isn't objective, because in a postmodern mind, objectivity does not exist. Subjects engage in dialogue with each other, communities are creating knowledge, interpreting knowledge and constructing truth. There is no objective, universal viewpoint or mindset on knowledge in postmodernism.

“The postmodern worldview operates with a community-based understanding of truth. It affirms that whatever we accept as truth and even the way we envision truth are dependant on the community in which we participate” (Grenz 1996:8).

### 3. *Knowledge is holistic*

In modernity knowledge is obtained rationally. The ideal man in modernity is a man who has no emotions, but is rationally clear and stable. The way knowledge is understood and obtained is through rational processes and the rationality of the human mind.

In the postmodern mind knowledge is obtained holistically. It doesn't mean that knowledge is always constructed rationally. A person as a whole is involved in the constructing of knowledge in dialogue. Communities and cultures as a whole are involved and participates.

This is the reason why we use narrative as metaphor for the research in this thesis. Narrative as explained is a synthesis of various different elements that come together. It is holistic by nature. Humans are holistic by nature. So is knowledge and truth.

#### 4. *The dangers in postmodernism*

Postmodernism poses lots of questions to a modern mind. It can be dangerous in its extreme forms. It has the potential to be misused or misclassified as being relativistic; a total abandonment of all that modernity has taught us. It can be this in its extreme form.

Postmodernism also poses a threat to theology in various ways – especially a theology that is foundational or structuralist, based on an absolute view of truth and knowledge; a theology that does not allow questions or critique of its texts.

Van Huyssteen states this challenge to theology in the following way as put by Berger: “Do we still have good enough reasons to stay convinced that the Christian message does indeed provide the most adequate interpretation and explanation of our experiences of God and of our world as understood by contemporary science?” (Van Huyssteen 1997a:574).

How do we position ourselves as theologians in terms of this particular scientific context in a way that does not end up being total relativism? Moving beyond foundationalism will assist in answering this question.

## **2.4 Beyond foundationalism**

### **2.4.1 Postfoundationalism**

The Enlightenment gave birth to the epistemology already described under the heading of postmodernism. To understand this more fully we turn to the term “foundationalism”.

Foundationalism is the understanding that all our knowledge and beliefs are built on some basic foundation that is certain. These certainties hold the foundation

for all the other knowledge and beliefs that are built upon them. It is like a brick wall. The basis or foundation needs to be firm, then all the other bricks cemented on top of the foundation will be strong and stable as well.

The foundationalist's initial task, then, becomes that of establishing an epistemological foundation for the construction of the human knowing project by determining, and perhaps even demonstrating, the foundational beliefs or principles on which knowledge rests. Viewed under the foundationalist rubric, therefore, reasoning moves in only one direction – from the bottom up, that is, from basic beliefs or first principles to resultant conclusions (Grenz & Franke 2001:30).

Foundationalism also spilled over into various sciences, also theology. In theology there were debates on what to use as foundation for theological reasoning. There can be two different foundations: human religious experience (liberalism) and the Bible (conservatists).

Today, foundationalism is in retreat. Within the postmodern epistemology the mere concept of foundations and certain knowledge is under constant critique. The ideal of certain basic knowledge in postmodernism is an impossible one.

This has led to the search for a new epistemology and a new way of thinking beyond foundationalism.

Within the search for a nonfoundationalist approach there have been various thinkers who either based their thinking on coherence (where knowledge is related to other knowledge) or pragmatism. Some theologians have followed in the way of the nonfoundationalist philosophers, but the question would remain in "... what sense, or to what extent, can the theological task incorporate a nonfoundationalist epistemology?" (Grenz & Franke 2001:46).

In the extreme form of nonfoundationalism there is a total relativism where there is no room for any further conversation within this thinking. Van Huyssteen (1997b:3) says that "... at the heart of this epistemological brand of nonfoundationalism we often find fideism: and uncritical, almost blind commitment to a basic set of beliefs. In this sense fideism can in some cases ironically turn out to be a foundationalism-in-disguise".

In the midst of this debate Van Huyssteen proposes a "third way". An approach that is beyond foundationalism, but not non-foundational. This approach is called postfoundationalism.

A postfoundational approach wants to make two moves according to Van Huyssteen (1997b). It is contextual by nature and acknowledges the empirical crucial role of interpreted experience. At the same time it wants to point beyond the local community towards an interdisciplinary conversation. Therefore it is called the "third way" beyond the extremes of foundationalism and nonfoundationalism.

By positioning this study in the postfoundational approach, I open up the space for narratives that come from a local context. Unlike foundational notions of universality and ideas about general knowledge, a postfoundational approach listens to interpreted experience from a local situation. It values the local experiences about praxis, God and traditions. It does not stay confined to the local but wants to move beyond the local into the public multidisciplinary realm.

To do this, Van Huyssteen, Schrag and others speak about the development of a rationality that can be shared.

In a response to Jeremy Stone, Van Huyssteen further explains postfoundationalism and an interdisciplinary notion of rationality along the following lines (Van Huyssteen 2000:428-429):

- It acknowledges contextuality and the embeddedness of all our reflection in human culture.
- It is serious about interpreted experience or experiential understanding and the way that tradition shapes this.
- It opens the possibility to explore freely the patterns that might be consonant with the Biblical paradigm.
- It can be seen as a skill that enables us to gather and bind together patterns of our interpreted experience.

The concept of transversality replaces the modern understanding of universality and rationality. I discuss this as part of postfoundationalism in the next section.

#### **2.4.2 Transversal rationality**

Due to the emphasis on interdisciplinarity and the dialogue between various disciplines in a postfoundational approach, time has to be spent on the understanding of rationality. Rationality is the basis on which interdisciplinary conversation is made possible.

“Interdisciplinary discourse, then, is the attempt to bring together disciplines or reasoning strategies that may have widely different points of reference, different epistemological foci, and different experiential resources” (Van Huyssteen 2006:9).

Transversality has become known through the thoughts of various other disciplines. In mathematics for instance the concept of transversality is described as “enabling a line to intersect two or more lines or surfaces without achieving coincidence” (Schrag 1992:148). In other sciences similar metaphors are used to describe the idea that there are ways in which various disciplines

(that seem unable to share in conversation) can coincide from their various perspectives.

The use of the concept/metaphor of transversality in all of these approaches exhibits interrelated senses of lying across, extending over, intersecting, meeting and converging without achieving coincidence. By way of complex maneuvers of borrowing and conjugation, metaphorical play and refiguration, the various disciplines make use of these interrelated senses ensconced within transversality (Schrag 1992:149).

Van Huyssteen also uses the concept of transversality to open up the possibility of a shared rationality. Müller (2008) argues that although Van Huyssteen does not specifically use the term social constructionism, the postfoundational approach places itself within the same epistemology. The interdisciplinary conversation made possible by transversal rationality implies the social construction of knowledge.

The key to “transversality” and a “wide reflective equilibrium between science and theology is the shared rationality between us all” (Van Huyssteen 2000b:236). In this approach the way we conduct conversations and engage in mutual interpretations we, as practical theologians, are able to participate on a democratic basis in the conversation about mentorship.

Transversality, therefore, justifies and urges an acknowledgement of multiple patterns of interpretation as one moves across the borders and boundaries of different disciplines (Van Huyssteen 2000b:430).

Transversality provides us with different ways to look at issues or disciplines that is legitimate and is a process that has integrity. It is due to this understanding of shared rationality that a discipline like theology can be public and contribute in a meaningful way to the interdisciplinary discussion.

Transversality and the notion of interdisciplinary conversation will be further explored during this research. The paper of Müller (2008) forms the starting point and foundation for the interdisciplinary discussion that is conducted in this research. This will be discussed in more detail during that part of the research.

In the next section we will turn to discussing theology within this context, within this epistemology and come to a point where I position myself theologically within this study.

### **3. THEOLOGY**

I often find myself thinking about theology in the world of today. If I drive around, I ask myself: “What do people want from theology?” I wonder what people understand theology to be, if theology even has an impact on postmodern people’s lives?

I had an interesting conversation with a woman at a cocktail party a few months ago. She is a marketer for a private marketing firm. She had just finished with a project for a church that had hired her to help them with their branding and corporate identity. For this project she did a bit of research on what people want from the church, how people see the church, et cetera. She said that most people come to church for the purpose of finding some sort of meaning there. They want to grow and expand, be challenged for the week ahead – maybe to do something for others or to be involved in charity. They want to connect and want to add meaning to their lives.

This made me think about the place of theology today. What would the questions be that these people would ask about theology? Maybe they would ask: Are we doing theology in such a way that it contributes meaning? Is the

way we are busy with the *logos* and *theos* bringing meaning to people's lives living in a postmodern context? We do have to inherently believe that what we describe and study is meaningful enough to change, inspire and bring forth love. It has to re-author stories, make the process of re-telling stories differently possible; to open up meaning in stories; to open up living.

### 3.1 Theology today

Theology is in a time of transition and ferment, partly as a result of the collapse of the categories and paradigms of the modern world as spawned by the Enlightenment (Grenz & Franke 2001:3).

Talking about theology and explaining it is a well-nigh impossible task, As an introduction to this section, discussing practical theology and post-foundationalism (because they are important to my positioning in this study), I would like to make a few remarks on theology in general. As discussed in the previous section we are in the context of a postmodern world. Theology is facing various challenges for this reason. Grenz and Franke comment on this. They argue that theology today is in fragmented state, more so than it ever was. Although theology has always been faced with living up to the challenges of the day and theology has always been "remarkably adaptable in its task of assisting the church in extending and establishing the message of the gospel in a wide variety of contexts" (Grenz & Franke 2001:3), it faces a particular phase in human history at the moment.

In the past it has always been easy to divide theology in two categories: liberal and conservative. But even in theology it is not so easy to do it today, because within each category there is fragmentation. Different scholars would group and describe these two categories differently. Some might say there are two or even three subgroups within the liberal and conservative camps.

Grenz and Franke (2001) divide the liberal camp into two main groups. The so-called “revisionist” thinkers, of which David Tracy is a well-known scholar, and the “post-liberal” designation, associated with George Lindbeck. On the side of the conservative coalition Phillips and Okholm describe three divisions in evangelical theology: on the right are those that follow Carl Henry, in the middle the moderates with which Phillips and Okholm are themselves associated and on the left the “postconservatives”. On the other side in the conservative camp there are the “reformists”.

I am not going into the descriptions of each theological paradigm here, but it is notable that even in theology there is fragmentation, diversity and definitely not one exclusive way of doing theology.

The spectrum of theology according to Grenz and Franke is still busy with the agenda of modernity. They continue to pursue the modernist theological agenda. The question remains how we see and understand theology with a postmodern agenda, helping Christian communities living the gospel in a postmodern context without being alienated from the world we live in?

Grenz and Franke proposes a working definition for theology that resonates with my positioning on many points:

Christian theology is an ongoing, second-order, contextual discipline that engages in critical and constructive reflection on the faith, life, and practices of the Christian community. Its task is the articulation of biblically normed, historically informed, and culturally relevant models of the Christian belief-mosaic for the purpose of assisting the community of Christ’s followers in their vocation to live as the people of God in the particular social-historical context in which they are situated (Grenz & Franke 2001:16).

There are two important aspects to reflect upon: this definition of theology makes it a contextual theology that changes and grows. It doesn't stay the same, it has to evolve and interpret its context. Secondly it is a theology that serves. It serves communities and helps the narratives of the communities to find, explore and facilitate meaning within the context and world that we find ourselves in within a specific time.

I agree with Van Huyssteen that theology needs to be able to participate in interdisciplinary discourse. Theology shouldn't only be contextual in terms of its application, but must also engage the context of our world. This includes engaging other sciences. This is not easy. "Trying to find some kind of meaningful epistemological link between theology and science not only confronts us with problems of interdisciplinary reflection... but also presents us with another acute new problems:...the startling fragmentation effected by what is often called the 'postmodern challenge' " (Van Huyssteen 1998:4).

Theology needs to take up the challenges of the postmodern context. This is a dynamic theology – a theology that is in constant conversation with context and text.

### **3.2 Practical theology**

Because this is a practical theological study it would be of interest to look at practical theology in this context and place this study within a practical theological framework.

The definition and understanding of practical theology has been a highly debated and dynamic subject in the last century. Browning (1991:3) points out that "practical theology has been throughout history one of the most beleaguered and despised of the theological disciplines. With the rebirth of practical philosophies, practical theology was reborn. Every theological discipline seems now to be asking if they are not practical by nature." Heitink

(1993) also explains that the encyclopedia approach to theology brought the differentiation in the subjects since the beginning of the 19th century. This has since then been highly debated. Practical theology had to “find its feet” as an empirical subject.

“Within this ‘encyclopedic’ paradigm of theology, practical theology had the particular task of forming ‘theories of practice’ (Osmer 2006:325). This was related to the idea that practical theology had to provide the ‘encyclopedia’ of theology with theories on how to do preaching, serving, care, et cetera. Some call this the kerugmatik approach to practical theology.

As the definition of practical theology grew, “the primary subject matter of practical theology is some form of Christian praxis in the contemporary world.” (Osmer 2006: 328). This distinguished practical theology from the Biblical sciences in terms of the starting point. In practical theology the starting point is the praxis, in the Biblical sciences it is the text.

This approach was further developed and new understanding helped to open up definitions of practical theology to understand itself as hermeneutical. The work and influence of the social sciences had an impact on the field.

This approach is broad and has up to today developed in many ways. It is not discussed in detail here. We are still, in terms of our positioning of practical theology in this study, a product and development of the hermeneutical approach.

Heitink, Browning, Pieterse and other practical theologians described the field of practical theology as a hermeneutical approach. In order to do this, the object of study needed to be defined. Heitink (1993) understood the direct object of study as faith as it manifested itself through the practices of people. In theology it is then about understanding, explaining and interpreting the acts of faith in the

context of our time. Pieterse (1993:52) understood practical theology as a communicative theory of practice (“*handelinge*”). The communicative acts of the church must be understood within the context it brings the gospel in.

For Heitink, Pieterse and others, the praxis has always been the starting point of practical theology. There is a meaningful interaction between praxis and theory. The views on the way that this interaction works have been understood differently in the past and practical theologians do not all agree on how this interaction works.

Browning (1991:38-42) doesn’t give a specific definition but in his writings on understanding and practical wisdom he argues that we cannot work with only the Barthian understanding that the theory is just applied to the practice, but the hermeneutics of practical wisdom and thinking (and thus practical theology) imply that we move from practice to theory to practice (Gadamer’s theology).

This simply means that in practical theology we are in a constant conversation with the narratives of the Christian faith community and the practical situations in everyday life. We try to understand and bring meaning into the context of our present situation, without forgetting the past narratives, and by creating future narratives.

Elaine Graham (2000:104-117) also refers to practical wisdom in her article and comes to the conclusion that practical theology should be a transforming practice. She writes:

A vision of God embedded in human encounter and renewal animates genuinely disclosive practical wisdom: words made flesh in a community which fosters a generosity to others. Such transformative practice facilitates and encourages the exercise of the qualities of solidarity,

wholeness and reconciliation, practices by which divine disclosure can be effected (Graham 2000:112).

Gerkin (1991:13), writing in the context of pastoral care for individuals and groups concerning addressing the fluid norms and boundaries in society, makes the paradigm shift that practical theology is not only aimed at the ministry practice of the church but also at the presence of the church in society. This idea is further developed into the idea that theology is public and needs to be an interdisciplinary conversational partner.

Alastair Campbell (2000:84) makes a few conclusive points as to the nature of practical theology that I find satisfactory. In summary five important aspects are mentioned:

1. Practical theology is concerned with the study of specific social structures and individual initiatives within which God's continuing work of renewal and restitution becomes manifest. These may be found either inside or outside the life of the church.
2. Practical theology can no longer take the functions of the ordained ministry as normative for its divisions of subject matter and delineation of scope.
3. The relationship between practical theology and other theological disciplines is neither inductive, nor deductive. The relationship is to be seen as a 'lateral' rather than a 'linear' one.
4. Because of the 'situation based' method it employs, practical theology can be expected to be fragmentary and poorly systemised.
5. The findings of practical theology can be expected to be mostly in the form of concrete proposals.

Woodward and Pattison (2000:13–14) says that practical theology is:

- A transformational activity
- Not just concerned with the propositional, the rational, and the logical
- Confessional and honest
- Unsystematic
- Truthful and committed
- Contextual and situationally related
- Socio-politically aware and committed
- Experiential
- Reflectively based
- Interrogative
- Interdisciplinary
- Analytical and constructive
- Dialectical and disciplined
- Skilful and demanding

It is clear that practical theology has developed over many years in various ways. It is also clear that although it stays concerned with the praxis and the hermeneutics it grows in its resources and understandings. It positions itself in the postmodern challenge and context. Recently the emphasis on interdisciplinary and public engagement, also in terms of other sciences have been prevalent. Therefore I turn to a postfoundational approach to practical theology that includes the epistemology outlined in this study so far.

The thinking of Wentzel van Huyssteen and my introduction to postfoundationalism has been a rewarding one. Müller developed a postfoundational approach to practical theology. In the next section I will position myself within this approach.

### **3.3 Postfoundational practical theology**

The work of Wentzel van Huyssteen, as discussed earlier, came to our attention as an academic group through the introduction of postfoundational practical theology by Julian Müller. I think that postfoundational practical theology provides a firm theological background and basis for doing narrative therapy and doing narrative research.

Meeting Van Huyssteen in person and attending discussions led by him has been a high point of my studies. If you have met him and listened to his story and the context he currently works in, you start to understand postfoundationalism and his approach to it better.

These essays in philosophical theology were produced in the context of my own journey, which was also geographical: my family and I, after several increasingly frequent and extensive visits to the United States of America during the eighties, finally made the difficult and challenging move literally halfway around the world from the University of Port Elizabeth in South Africa to Princeton Theological Seminary in Princeton, New Jersey, in January 1992. Evolving out of my commitment to and involvement with Christian theology's precarious interdisciplinary status as it faces the diversity and inevitable pluralism of contemporary postmodern thought in our times, these essays also reflect my deep conviction that only a truly accessible and philosophically credible notion of interdisciplinarity will be able to pave the way for a plausible public theology that wishes to play an important intellectual role in our fragmented culture today (Van Huyssteen 1997b:1).

It is important to understand that the heart and context of Van Huyssteen's approach lies within the belief that all theology should be public theology. His work originates from the context of a fragmented, pluralist postmodern society. Van Huyssteen's work comes from the dialogue between science and theology

and the philosophical epistemology that makes it possible for theology to make a meaningful contribution to the interdisciplinary conversation of our time.

Due to the nature of the action field of this research, in which there is a lot of overlapping with other sciences, the work of Van Huyssteen and the approach of a postfoundational practical theology will help a great deal to position this process and the final research story within the conversation with other sciences.

We have looked at theology, practical theology and postfoundationalism. In this last section I would like to position myself within a postfoundational practical theology approach in this thesis. This approach will also form the basis of my research methodology that will be discussed in the next section.

Müller (2005:2) argues that “practical theology happens whenever and wherever there is a reflection on practise, from the perspective of the experience of the presence of God. This kind of practical theology is sometimes formal and sometimes informal and spontaneous. In the struggle for practical theology to re-position itself within the academic landscape it lost some of its basic forms. The discovery and development of a postfoundational approach to practical theology helps to get back to the original basics of the field,” says Müller.

Müller sums up postfoundational practical theology effectively by saying (Müller 2005:6):

For Practical Theology, in order to reflect in a meaningful way on the experiences of the presence of God, it needs to be...

- Locally contextual
- Socially constructed
- Directed by tradition
- Exploring interdisciplinary meaning
- Pointing beyond the local

This epistemic positioning of a postfoundational practical theology also has methodological implications for the way in which this study is conducted. The seven movements developed by Müller as an approach to do practical theology and research will serve as an approach to methodology in this study. This will be discussed in the next section.

Van Huyssteen (2000:428) argues that all theology should start from the context. Müller (2005:2) says that all practical theology emerges from a space where there is reflection on a specific moment of praxis. Browning (1991) works with practise – theory – practise. This all points to the understanding that practical theology can only be developed from a specific context and a moment of praxis.

A postfoundational practical theology about mentorship in a local congregation can therefore only emerge from the moment of praxis – the mentorship programme in DRC Lynnwood. Within the postfoundational framework the co-researchers and myself will socially construct this theology and research story that develops with subjective integrity. The “received experiences” and “interpreted experiences” (Müller 2005:8) will be interpreted and developed into a final research story. This story will point beyond the local context of DRC Lynnwood’s programme. This will not be claimed in universal or absolute terms, but in terms of meaning and conversation.

#### **4. RESEARCH**

I came across one of those books that is short, classical and will remain part of you for a longer period of time than other books do – *Tuesdays with Morrie* (Albom 1997). This book, written by Mitch Albom tells the story of his visits to his old professor, Morrie, at the end of his life while he is terminal with ALS (Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, or Motor Neuron Disease).

Morrie meant a lot to Mitch while he was still a student. They wanted to keep up contact after Mitch started working but it never happened. Mitch was consumed by his career and before he knew it, it was almost two decades later. Morrie was diagnosed with the disease and decided to use the last period of his life to make a difference. He attracted so much attention in this process that he was featured on a television talk show. Mitch saw this and decided to visit his old professor. This visit led to a number of visits (on a Tuesday) where Mitch ‘studied’ and documented the conversations they had till Morrie’s death. This way his wisdom, the experience of dying and whatever they spoke about could be recorded and used to the benefit of others. It led to this book and it led to what Mitch called his final classes with Morrie, writing his final thesis.

Instead, he would make death his final project, the center point of his days. Since everyone was going to die, he could be of great value, right? He could be research. *A human textbook. Study me in my slow and patient demise. Watch what happen to me. Learn with me* (Albom 1997:10).

This story intrigued me on more than one level as regards my own thesis. On one level the relationship between Morrie and Mitch was a kind of an informal mentorship relationship. I think it serves as a good example of what mentorship means and therefore it can be relevant to our own narratives of mentorship. On another level the process Mitch followed in writing his “thesis” or doing his “research” can serve as a very good metaphor for the kind of research process that I want to use in my own research.

In the next section I will have a look at the theoretical grounding for narrative research. In the following section I will design my own research process based on all the positioning we have done in this first chapter.

## 4.1 Narrative research

Within the framework of research there are different models of research. These models can basically be divided into qualitative and quantitative research (Neuman 1997:14). There are many methods used to do research within these approaches. These methods depend on the purpose and nature of the research as well as various other considerations.

The basic model of the modernistic approach to research is based on objectivity, universal validity, scientific and statistical verifiability and generalisations. The researcher would research an object or objects. The researcher will not get involved in the research and will only come to factual conclusions that can be used universally or in general. This research has been seen as objective and useful. Neuman (1997:4) explains that “Unfortunately, personal experience can lead you astray...Sometimes people believe what they see or experience rather than what is revealed by careful research designed to avoid such errors.” Being part of the research process as a researcher is seen as unscientific by the modernistic framework of doing research.

What is seen as truly scientific and professional can be described with the following norms of the scientific community (Neuman 1997:8):

1. *Universalism*. Irrespective of who conducts research and regardless of where it was conducted, the research is to be judged only on the basis of scientific merit.
2. *Organised scepticism*. Scientists should not accept new ideas or evidence in a carefree, uncritical manner. Instead, all evidence should be challenged and questioned.
3. *Disinterestedness*. Scientists must be neutral, impartial, receptive, and open to unexpected observations or new ideas.
4. *Communalism*. Scientific knowledge must be shared with others.

5. *Honesty*: This is a general cultural norm, but it is especially strong in scientific research.

Most of the above basic premises can be challenged. The question would be if it were at all possible for a researcher to be truly objective, unbiased and uninvolved with the research that is conducted? Is all research universally applicable? Can you truly stay neutral and impartial?

Müller and Schoeman (2004:3) suggest narrative research as a “respectful and fragile intervention”. Any research is seen as a form of intervention, a way of engaging a certain context and somehow being involved with that context. There are various approaches to how the researcher becomes involved in the context. Müller and Schoeman (2004:7) explain it briefly:

- In quantitative research quantities and numbers are the focus. Human behaviour is described from a perspective that humans are objects (outsider perspective).
- In qualitative research the starting point is the insider perspective. The goal is to describe and understand. Here is a level of involvement.
- In participatory research the involvement level is higher. The researched becomes part of the research process. There is a collaborative approach that aims at social change. The participants do not only participate but are also changed in the process.
- Narrative research identifies in various ways with this approach, but needs to be understood from a social constructionist viewpoint.

This research aims not to abuse (Müller, Van Deventer & Human 2001:77). This means that the researchers do not see the people as merely scientific “objects” that some abuse and misuse only for research purposes. These people become part of the research study and contribute their stories.

In the story of Mitch and Morrie there is a scene where Morrie had agreed to the interview with the television network. Morrie said that before he agreed to the interview he wanted to talk to the talk show host (Koppel) in private:

Inside the office, Morrie motioned for Koppel to sit down. He crossed his hands in his lap and smiled. "Tell me something close to your heart," Morrie began. "My heart?" Koppel studied the old man. "All right," he said cautiously, and he spoke about his children. They were close to his heart, weren't they? "Good," Morrie said. Now tell me something about your faith." Koppel was uncomfortable. "I usually don't talk about such things with people I've only known for a few minutes." "Ted, I'm dying," Morrie said, peering over his glasses. "I don't have a lot of time here." Koppel laughed. All right. Faith. He quoted a passage from Marcus Aurelius, something he felt strongly about. Morrie nodded (Albom 1997:20).

It is not possible to do research within the narrative approach and not get involved. It is not possible to treat people as mere objects of the research without getting to know them, hearing their stories, knowing their names. Morrie only agreed to share his story of dying to the presenter, after he felt comfortable with knowing a bit about who the presenter was. It is the same with research. A researcher cannot be objective in doing narrative research. A researcher will get involved. The integrity of the research lies in this and within the process in which the story is told.

The narrative researcher works within the paradigm of the social-constructionist approach. Therefore this research aims to also ask deconstructive questions about the discourses.

In the social constructionist approach (Freedman & Combs 1996:1–41) it is believed that knowledge is constructed within the small narratives of a group or

community. The research in this study is the knowledge for the DRC Lynnwood Mentorship Programme. The meaning of it lies there. This is what constructs their world and experience. It can be similar to other situations and contexts, but it is not universally applicable in a forced manner. We can learn from their experience.

The researcher works with stories. He/she is part of the research story. Within this approach, objectivity is not acknowledged as the ideal but rather the concept of *subjective integrity*. This means a researcher must have the integrity to be honest about his/her own story and feelings towards the research he/she is doing. In this sense one will always be subjective, but it is important to be open about this.

The research aims to open up space for stories. The focus is not a questionnaire or an individual interview. We want to unpack stories and voice them.

The researcher does not work with objects but with co-researchers who form part of the process to write a research story. This story is the research findings of this group of researchers in their specific situation. Others can learn from this new story, but it is not necessarily applicable to their own situation.

Morrie is not an object being studied by Mitch. Mitch listens and records the conversations they have. Together they are doing research on the experience of a person dying with ALS. Together they conclude their research. They are co-researchers.

The research is not hastily done. It formulates questions rather than giving answers too quickly. Sometimes there won't even be answers. It waits for the story to develop within the process of constructing it socially (Muller, Van Deventer & Human 2001). The research is done from a not-knowing position

(Müller 2003:2). This means that the researcher asks questions that is not forced by the science of research but formed due to the story and the context of the everyday life of the co-researcher.

Narratively speaking, life consists of many stories. Narratives construct each person's life. Each story has a beginning and an ending. Sometimes narratives take a long time to reach the end. A narrative researcher believes in the process of listening and telling narratives. This happens in individual lives, groups and communities. New narratives develop and are constructed in a social environment. We all form part of these processes.

I position myself in this paradigm of research.

As researcher, I want to open up space for stories and facilitate a process of story telling and story developing. In this process we will create new narratives and rewrite past narratives in order to move towards the future. I am not a researcher who will come and record clear facts and scientifically verify their validity and outcome.

I will achieve subjective integrity by using reflection and being honest about my own premises. The co-writers in this collective story will be active in my research and make sure that their stories are written justly and as they have told it. Together we will reflect on the final narrative of this research.

## **4.2 Design of my research**

To assist me in the design of my research, I choose to make use of the process Müller developed from Van Huyssteen's postfoundational theology. He translated these concepts into a research process for practical theology, which has seven movements (Müller 2005:8–9). I will explain my research process within these seven movements in this section.

I have formulated the aim of my research as follows:

1. To listen to the unheard narratives about mentorship in a local congregation.
2. To come to a greater understanding of mentorship in the context of a local congregation.
3. To develop these narratives and to develop a research narrative that points beyond the local congregation.
4. To see how theology is developed from this moment of praxis.
5. To make a meaningful contribution to the field of mentorship as theologian.

#### **4.2.1 A specific context is described**

##### ***The context/action field/habitus that I will be doing research on***

I will be doing research on the narratives arising from the mentorship programme in the Dutch Reformed Congregation Lynnwood. This programme has two legs.

The one leg of the programme is for the guidance of grade 11 students in their confirmation year. It involves all the young people who are in the final phase of the catechism programme and wants to do their public confirmation of faith within the reformed tradition. The almost 80 young people are divided into four confirmation classes that are facilitated by the pastors of the congregation. These grade 11s are between the ages of 17 and 18 and each of them has to select a mentor for themselves, for the period of one year (the terms of their confirmation class in the church).

The other leg of the programme is for young leaders in the youth ministry. This group consists of almost 25 leaders. These leaders have different responsibilities in the youth ministry and they vary in age, starting from 18 years.

The leaders are asked to be part of mentorship programme for the duration of their one year leadership term. Some of the leaders stay leaders in the youth ministry for more than one term. They also select a mentor for themselves.

All mentors are screened and trained. The mentors are a heterogeneous group. They vary in age, background, relationship with the grade 11 young person or leader and come from various congregations.

During the course of the year there are various feedback sessions and time for the mentors and mentees to reflect on the story of their mentoring relationship. I will be focusing on these narratives.

The DRC Lynnwood is a suburban congregation in the eastern part of Pretoria. The congregation consists of almost 4 000 members in total, divided into an Afrikaans and English ministry. The mentorship programme runs in the Afrikaans ministry, within the context of a youth ministry with almost 500 teenagers and students.

### ***My own personal story and knowledge of this context***

I am the person who developed this programme over the past four years. In these years I came into contact with various aspects of mentorship through reading and training. The programme itself has also played a role in the knowledge and interest I have for this action field. I have gained knowledge from various sources, which is mostly focused on the business world. Although the age-old tradition of spiritual direction also links with this topic, I have had more experience with coaching and mentoring.

My own personal story with mentorship started with being confronted by the situation of developing leaders in the youth ministry. I did not know how to really do this without spending enough time in personal relationships. Just training

young people in an educational sense was not enough. The need for something more personal arose from the story of working with these young leaders. My interest in this subject grew during this time. We started the mentoring programme with only the leaders. This worked well and we further developed the programme to also include the young people in their confirmation year.

I reflected on my own story with mentoring as the programme grew. This made me aware of the lack of such mentoring relationships in my own life. In a sense there were informal relationships in my life that functioned, but no structured mentoring relationships. Since the programme started, I also started to have a formal relationship with one or two persons who I see as my mentors. This has made me even more positive about the experience.

### ***The relationship between the context and me***

I am the full-time minister responsible for youth ministry in the congregation. I have four colleagues in the Afrikaans ministry and one in the English ministry. I have had the responsibility to do youth ministry for more than seven years now and firmly believe that mentorship programmes are the key to building relationships with young people in a big congregation where you cannot know every teenager and student personally.

Due to my position as minister and programme facilitator I am very much involved in the context. I am also involved in mentorship programmes that go beyond this particular action field that I would be doing research on. I also mentor a number of young leaders myself.

It will be important for me to be aware of this relationship to the context as researcher. In the research approach that I have chosen this is possible, but the importance of my own role and subjective integrity (as it was explained in the previous section) cannot be stressed enough.

In the design of the research process I thought a lot about my own role in the programme. During the past few years that the programme has been running, the groups have been aware of my role as a researcher and my field of study. Although I am the programme leader, my role leans more towards the training of mentors. The programme has a ministry leader that has been involved with the programme since the beginning. In my role as researcher, I have decided that I will focus on the ministry leader as an important co-researcher with regards to the story of the programme and the annual groups.

### ***The influence of my positioning on my relationship with the context***

The work of Van Huyssteen originates within the USA context of public theology. The emerging of postfoundational practical theology takes place within a world where theology needs to bring a significant contribution to the public realm of science and social issues. If theology is not practical in this sense it has no ground to stand on as being a dynamic and contributing science and art.

This is important for me working within the context/action field of mentorship. Mentorship is an umbrella term that is widely used and defined in various contexts of interpretation at the moment. This immediately implies that this context/action field is very public. The content of this context ranges from coaching (in all its forms) to spiritual direction (within all its traditions).

It has been my experience that most of the content of the mentorship practices in our local environments are mostly influenced by the disciplines emerging from psychology, business sciences, social work and other human sciences. Theology is a very “thin” contributor to this public debate. The contribution I want to make is then important as described in the previous section.

A second argument can be made that the philosophy behind most mentorship programmes is in my opinion mostly modernistic in approach. The positioning of a theological approach that opens up a “third way” as opposed to the dual philosophy of either modernism or post-modernism helps to bring new light to the action field.

Postfoundational practical theology also provides the basis for my research approach and the way that I will be interacting with the context.

My theological paradigm leaves space for mentorship and narratives of mentorship within this context of study to also influence me. It makes me a part of the story and opens up my horizons for the unexpected.

### ***The methodological implications of my positioning***

Positioning myself within this paradigm immediately helps me with how I will not be conducting my research. I will not

- approach the mentors and mentees as objects
- make universal derivations from “data”
- be able to leave out my own story out of the research
- be working with a literary study on mentorship and copy this as a starting point
- hand out questionnaires with questions that are not open and do not create space for stories

Methodologically it will therefore be important to keep certain basic values in mind:

I will

- do my research with integrity and always reflect on my own story
- involve my co-researchers as participants

- always be reflective in the whole research process with the co-researchers
- involve other reflection and feedback groups
- always conduct myself in an ethical way with regards to research
- stick to the moment of praxis
- develop the theology and research from the local context

#### **4.2.2 In-context experiences are listened to and described**

##### ***The co-researchers***

I will primarily be listening to the narratives of the mentors and mentees involved in the programme who volunteer to take part in the research project. “Qualitative interviewers listen to people as they describe how they understand the worlds in which they live and work” (Rubin & Rubin 1995:3).

On a secondary level I will also listen to the different stories of the groups of the programme in a less formal way. Every year’s group meets during the course of that year in different ways and reflects on the process of mentoring thus far. The group also shares narratives of the mentoring experiences with each other. Besides the meetings that they have, they also give feedback through different means during the year. This story of the programme over the past few years will help to make a thick description. I will do so with the ministry leader as my co-researcher.

Rubin and Rubin (1995:8) explains this by saying:

To get beyond ordinary listening and hear meanings, you have to focus the discussion to obtain more depth and detail on a narrower range of topics than you would in ordinary conversations. You encourage people to elaborate, provide incidents and clarifications, and discuss events at length. The depth, detail, and richness we seek in interviews is what

Clifford Geertz (1973) has called *thick descriptions*. Thick description, rooted in the interviewees' firsthand experience, forms the material that researchers gather up, synthesize, and analyze as part of hearing the meaning of data.

The primary group (my co-researchers) will be selected on the basis of mentors and mentees (a couple) that volunteer to be part of the research. I have extended an invitation to the whole group in this regard.

I initially thought that I should select these co-researchers within various categories that have surfaced within the programme: categories based on the type of mentor-mentee relationships, like parent-child, friends, different generations, et cetera. But I decided to stick to the volunteers. I did not want to pre-figure certain categories on my own, but wanted to see how the narratives of mentorship developed by themselves. The research design is flexible enough that we can invite new narratives to the research group if necessary.

I did however invite the story of one leader to the programme who had a negative experience with the programme. I thought this is important for the research and within this approach I wanted to make sure that unheard narratives are also told.

I will rather aim to make thick descriptions of fewer narratives. Therefore I will try to limit the narratives to between the narratives of three to five couples.

### ***The methods used to listen to the co-researcher's narratives***

To keep record of interviews I will be using audio recordings and verbatim accounts of conversations. In my MA research I used my process notes and gave them back to the co-researchers – this also worked quite well.

I know it won't always be practical to have lengthy interviews that are recorded. For this reason I will also make use of feedback and questions by means of email. I think this will be practical for the co-researcher and will give me a chance to keep them part of the research story development.

Other forms of methods will be the feedback and reflections that the pairs hand in during the year of the programme. These include email reports but sometimes also letters, picture collages or any other form that they choose to describe or tell the story of their relationship.

Concerning the interviews themselves, I turn to the work of Rubin and Rubin (1995). They explain that there are two approaches that a researcher can balance in the process of interviewing. On the one hand there is an unstructured format, where the researcher merely suggests the topic and lets the co-researcher talk about it while asking conversational questions. On the other hand there is the semi-structured (or focused) approach where specific, open questions are formulated about more specific information needed.

I will use both of these approaches. I will start off with the unstructured interviews and move to the more semi-structured interviews (especially when it happens by way of email).

While reading Mishler (1996) and his critique on other interviewing methods, I found resonance in his suggestion that co-researchers can even contribute to the process by formulating their own questions for interviews. He criticises an approach where all the questions have been pre-formulated and there is no room for unstructured conversations.

### ***Ethics and my research***

“Research ethics are about how to acquire and disseminate trustworthy information in ways that cause no harm to those being studied” (Rubin & Rubin 1995:93). They continue by pointing out the ethical obligations in research:

- Avoiding deception
- Asking permission
- Being honest about the intended use of the research
- Making sure not to hurt co-researchers in any way
- Warning co-researchers that if something they say might get them in trouble
- Not using any material to your own benefit

I will ask permission from the church council to conduct the research in the congregation. I will follow the ethical guidelines of the university, in which it is stated that permission should be granted by the co-researchers that they want to partake in the research. In this regard I will design an ethical consent form that the co-researchers can sign after I have discussed the contents with them (Appendix A).

I will also establish whether the co-researchers would want to be connected to the research in their own names or if they would prefer to use a pseudonym or stay anonymous.

In the methodology of this research the co-researchers are constantly part of the process. In this way, they will know what I have written and they will know how the research story develops and unfolds. By doing this, they will be able to convey their feelings about information or the way that it is written.

These efforts and processes will also apply to the participation of the ministry leader, who tells the story of the programme. I have made an effort to get the

permission of the groups over the past three years to use the programme for research and to inform them of the research process. They are too many to contact individually, seeing that some of the mentors in the programme have moved away or have moved on. Therefore I cannot give feedback to everyone involved in the programme over the past few years.

I will however keep to the story of the ministry leader on the programme and where I do want to make use of a specific person's story or written feedback, I will get their permission personally.

### ***Methods to remain true to my positioning***

The PhD group is a good way to keep me constantly reminded and confronted with the paradigm of theology. The fact that we meet regularly helps to have an opportunity to discuss the process regularly as it progresses and it also helps to have colleagues asking critical questions about the work. All this is a way in which I can reflect on my own theological position.

I also think it is good discipline to constantly refer back to my chapter on positioning and make sure that I am doing what I set out to do. If this has changed during the course of the time, I will at least be reminded to explain why this has changed and how. This will then also help me to show progress and development on the growth and better understanding of my theological positioning.

### ***Moving effectively from “listening to experiences” to “describing the experiences”***

In the ABDCE approach of doing research the movement is described as moving from the action and the background to the development (Müller et al 2001). This is almost a movement that happens on various levels during the

whole process. In my previous experiences with this kind of research, the co-researchers helped a lot with “reading” this process. One can easily take too long to get to development and describing, but it can also happen that you move too quickly and miss out on listening properly.

The key is making thick descriptions in the listening part, so that the description and development of the research story comes naturally from these listening experiences.

#### **4.2.3 Interpretations of experiences are made, described and developed in collaboration with “co-researchers”**

##### ***The balance between my interpretations and those of the co-researchers***

It will be possible to communicate effectively with the co-researchers in various ways. I see them often and am in contact with them through electronic correspondence. This means that I will be able to involve them in my interpretations by sending them some of my work and letting them comment or add to it.

In the group sessions each co-researcher will have the opportunity to participate in the interpretations and development of the research story.

Involving my PhD group in the interpretations will also help to balance the interpretations. I will present these from time to time within the group and reflect on that.

##### ***Methods to facilitate my co-researchers’ own interpretations of their experiences***

In the programme there is a set of questions that each mentor has to answer each quarter and send to the programme leader. These questions are open process questions. These questions will help them with basic feedback.

During the course of the year the mentors and the mentees have to prepare a report on their experiences of the year's programme. These reports are encouraged to be creative. In the past the pairs have reported on their experience by using pictures, letters, collages, et cetera. There are various ways for them to report on their experiences.

The co-researchers that volunteered for this research in the primary group have however finished the formal programme at Lynnwood. Therefore the main method in assisting them with their own interpretations is through a reflective process in conversation with each other.

#### **4.2.4 A description of experiences as it is continually informed by traditions of interpretation**

##### ***Making decisions on which “traditions of interpretation” need to be studied***

It is important to understand firstly what is meant by traditions of interpretations. When Van Huyssteen speaks about traditions of interpretation, he does so within the context of the interdisciplinary conversation. “Given the embeddedness of all our knowledge in tradition(s), it seems clear that if we want to reflect critically on the nature of a specific interdisciplinary problem like human uniqueness in science and theology, we will have to be ready and willing to reflect critically on exactly those traditions that underlie our knowledge” (Van Huyssteen 2006:26).

When we walk into an interdisciplinary situation we have to acknowledge that our own knowledge (for instance as practical theologians) have been influenced by history. In this history there have been understandings of previously

interpreted experiences, theories, contexts, patterns, et cetera. These form the traditions of interpretation.

Together with Müller this understanding of the traditions of interpretation need to be 'translated' into this application of it in narrative research. We have discussed discourses in narratives as systems of various elements that make up our common knowledge.

Both these terms relate to systems and patterns that form our knowledge. This is common knowledge within a specific context. These terms are used in different contexts and differ slightly in scope and other elements, but are not mutually exclusive. In terms of this research traditions of interpretations and discourses will be understood as two terms that essentially mean the same thing in this study.

In this approach the starting point of studying traditions of interpretations are the discourses that come from the narratives and conversations with the co-researchers. This will form the basis of the further study and the co-researchers will in the first instance lead me in our discussions.

The amount of these discourses in this particular topic will be a difficult task to conduct with integrity. The obvious traditions of interpretation in this context are vast in comparison to other topics in the light of the explanation of mentorship as action field in the first section. To list a few:

- Mentorship in the context of the various areas it is used and informed in – each has a different tradition of interpretation. Each of these contexts has its own discourses about mentorship. These range from coaching, therapy, facilitation, learning and spiritual direction.
- Within the influence of modern and postmodern approaches to mentorship there are various traditions of interpretations.

- Within the local church context there are various influences and discourses surrounding mentorship. These include generational issues, male/female discourses, et cetera.
- There is also always a great emphasis on the power play between various discourses as well as the marginalised in narrative practical theology and postfoundational practical theology.

The guiding factor will still have to be the context and moment of praxis.

***The influence of the scientific community in my decisions about literature to study***

In the PhD group the reflection on the different experiences as they are told and interpreted will possibly bring forth questions and discourses that could become part of the research interpretation and development story. In this way the group can suggest literature or at least literature on the basis of these discourses as they arise.

I will also spend time with persons from other sciences on this topic on individual basis as well as in a group discussion. They might also suggest literature that is related to this topic and can become useful.

***Methods I am going to use in order to make an assessment of how the in-context experiences are informed by tradition***

Through listening to the in-context experiences and asking questions from a not-knowing position (Müller 2000), I will let the discussion lead us to the traditions or discourses that emerge from the narratives. Reflecting on these with the co-researchers will help to identify these traditions.

Within the various groups where these narratives will be reflected on, the traditions will also come to the foreground.

#### **4.2.5 A reflection on the religious and spiritual aspects, especially on God's presence, as it is understood and experienced in a specific situation**

##### ***Language and the co-researcher's talk about experiences of God's presence***

Language and "linguaging" in narrative theology are very important. They do not always come in the form of words but also in the form of metaphors and imagery. I think any of these types of language that communicate a sense of meaning to persons that is described in such a way that it points to an understanding of God's presence in their lives or in the mentorship experience are "clues" in this regard.

It would also be important to clarify this language in the way that the co-researchers interpret the language themselves. They might even use language that is interpreted by me, as reflections on God's presence while it might not even be.

##### ***Facilitating "God-talk" in my interviews***

In narrative theology we are taught not to impose "God-talk" in any conversation, but only discuss what is being "put on the table" by the co-researchers themselves. I want to try and stay as close as possible to this value in narrative research. I think the basic approach is to stick to the story, the character and the language that the co-researchers use.

When it comes to the stage where reflection becomes the main focus of the co-researchers' and group's activity, I think I can also reflect on my interpretations and questions about the research story. If there were meaningful themes and narratives of the co-researchers speaking about the presence of God in their experiences, this would be the place where I would speak about it. It might also be appropriate to speak about the lack of such stories. The relationship with the co-researchers will be the guiding factor.

***My feelings in regard to my own positive or negative experiences of God's presence***

Working within the context of being a researcher in this approach, honestly also reflecting on my own thoughts and feelings to any aspect of the research story, I will have to be honest about my own story and discourses in this regard.

Reflecting on the influence of my own feelings in this regard will be part of the process. If I understand Van Huyssteen correctly, he would also acknowledge that theologians would have to be honest that all rationality and ideas are influenced by our own interpreted experiences. We stand within our own theology and interpretations. He would argue that the key to our own integrity in this regard would be a critical stance on our own position, being able to also rethink our own positioning (Van Huyssteen 2000:419).

To answer the question I can only at this point say that I don't know yet. I will have to take a critical stance on my own feelings and develop and reflect on them as the research process continues.

**4.2.6 A description of experience thickened through interdisciplinary investigation**

### ***Deciding about which themes to investigate further on an interdisciplinary level***

As I have pointed out in the section where I discussed my theological positioning, I think this theme leans towards a wide variety of interdisciplinary investigations. I will not be able to investigate the whole landscape of mentorship within the different fields. The themes that present themselves within the research story will therefore have to be the focus of the investigations.

As part of the reflection process I will establish a reflection team that consists of scholars from different disciplines. I will also have to rely on this group that reflect with me on this to help me with these decisions.

### ***Using relevant material from other disciplines correctly***

I will try and have discussions with people within other fields to clarify my understanding of their material as far as possible. This is not always possible – so making sure that you don't only use one source or piece of information from a field will also help to gain a better understanding of the context in which it is used. The reflection group can assist me in this regard.

### ***Balancing non-theological evidence with theology***

As I have explained in the positioning, postfoundational practical theology is developed from the context of public theology, engaging with other sciences with integrity.

I think the focus of my research theme will be to develop a theology from the stories and moment of praxis and engage with this theology in discussion with other sciences. Making use of non-theological evidence will be secondary and put within context if I do make use of it.

#### **4.2.7 The development of alternative interpretations that point beyond the local community**

***Allowing all the interpretations (empirical stories; theological and interdisciplinary literature; my understandings; the interpretations of co-researchers) to develop into alternative understandings***

In the narrative approach to research the process of story telling and story development is closely linked. Muller, Van Deventer and Human (2001) use fiction writing by Anne Lamott (1995) as a metaphor for understanding the process of narrative research. In this metaphor stories are told about a specific action, but the process of research also develops stories and reaches an ending in a specific process. In the process of listening to the stories, reflecting on literature and co-reflecting on the process, the new research story is formed. This is done through conversations with co-researchers, the reflection team, the researcher's own reflection and bringing the stories into conversation with each other during the whole process.

This is a process that cannot be forced, but it's almost a natural event when doing narrative research if the researcher stays open to the process and adheres to his/her own subjective integrity throughout the research and the writing down of the research story.

#### ***Involving my co-researchers in this stage***

The co-researchers are vital in the interpretation of their own narratives. After listening to their narratives, I will be reflecting on them. The one possibility is to send this reflection to the co-researchers and have them comment on it. Another possibility would be to involve them in a conversation about the narratives and

reflect on the narratives with them. There is also the possibility of reflecting on the narratives in the group of co-researchers if they would like to.

It all depends on the practicalities and if it would be possible to do the reflection in this way.

In narrative research it is extremely important to include the co-researchers in as much of the interpreting of the narratives as possible. The idea of the researcher analysing the narratives somewhere on his/her own is foreign in this approach, because it does not comply with the value of subjective integrity and working with the co-researchers, otherwise they won't be co-researchers but merely objects of study.

***Reaching conclusions that point beyond the local community, or the specific context***

I think that if you always use the stories and your own research story as the starting point of your conclusions in the research you can stay clear of generalisations. Narrative research is never presented as the universal general findings on any topic. It cannot be presented without its context and not be embedded within the local arena of its action.

Good research done in a good narrative way, would for this reason always point beyond the local, because it will tell an authentic research story that will resonate and be meaningful beyond the local.

The research group and the rest of the community involved in my research will also help me in this aspect.

***The outline of the rest of this thesis***

I have decided to present the research story in this thesis within the following chapters.

## **Chapters**

1. Introduction, theological positioning, epistemological positioning, research positioning and explanation of the topic and research process
2. The story of the mentorship programme
3. The narratives of the co-researchers
4. The research story and conversation between the different narratives, thickened through interdisciplinary consultation
5. The brief overview of mentorship literature
6. Conclusions, pointing beyond the local
7. Reflection on my research

Bibliography

Appendixes