

Investigating the impact of “the gap year” on career decision-making

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**Investigating the impact of “the gap year”
on career decision-making**

by

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DECLARATION

I, Melinda Coetzee (99092779), hereby declare that all the resources consulted are included in the reference list and that this study titled: **Investigating the impact of “the gap year” on career decision-making** is my original work. This thesis was not previously submitted by me for any degree at another university.

M. Coetzee
August 2006

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SUMMARY

In this study the experiences of young people who engage in a gap year were explored. The focus of the study was on how the gap year influenced career decision-making. A case study design was used to gather information about the experiences of three young people who engaged in various types of gap years.

Data was collected by means of semi-structured interviews, life-lines and collages created by the participants. They were also consulted throughout the research process and participated in the data analysis. Content analysis was applied to the gathered data, and various themes and sub-themes were identified. These were confirmed by the participants before the completion of the study.

This study found that the value of the gap year may be in the personal growth that it facilitates, the time it allows people to take before finalising their decisions, and its impact on career maturity. The findings indicate that the gap year may help people to resolve their career indecision by providing opportunities to experience the world and gain self-knowledge, thereby becoming more career mature. This in turn leads to the ability to make a career decision.

KEYWORDS

- Gap year
- Career decision-making
- Career indecision
- Career maturity
- Life-skills
- Career development
- Career counseling
- Post-modern career counseling
- Constructivism

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER 1	
INTRODUCTION	
1.1 INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY	1
1.2 CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY	3
1.3 STATEMENT OF PURPOSE	3
1.4 ORIENTATION OF STUDY	3
1.4.1 LITERATURE BASED CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS	3
1.4.1.1 The gap year	3
1.4.1.2 Career	5
1.4.1.3 Career decision-making	7
1.4.2 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK	8
1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS	10
1.5.1 PRIMARY RESEARCH QUESTION	10
1.5.2 SUB-QUESTIONS	10
1.6 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY	10
1.6.1 CASE STUDY DESIGN	10
1.6.2 RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS	11
1.6.3 DATA COLLECTION	13
1.6.3.1 Life-line	14
1.6.3.2 Semi-structured interviews	14
1.6.3.3 Collages	15
1.6.4 DATA ANALYSIS	16
1.6.4.1 Analysing the life-line	16
1.6.4.2 Analysing the interview data	16
1.6.4.3 Analysing the collage data	17
1.6.5 INTERPRETATION OF DATA	17

	Page
1.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS	18
1.8 OUTLINE OF THE CHAPTERS THAT FOLLOW	18
1.8.1 CHAPTER 2	18
1.8.2 CHAPTER 3	18
1.8.3 CHAPTER 4	18
1.8.4 CHAPTER 5	19

--- oOo ---

CHAPTER 2
THE LITERATURE SURVEY

2.1	INTRODUCTION	20
2.2	ON THE IMPORTANCE OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW	20
2.3	THE GAP YEAR	20
2.3.1	DEFINITION	21
2.3.2	ACTIVITIES ENGAGED IN DURING GAP YEAR	22
2.3.3	MOTIVATIONS FOR ENGAGING IN A GAP YEAR	23
2.3.4	ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF TAKING A GAP YEAR	23
2.4	CAREER AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT	24
2.4.1	SUPER'S LIFE-SPAN, LIFE-SPACE THEORY	24
2.4.1.1	Life-span	27
2.4.1.2	Life-space	29
2.4.1.3	Self-concept	31
2.4.2	KRUMBOLTZ'S LEARNING THEORY OF CAREER CHOICE AND COUNSELLING	32
2.4.2.1	The role of chance	35
2.4.3	POST-MODERN THEORIES	35
2.5	CAREER DECISION-MAKING AND CAREER INDECISION	38
2.6	LIMITATIONS OF LITERATURE	39
2.7	CONCLUSION	40

CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1	INTRODUCTION	42
3.2	THE CONSTRUCTIVIST-INTERPRETIVIST PARADIGM	42
3.3	CASE STUDY DESIGN	44
3.3.1	STRENGTHS OF THE DESIGN	45
3.3.2	WEAKNESSES OF THE DESIGN	45
3.4	RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	46
3.4.1	RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS	46
3.4.1.1	Ethical considerations	49
3.4.2	DATA COLLECTION	51
3.4.2.1	Round 1 – Life-lines and interviews	51
3.4.2.2	Round 2 – Collages and interviews	53
3.4.4.3	Round 3 – Participant checking	53
3.4.3	DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION	54
3.5	TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE ENQUIRY	54
3.5.1	VALIDITY	54
3.5.1.1	Internal validity	55
3.5.1.2	External validity	55
3.5.1.3	Construct validity	55
3.5.2	RELIABILITY	56
3.6	CONCLUSION	56

CHAPTER 4
FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH

4.1	INTRODUCTION	58
4.2	DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS	58
4.3	FINDINGS OF THE THEMATIC ANALYSIS	59
4.3.1	IMPACT OF SCHOOL	61
4.3.1.1	Feelings about school	61
4.3.1.2	Relationships	62
4.3.1.3	Career guidance	63
4.3.2	CAREER EXPLORATION	64
4.3.2.1	Work experiences	64
4.3.2.2	Studying	66
4.3.2.3	Motivations for gap year	68
4.3.3	EXPECTATIONS OF GAP YEAR	69
4.3.3.1	Financial	70
4.3.3.2	Experiential	70
4.3.4	RESULTS OF GAP YEAR	71
4.3.4.1	Expectations	71
4.3.4.2	Personal growth	74
4.3.4.3	Life-skills	75
4.3.4.4	Career decision-making	76
4.3.5	FEELINGS ABOUT GAP YEAR EXPERIENCES	77
4.3.5.1	Positive feelings	77
4.3.5.2	Negative feelings/regrets	78
4.4	CONCLUSION	79

	Page
CHAPTER 5	
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	
5.1 INTRODUCTION	80
5.2 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND COMPARISON TO LITERATURE	80
5.3 CONCLUSIONS OF THE STUDY	84
5.4 ADDRESSING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS	85
5.4.1 PRIMARY RESEARCH QUESTION	85
5.4.2 SUB-QUESTIONS	86
5.5 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY	88
5.6 CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY	88
5.7 RECOMMENDATIONS	89
5.7.1 FURTHER RESEARCH	89
5.7.2 PRACTICE	90
5.8 CONCLUSION	91
REFERENCE LIST	92
APPENDICES	99

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
FIGURE 2.1 Types of gap year activities.....	22
FIGURE 2.2 Super’s Life-Career Rainbow.....	26
FIGURE 3.1 Overview of research process.....	47
Box 3.1 Anne’s biography.....	48
Box 3.2 Beth’s biography.....	48
Box 3.3 Carl’s biography.....	49
FIGURE 4.1 Representation of themes and sub-themes.....	60
FIGURE 4.2 Beth’s collage – Excerpt 1.....	66
FIGURE 4.3 Beth’s collage – Excerpt 2.....	66
FIGURE 4.4 Beth’s collage – Excerpt 3.....	68
FIGURE 4.5 Beth’s collage – Excerpt 4.....	72
FIGURE 4.6 Excerpts from Anne and Carl’s collages.....	73
FIGURE 4.7 Beth’s collage – Excerpt 5.....	75

LIST OF TABLES

	Page
TABLE 2.1 Table of gap year categories and descriptions.....	21
TABLE 2.2 Super’s life stages and related developmental tasks.....	27

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

This research will focus on the experiences of three young people who have taken a “gap year”¹ during their career development, and how this has influenced their career decision-making. The gap year is a fairly new phenomenon, and can be seen as resulting from the changing world of work and the trend towards globalisation that is currently taking place. Very little research has been done on the various aspects of the gap year and, specifically, the influence of the gap year on career decision-making.

In my experience with career counselling I have found that many learners who are nearing the end of their school careers contemplate travelling and working overseas before “settling down” to study or work. The pressure to make a “good career choice” and to select an occupation that will have immediate as well as long-term rewards is great (Mortimer, Zimmer-Gembeck & Holmes 2002:441-442). A common perception among some young people, parents and even employers appears to be that taking a gap year could be a way to help young people address the need to “find themselves”, to become more organised, and to mature in preparation for entering a field of study or the world of work (Jones 2004a:2). Others however appear to have mixed feelings about this, as they are unsure whether the gap year will simply be a waste of time and money, or whether it will serve to help young people mature and make a career decision.

Commonly cited motivators for taking a gap year are earning money, gaining job experience, seeing the world and self-exploration (Jones 2004a:1-5). Some feel that the gap year offers valuable opportunities for young people to explore jobs, travel and gain experience (Arnett 2000:470). Others point out that young people who do not have the opportunity to travel or to seek further education tend to “flounder” from

¹ Whereas the phrase “the gap year” comes across as a colloquial term, it has become the accepted expression to use when referring to a break taken by a person from their career or study path.

job to job and find it difficult to make a career decision (Mortimer *et al* 2002:443). However, Jones (2004a:3) stresses the importance of a well-planned gap year spent engaged in meaningful activities, if the positive effects thereof are to be enjoyed. The motives for embarking on a gap year and how the gap year is experienced by the young person, will therefore have a large impact on how meaningful it is.

With the advent of the “global village” and advances in information technology, the world of work is undergoing radical and rapid changes. The emergence of a world worker is just one of the effects of the globalisation of the workforce (Savickas 2003:87). With the changing world of work, the needs of young people leaving school are changing as well. Traditional Euro-centric methods of career counselling are no longer appropriate, especially in the post-apartheid South African context (Bester 1999:5). Many traditional theories regarding career development are based on a rational-positivist epistemology, and do not take into account personal meanings attributed to career development. The afore-mentioned theories are accused of being reductionistic and of not being culturally relevant. With traditional approaches to career counselling falling away, new means are being sought to guide and assist young people to cope with the challenge of finding a place in the global village. Different theories have emerged to address this deficiency. These include: the Social Cognitive Career Theory of Lent, Brown and Hackett; the Cognitive Information Processing Approach; Hansen’s Integrative Life Planning Theory; and, post-modern approaches (such as the narrative approach and constructivist career counselling) (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey 2002:70-92).

Brott (2004:189) stresses the importance of the exploration of meanings and themes in the client’s personal stories during career counselling. Post-modern career theories have emerged to address this need. Savickas (1993:209) furthermore stresses the importance of encouraging self-affirmation and of facilitating career decision-making when engaging in post-modern career counselling, as opposed to traditional approaches, which rely on psychometric tests and on finding the “best fit”. The focus on personal meaning is therefore an important aspect of post-modern career counselling.

This research aims to avoid the pitfall of reductionism by utilising a constructivist technique in order to investigate gap year participants' construction of meaning and understanding. This could have implications for career counselling in South Africa. In doing so, the research also aims to contribute to the growing body of research within the constructivist paradigm.

1.2 CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY

The research could be of value to:

- parents and learners who are faced with the choice of whether or not to take a gap year.
- career counsellors.

The research could also have value on a theoretical level as it is envisaged that theory as viewed from a constructivist perspective will be generated regarding the gap year phenomenon.

1.3 STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to investigate the influence of “the gap year” on career decision-making.

1.4 ORIENTATION OF STUDY

1.4.1 LITERATURE BASED CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS²

1.4.1.1 The gap year

One of the growing trends in the career development of young people in the western world is that of the gap year, where they travel and work internationally, gaining experience in the global village before returning to their country of origin and starting their careers.

² The theories and literature touched upon in this section will be explored in greater detail in chapter 2.

The traditional definition of a gap year refers to one year taken off by young people between school and university to explore the world and career opportunities (Pidcock 2004:1). A research report compiled by Jones (2004b:24) defines the gap year as a break taken by a student that lasts anything from three months to 24 months. The author notes that the key element that separates a gap year from a vacation is that the student is engaged in travelling, gaining extra qualifications or working. According to Simpson (2005:447) the gap year has changed in the last five years from a “radical activity, dominated by charities and inspired by the travel of the hippie generation, to an institutionally accepted commercial gap year industry which helps form new citizens for a global age.”

The prevalence of commercial gap year companies as well as the large number of young people taking gap years is seen as evidence of the growing popularity of this practice (Simpson 2005:447; Jones 2004a:2). While the gap year has been popular in the United Kingdom (UK) for some time, it is quickly growing in popularity in other countries including the United States of America (USA) (Pidcock 2004:1). Gose (2005:2) reports that many colleges in the USA encourage students to take a gap year due to the common belief that this allows the students to mature emotionally and intellectually. Another trend is for young people to study for a year in another institution in order to improve their chances of being admitted into their university of choice (Gose 2005:3). Gose reports that many young people feel that doing this improves their chances of gaining admission into an Ivy-league school, and the opinion exists that graduate schools and employers in the USA look favourably upon students who have engaged in gap year activities and who have gained “soft skills” not taught in university or college (Curtis 2004:1).

In South Africa, concerns have been raised regarding the number of young people leaving the country, and the issue of the “brain drain” is one fraught with controversy (Robinson 2003:1). However, opinions exist that, in the case of the gap year, “brain circulation” occurs as opposed to “brain drain”. This implies that many young people and professionals return from gap years abroad with more experience, and with more to offer to their professions (Robinson 2003:2; Asmal 2004:1).

One of the most commonly cited advantages of a gap year is that it allows students to mature emotionally and intellectually (Jones 2004a: 2-3). Some proponents of the gap year feel that it prepares students for their tertiary education both as a person and on an academic level. Recruitment and administration personnel at some universities feel that the students are more mature, motivated and secure after completing a gap year, and that it “changes people” and helps them to “find themselves” (Pidcock 2004:2; Gose 2005:3). Gose (2005:2) and Pidcock (2004:2) report that some students who have completed a gap year state that it helped them to finalise their career choices, to gain admission into their desired universities, and to mature.

Some of the disadvantages include the perception that a gap year will only be of value to you if you gain experience relevant to your intended career, or if you study during that time. An “extended vacation” can be viewed as a waste of time, or as an attempt to avoid making a career choice. Furthermore, its financial implications make it an option not available to all school-leavers (Jones 2004b:12; Pidcock 2004:4).

Due to the gap year’s growing popularity in recent years, more attention is being given to this phenomenon. Whereas some accounts of gap year experiences can be found in current literature (Jones 2004a:1-5; Gose 2005:1-7; Pidcock 2004:1-4), very little research is to be found regarding the impact of the gap year on career development in general, and specifically regarding career decision-making. Existing literature is focused on American and British students and their perceptions of the gap year, but little information is available about the phenomenon amongst South African young people. This research will attempt to contribute to the knowledge base by focusing specifically on how the experiences of South African young people during a gap year impacted on their career decision-making.

1.4.1.2 Career

Super and Hall (1978:334) define “career” as “... a sequence of positions occupied by a person during the course of a life-time.” In a later publication, Super defines it as “... the life course of a person encountering a series of developmental tasks and handling them in such a way as to become the kind of person he or she wants to

become” (Super 1990:225-226). According to all these definitions the concept “career” encompasses more than simply an occupation: it is a constantly developing state of being. Researchers therefore tend to speak about career development.

Bester (2004:291) defines career development as “The collection of psychological, sociological, educational, physical, economic and chance factors that combine to shape the career of an individual over his life-span.” “Career development” therefore includes many aspects of a career, such as career choice and the development of career-related skills. It also includes all of the life-roles that people play, including those of student and leisurite (Bester 2004:294, 309). The concept of career development is indeed a very broad one, not limited to only those roles and skills associated with a specific profession or job.

Many theories explore and explain various aspects of career development. These include Trait-and-Factor, Developmental, Sociological and Psychological approaches, as well as those such as Decision Theory, Social Learning Theory and Needs Theory which deal with the impact of decision-making, social learning and the needs of the individual upon career development (Bester 2004:292).

Pryor and Bright (2003:121) argue that traditional career development theories tend to be reductionistic in nature, and that many of those fail to take into account four elements involved in career development and choice, namely:

- The influence of objective and subjective contexts.
- The dynamic, adaptive and interactive way that people function in the world and make choices.
- The tendency of people to ascribe meanings to experiences and to construct personal understandings of themselves and their careers.
- The occurrence of unplanned and unpredictable events.

Efforts to address these issues have led to the emergence of approaches such as the ecological approach, the use of systems theory, constructivist approaches and the use of chaos theory (Pryor & Bright 2003:121).

It would not be possible to review all the above-mentioned theories for the purpose of this research, and therefore only those dealing specifically with career decision-making will be focused upon. These include the developmental approach of Super, Krumboltz's learning theory of career decision-making and post-modern approaches to career development.³

Many existing career theories (including Super and Krumboltz's theories) as well as the various post-modern approaches are still being developed and refined as more research is being done and more information is gathered. However, these do not take into account the effect of globalisation and the phenomenon of the gap year. The gap year is a growing trend, which means that an additional life-role could evolve for the many people who choose to take a gap year.

1.4.1.3 Career decision-making

The ability to make a career decision is considered to be an important characteristic of a career mature person. However, research suggests that the ability to make a career decision is affected by various factors, including: identity formation, interest, relationships with parents, and the cultural and work-related context of the individual (Mortimer *et al* 2002:440; Guerra & Braungart-Rieker 1999:256, 262&263; Tracey, Robbins & Hofsess 2004:2). As mentioned above, both Super and Krumboltz view career decision-making as being influenced by various factors, including situational, environmental and personal factors (Bester 2004:293-296).

Mortimer *et al* (2002:440) point out that choices about school, work and family take place within the context of the labour market, and therefore an individual's decision-making is both constrained and enabled by circumstance. It is therefore very important to take contextual factors into account when working with career decision-making. The current labour market is rapidly changing, and is strongly influenced by information technology. The transition from adolescence to adulthood is sensitive to social and economic conditions, therefore the call to become a part of the global village and to be a "world worker" can be seen as a significant influencer of career

³ See Chapter 2 for a detailed discussion of these theories.

decision-making of young people in the post-modern age (Mortimer *et al* 2002:440; Savickas 2003:89).

In considering career decision-making, the term “career indecision” is often used. This term has been widely used to refer to problems related to career development, and specifically problems associated with career decision-making (Rojewski 1994 in Gordon & Meyer 2002:41). Gordon and Meyer (2002:45) identified self-information, decision-making, career information, (and the integration of self-information and career information) as relevant factors of career development when young people are faced with career indecision. Whereas career indecision has traditionally been viewed in a negative light, more recent conceptualisations have highlighted the necessity of experiencing a stage of career indecision in the process of career decision-making (Savickas 1995:3).

Career indecision is therefore re-conceptualised by Savickas (1995:3). He holds that it should be seen as an expression of “... hesitation before transformation.” He stresses that hesitation does not stop forward movement, but rather offers an opportunity for the individual to transform himself and forge a new identity. He theorizes that career indecision experienced by adolescents and young people occurs because they have not yet identified their “life themes”, and are still in the process of developing their identities. This identity formation ties in with the integration of self-information and career information as identified by Gordon and Meyer (2002:45) as an important aspect of career development.

1.4.2 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The participants are viewed through the lenses of the post-modern approach to career development, which states that each individual constructs meaning in career development and career decision-making. Hence, the research is situated within a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm. This research also takes into account the career development theories of Krumboltz, and works within the framework of the career life-span approach of Super. Krumboltz theorizes that various factors such as genetic, environmental, learning experience and task approach skills all contribute to the ability to make a career decision (Tolbert 1980:86).

Mkhize and Frizelle (2000:1) state that career development research in South Africa is influenced by Western values of individualism, and argue that these values are not culturally relevant to an African society. They propose that a hermeneutic and dialogical approach provides a more relevant framework for understanding career development in South Africa, as it emphasises that career development results from exposure to various social and cultural perspectives. The post-modern approach of constructivism is therefore considered to be applicable as it allows for contextual and personal factors, (as described by the participant) to be taken into account. Constructivists assert that reality is relative and that research findings are created through the interaction between the researcher and research participants (Schurink 1998a:240).

The proposed research aims to explore the meanings attached to their gap year experiences by participants, and how these impact on career decision-making. This is linked to the factor of “task approach skills” (with specific focus on emotional responses) as identified by Krumboltz. This factor can also be viewed in light of its impact on self-concept as informed by Super’s theory.

The research has a qualitative focus and therefore follows a qualitative approach, which differs fundamentally from a quantitative research approach in terms of its view of reality (ontological assumptions) and of truth (epistemological assumptions) (Smit 2001:59; Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2004:7). The research is based on a constructivist-interpretivist epistemology and ontology. The ontological assumption that informs this research is that reality is socially constructed by both the researcher and the research participants. The epistemological assumption is that participants construct meanings based on their experiences and their interaction with the social context. As stated by Cohen *et al* (2004:7) the epistemological and ontological assumptions inform the research method and design.

However, while this study is of a qualitative nature, the researcher heeds Northcutt & McCoy’s (2004:9-12) warning that any extreme position in terms of research approach is undesirable, as it leads to the inability to understand and see the value in the “opposite” approach.

1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1.5.1 PRIMARY RESEARCH QUESTION

“How does the gap year impact on career decision-making?”

1.5.2 SUB-QUESTIONS

- What motivated the participants to take a gap year?
- How do the participants feel about their experiences during the gap year as related to career decision-making?
- What do the participants value about the gap year in terms of career decision-making?
- What are the participants’ perceptions as to whether or not the gap year prepared them for career decision-making?

1.6 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY⁴

1.6.1 CASE STUDY DESIGN

A case study design is used during this research. A case study is a rich and holistic description of a phenomenon (Merriam 1998:27). Merriam identifies various characteristics of a case study, namely (1998:27-30):

- It consists of a bounded system (a system bound by time or place).
- It is descriptive and provides thick descriptions of the phenomenon.
- It is particularistic in that it focuses on a specific phenomenon.
- It is heuristic, as it contributes to the reader’s understanding of the phenomenon.

A comparative, interpretive case study⁵ is done regarding the phenomenon of the gap year and its influence on career decision-making, as experienced by three research participants. Case study research is appropriate for this study as it allows the researcher to explore the phenomenon of the gap year in depth. It allows for rich

⁴ The research design and methodology will be discussed at length in Chapter 3.

⁵ This type of case study will be described in more detail on page 42.

descriptions based on the participant's own experiences, and thereby reflects their constructions of meaning (Cohen *et al* 2004:182). Schurink (1998a:247) identifies "personal narratives" as an appropriate methodological approach to utilise when working within a constructivist paradigm.

Cohen *et al* (2004:181) state that one of the strengths of a case study is that it observes effects within a real-life context. Babbie, Mouton, Vorster and Prozesky (2002:282) reiterate the importance of an accurate portrayal of contextual factors in case studies. According to Merriam (1998:42) advantages of case studies include that they provide detailed descriptions and explanations about phenomena. They result in tentative hypotheses that inform further research. Disadvantages include that they can be very time consuming and labour intensive, and that case studies may portray only one aspect of a complex phenomenon and therefore be misleading. One of the major problems in case study research is that of researcher bias, as unethical researchers might inaccurately portray research findings to verify and support their arguments (Merriam 1998:42). The problem of researcher subjectivity is evident in most qualitative research methods.

Researcher bias in this study will be addressed by making use of participant checking throughout the research process. This will entail checking understanding of constructs and meanings, as well as offering the participants an opportunity to examine and question the data interpretation.

When discussing the limitations of case studies, questions also arise regarding the reliability and validity of case studies (Merriam 1998:43; Cohen *et al* 2004:185). This is addressed in Chapter 3.

1.6.2 RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Babbie *et al* (2002:287) as well as Schurink, Schurink and Poggenpoel (1998:317) suggest a sample of between five and twenty-five participants when engaging in a qualitative enquiry. The small size of the sample in qualitative research seeks to ensure that the individual voices of the participants can be heard, and that rich descriptions of their experiences and meanings can be constructed. When

conducting case study research, it is appropriate to select a very small sample as an in-depth investigation will be done. Purposeful convenience sampling will be applied to select the research participants.

According to Babbie *et al* (2002:288) purposeful sampling is the most commonly used sampling method when qualitative research is undertaken. It implies that a small sample is selected, and that inclusion criteria are implemented in selecting the participants (Strydom & De Vos 2000:198). Convenience sampling refers to a sampling method in which participants are selected based upon the researchers' ability to access the participants and information easily and conveniently. As this is a study of limited scope, purposeful convenience sampling will be used. Therefore, while participants will be selected based upon their fulfilment of certain selection criteria (as required in purposeful sampling), ease of access (i.e. convenience) will be the primary deciding factor. The main selection criterion for this study, based upon Jones' (2004b:24) definition of the gap year, is as follows:

- The participants must have taken any period of time between 3 and 24 months 'out' of formal education, training or the workplace, where the timeout took place within the context of a longer career trajectory.

The sample comprises of three research participants, whose experiences, perceptions and beliefs will form the basis of the comparative case study. All of the participants fulfil the sampling criteria as they have all participated in gap years that have been longer than 3 and shorter than 24 months. Furthermore, all of the gap years took the form of time taken out of formal education or work and took place within the participant's career spans. The participants all have existing relationships with the researcher, and therefore ease of access will be facilitated. A brief overview of the participants is as follows:

- ***Participant 1***

Participant 1 is a 21-year-old female who will be referred to as Anne⁶. She is from an Afrikaans South African background. After finishing school, she worked in various industries for a period of approximately two years. She then took a gap year, during which she travelled to the UK and worked there for a year. When she returned she

⁶ All names used to refer to the participants, and when discussing their life stories, are pseudonyms.

completed a diploma course in Kindergarten teaching, and is currently working as a teacher while studying further part-time.

- ***Participant 2***

Participant 2 is a 23-year-old female who will be referred to as Beth. She is also from an Afrikaans South African background. She started studying at the University of Pretoria after finishing high school, but dropped out of the course after six months. She took a gap year from studying, then worked in the business world for six months, after which she decided to study education. She is currently completing her BEd FET degree, and will be qualifying as a Senior Secondary Maths and Science Educator.

- ***Participant 3***

Participant 3 is a 26-year-old male who will be referred to as Carl. His parents emigrated from Zimbabwe before he was born, therefore he is from an English Rhodesian background. He worked after school to raise money to finance his gap year, which consisted of working in the UK for over a year, and also travelled to other parts of the world during this time. Due to difficulties finding work, he ended up returning to the UK a further two times after his first gap year. He currently works in Pretoria as a sales representative in the air-conditioning and refrigeration industry.

1.6.3 DATA COLLECTION

According to Yin (2003:97) one of the principles of data collection in case study research is to use multiple sources of evidence. The use of multiple sources of data allows for a compilation of rich data (Merriam 1998:28; Babbie *et al* 2002:282; Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit 2004:42). It also allows for triangulation of data whereby a wider range of information is accessed and compared. During the process of triangulation evidence can be corroborated through identifying “converging lines of inquiry” (Yin 2003:98), thereby also addressing validity and reliability concerns. In this study, life-lines, semi-structured interviews and collages will be used to gather data.

1.6.3.1 Life-line

The life-line is identified by Brott (2004:142) as a post-modern career counselling technique aimed at revealing the participants' past and present life story. It is an interactive method where the counsellor works with clients to construct a visual representation of their lives to date and the important events, people and experiences that shaped their life stories. It is a technique that falls within the constructivist paradigm as it allows the participants to construct meaning and portray their personal experiences (Brott 2004:138).

This technique is a useful way of introducing the topic of career and career development and to situate the client in a specific context. It serves as a means to build rapport with the participant, to clarify mutual understanding of the concepts being discussed, and also offers an opportunity to explore the various meanings that the participant attributes to his or her career and life story.

The participants will be asked to prepare a life-line detailing their experiences from high school to date. It will be requested that they do so with specific focus on events or experiences that led them to their current career or study direction. While some guidance will be given regarding how to compile a life-line, the contents of the life-line are entirely decided on by the participant.

The research participant will be asked to describe and discuss his or her life-line with the researcher. They will be asked to share their meanings and experiences as guided by the life-line, with the researcher probing to facilitate understanding. Notes shall be taken during this discussion and, with the permission of the participant, the discussion will be recorded. The information shared during this exercise will inform the semi-structured interview.

1.6.3.2 Semi-structured interviews

Face to face interviewing is the most common method of data collection in qualitative research (Schurink 1998b:297). As pointed out by Kvale (1996:62) interviews are characterised by the view that knowledge is not external to the individuals involved,

but that it is generated between individuals, often through conversations. For this reason, in-depth interviews formed the main part of the data collection strategy. A semi-structured interview format was used.

In a semi-structured interview (also known as the interview guide approach) an interview guide leads the interview, but does not dictate the sequence of questions or responses (Cohen *et al* 2004:271). The interviewer is free to probe and to follow the lead of the participant. This allows for a natural conversation. The researcher can anticipate the main questions, but is not limited to asking these in a specific order or format. However, a weakness of using this type of interview is that important topics may be inadvertently missed. In order to address this, the researcher will arrange follow-up interviews after reviewing the initial conversations, and after identifying secondary questions based on the first conversation.

The life-line created by participants will form the guide to the interview. Therefore each participant will have a slightly different focus in the interview. Whereas this has implications for ease of comparison (Cohen *et al* 2004:271) it allows the participants to express their unique understanding and perceptions about the topic.

According to Smith (1995a:1) a semi-structured interview is used when the researcher wants to gain an in-depth understanding of the participant's beliefs about or experiences of a specific phenomenon. He identifies the following as being important aspects of a semi-structured interview (1995a:3):

- Rapport is established.
- The order of questions is not important.
- The interviewer may probe interesting areas that arise.
- The interview can follow the participant's interests.

1.6.3.3 Collages

In recent years educational researchers have been investigating the use of visual images in qualitative data collection (Novoa 2000:21; Margolis 2000:8). Fischman (2001:359) argues that visual sources of data 'constitute a challenge to the blind spot created by the more traditional ways of seeing and doing research in education'.

Collages consist of “an assemblage of diverse elements; a collage of conflicting memories” and “an artistic composition of materials and objects pasted over a surface”.

Reflecting on the interview, each participant will be asked to compile an A3 collage of his or her experiences. They will be asked to make the collage available to the researcher one to two weeks after the interview has taken place. During this meeting, the collage will be discussed in depth, with the participant identifying themes, metaphors and important constructs contained within the collage. The researcher will probe for detail and understanding, and the discussion will be recorded (with the participant’s permission).

1.6.4 DATA ANALYSIS

1.6.4.1 Analysing the life-line

The meanings attributed by the research participant to the life-line will be explored during the initial parts of the semi-structured interview. The participant will be asked to clarify his or her meanings and experiences. Therefore, it will not be necessary for the researcher to analyse the life-line. Rather, the participants will offer their own interpretations of what was meant.

1.6.4.2 Analysing the interview data

Smith (1995b:1) describes qualitative analysis of interviews as the process of engaging in an interpretive relationship with the interview transcript. He points out that, while the aim of data analysis is to capture the meanings of the participant, these meanings are not always easily available, and a process of engaging with the data is necessary in order to extract the relevant themes. Content analysis of the interviews conducted with the research participants will be done. The data analysis will follow these steps (Smith 1995b:2; Smit 2001:84):

- The recorded interviews will be transcribed.
- The transcripts will be re-read a number of times.

- The data will be divided into smaller meaningful units. These codes will be identified in the body of the interview. These will be noted alongside the interview transcript.
- Once all of the codes have been identified, they will be grouped into similar themes.
- The identified themes will then be discussed and described.
- The descriptions of the themes will form the basis of the analysis.

This process will be followed for each interview. The themes generated from the interviews will then be compared (and combined where possible). Similarities and differences in experiences will be identified and discussed.

1.6.4.3 Analysing the collage data

The transcriptions of the discussions with the participants (containing the interpretations of the collages) will be analysed for common themes, similarities and differences. The content of the collages will also be analysed for recurring themes. The identified themes will be discussed with the relevant research participants in order to minimise researcher bias and ensure validity.

1.6.5 INTERPRETATION OF DATA

The data will be interpreted from within a constructivist framework. The researcher will strive to maintain awareness of her bias and subjective experiences and will aim to focus on the constructed meanings created by the participants.

The multiple sources of data (life-lines, interview data and collages) will be compared and contrasted. Underlying themes will then be elicited from the data. Participants will be invited to be part of the data interpretation, and to establish that the data generated provides an accurate picture of their experiences (Cohen *et al* 2004:120; Northcutt & McCoy 2004:17).

1.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS⁷

Various measures will be used to ensure that the research is carried out ethically, as outlined in Cohen *et al* (2004:49-72). Firstly, the structure and aims of the research will be discussed in detail with the participants. The fact that they are free to discontinue their participation at any time will be stressed, as will the fact that confidentiality will be maintained at all times regarding their identities. All of the participants will be asked to sign consent forms⁸.

The research will be conducted with the permission of the Ethical Committee of the Faculty of Education of the University of Pretoria.

1.8 OUTLINE OF THE CHAPTERS THAT FOLLOW

1.8.1 CHAPTER 2

Chapter 2 will consist of a comprehensive literature survey. It will focus specifically on the gap year and theories that have been identified as being relevant to this study, (which includes the theories of Super, Krumboltz and post-modern approaches and how they relate to the gap year). Career decision-making as well as career indecision will be included as part of the discussion on career development.

1.8.2 CHAPTER 3

Chapter 3 will focus on the research design and methodology. It will discuss the research process that will be followed. The trustworthiness of the enquiry will also be addressed.

1.8.3 CHAPTER 4

Chapter 4 will describe the results of the content analysis of the data. The three cases will be depicted in detail, and the findings of the study will be described.

⁷ See Chapter 3 for a detailed discussion of the ethical considerations in this study.

⁸ Please see Appendix A for a template of the consent form that was used.

1.8.4 CHAPTER 5

Chapter 5 will offer conclusions and recommendations based on the findings of the study. The findings will be related back to the relevant literature and to the research questions. The limitations of the study will be discussed.

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CHAPTER 2

THE LITERATURE SURVEY

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter aims to explore in more detail the theories that contribute to the understanding of career development and career decision-making, as well as the gap year. The theories of Super and Krumboltz are focused upon, and the more recent theories related to the post-modern movement in career psychology are also discussed. Career decision-making and career indecision are also dealt with. The discussions on the above-mentioned theories will centre around the contribution of the theory to understanding career decision-making and the possible influences on and associations with the gap year.

2.2 ON THE IMPORTANCE OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW

As the aim of qualitative research includes generating hypotheses and contributing to the knowledge base in the field of study, the literature survey is an important and integral part of any qualitative research process, as it places the topic to be explored in context (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit 2004:27). Moreover, the literature survey facilitates an understanding of the nature and meaning of the research problem (Fouché & De Vos 1998:64). Boote and Beile (2005:3) point out that the literature review is an important and often neglected part of the research process. They argue that it forms the foundation for "substantial, useful research."

2.3 THE GAP YEAR

A challenge when gathering data about the gap year is the lack of existing literature about it (Jones 2004b:20). Much of the information takes the form of anecdotal evidence from "gapers" on websites of gap year service providers, and a large majority of these providers are based in the United Kingdom (UK) or United States of America (USA). Furthermore, Jones (2004b:21) points out that much of the literature

is not directly related to gap year issues, and therefore “relevant points often [have] to be inferred.” Most of the gap-related information used in this chapter is based on the research conducted by Dr. Andrew Jones and reported on in his Review of Gap Year Provision (2004b). It offers a comprehensive overview of the gap year phenomenon in the UK, and parallels can be drawn to the South African context.

2.3.1 DEFINITION

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the gap year is a practice that has been growing in popularity over the last two decades (Jones 2004b:17). While it was traditionally viewed with some suspicion it is becoming an increasingly accepted practice in Western societies (Simpson 2005:447; Jones 2004b:17). Jones (2004b:24) defines the gap year as:

“...any period of time between 3 and 24 months which an individual takes ‘out’ of formal education, training or the workplace, and where the timeout sits in the context of a longer career trajectory.”

Gap years can be placed into the following categories, based upon the stage at which the gap year is taken (Jones 2004b:26-29):

TABLE 2.1: TABLE OF GAP YEAR CATEGORIES AND DESCRIPTIONS

Gap Year Categories	Description
Planned Post-School at 16	Taking a gap year after leaving school in Grade 10.
Planned Post-School at 18	Taking a gap year after matriculating.
Default Post-School at 18	Taking a gap year after school due to changing circumstances (e.g. not getting university exemption at school or changing their minds about their career/study choices).
Undergraduate break in study	Taking a gap year during a 3 or 4 year undergraduate degree course.
Undergraduate combined with course	Taking a gap year during an undergraduate degree course to complete a degree-related course or engage in degree-related work.
Immediate Post-University	Taking a gap year directly after graduating from university, usually before entering the workplace or continuing studies.

Gap Year Categories	Description
Break in Postgraduate Study	Taking a gap year during a postgraduate degree course
Postgraduate combined with course	Taking a gap year during a postgraduate degree course to complete a degree-related course or engage in degree-related work.
Employment Break	Taking a gap year from the context of paid employment.
Immediate Post-Training	Taking a gap year after completing vocational training of some kind (not through a tertiary institution).
Complex Gap Year	A gap year that does not fall into one of the above categories (e.g. a gap year where the young person engages in a combination of working and attending courses, or a young person who takes multiple gap years between work and study).

2.3.2 ACTIVITIES ENGAGED IN DURING A GAP YEAR

People are faced with various choices when deciding upon the types of activities they would prefer to engage in during a gap year. These choices can be represented in the following diagram, adapted from Jones (2004b:31):

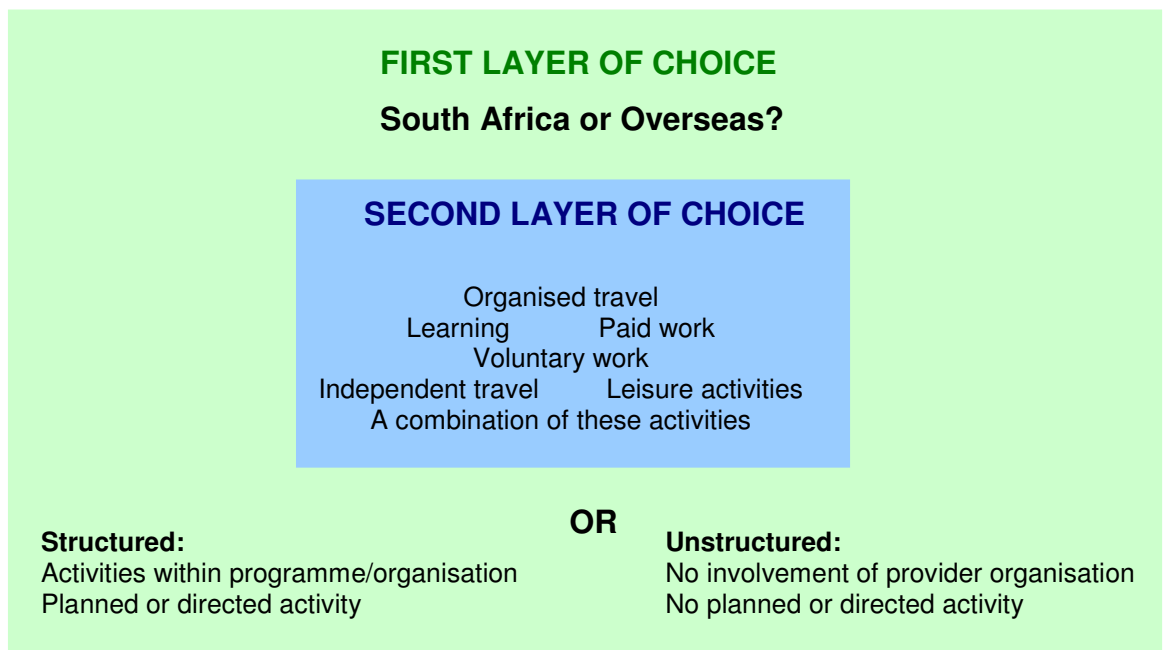


FIGURE 2.1: TYPES OF GAP YEAR ACTIVITIES

2.3.3 MOTIVATIONS FOR ENGAGING IN A GAP YEAR

Gose (2005:3) states that engaging in gap years in order to improve CV's to attract employers and gain entrance to educational institutions is common, while Curtis (2004:1) focuses on the importance of the "soft skills" gained during a gap year. However, Jones (2004b:38) postulates that gaining life-skills and enhancing CV's, while recognised by participants, are not important motivating factors.

According to Jones (2004b:38) the most common motivator for engaging in a gap year appears to be experiential in nature – Many young people cite experiencing different people, cultures and places as a motivating factor, and they also refer to the thrill of a challenge (Jones 2004b:38). Tied in with this motivating factor is the desire to take a break from education or work.

Another, albeit less prevalent, motivation is altruistic in nature (Jones 2004b:38). This refers to young people who engage in gap years out of a desire to help people or to make a contribution to society.

Jones (2004b:39) furthermore identifies the various factors that influence a young person's decision to take a gap year. In the UK, the educational context is the most significant factor for post-school gap year participation, but the role of peers, family background and a lack of career-related advice and guidance are also identified as influential factors.

2.3.4 ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF TAKING A GAP YEAR

Jones (2004b:58) identifies various benefits that result from participating in a gap year. These include economic benefits to the countries that host the gap year participants, and long-term benefits to the home country as the skilled and more experienced participants return and enter the workforce/educational arena. Benefits to the individual include:

- Improved educational performance.
- Formation and development of educational and career choices.
- Reduced likelihood of "dropping out".

- Improved career skills.
- Non-academic skills and qualifications.
- Social capital (voluntary work has been linked to greater participation and engagement in society).
- Life-skills.
- Developing social values.

Another commonly cited advantage to individuals is that it allows young people to mature emotionally and intellectually (Jones 2004a:2-3), and also that it prepares the individual for educational institutions or the workplace, improves motivation and helps the individual to finalise career choices (Pidcock 2004:2; Gose 2005:3).

Jones (2004b:66), however, also identified various disadvantages to engaging in a gap year. These include that “time is wasted” and not spent in study or employment; young people may find it difficult to remain motivated and to progress after a break in routine; a poorly planned gap year can lead to floundering between jobs; certain universities do not look favourably upon gap years; and finally the cost involved can be a huge disadvantage as young people may be left with a large amount of debt after funding it (Pidcock 2004:4).

2.4 CAREER AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Various definitions of career exist, as cited in Chapter 1. Most such include concepts of development over time – the suggestion of personal growth in terms of skills and maturity gained as the various life tasks are completed (Super 1990:225-226; Super & Hall 1978:334).

One of the most prominent theorists regarding career development is Donald Super, and his views and contributions to career development theory are discussed below.

2.4.1 SUPER’S LIFE-SPAN, LIFE-SPACE THEORY

Donald Super has made numerous and rich contributions to the field of career psychology in the course of his career. However, he views his contributions not as a

“complete theory” *per se*, but rather as a set of constructs used to enrich the field of career psychology (Super, Savickas & Super 1996:123; Langley 1999:67). Super’s view of career has constantly developed and evolved over the years to include new research and developments (Langley 1999:67; Super *et al* 1996:123).

Super’s theory is based on 14 propositions developed from the original 10 that he initially proposed (Super *et al* 1996:123-125; Langley 1999:68-69):

1. People differ in their abilities, personalities, needs, values, interests, traits and self-concepts.
2. Due to the nature of these characteristics people are qualified for various occupations.
3. Each occupation requires a certain set of abilities and traits, but there is enough room for variation to allow a variety of occupations for each individual and a variety of individuals for each occupation.
4. People’s career-related preferences, competencies, situations and their self-concepts change over time and with experience (however, self-concepts are usually quite stable from late adolescence to late maturity).
5. The above-mentioned process of change is summed up in a series of life stages. Small cycles also occur during career transitions.
6. The nature of a person’s career is determined by socio-economic level, mental ability, education, skills, personality characteristics, career maturity and the opportunities that the person is exposed to.
7. Success in coping with the demands of the environment depends on the readiness of the individual to cope with them (career maturity).
8. Career maturity is a psychosocial construct denoting a person’s degree of development along the life stages and sub-stages.
9. Development through the stages can be guided.
10. The process of career development is that of developing and implementing “occupational self-concepts”. This is a process of compromise and synthesis during which the self-concept is a product of the interaction of various factors.
11. The process of synthesis or reaching a compromise between individual and social factors is one of role-playing and learning from feedback.

12. Work and life satisfaction depends on the extent to which an individual finds an outlet for abilities, needs, interests, personality traits and self-concepts.
13. The degree of satisfaction that people obtain from work is proportionate to the degree to which they have been able to implement self-concepts.
14. For most people work and occupation provide a focus for personality organisation, but for others this focus is not important or non-existent. These people tend to rather focus on things such as homemaking or leisure activities.

Super's theory of career development consists of three basic components, namely life-span, life-space and self-concept (Bester 2004:293-294). A common criticism of Super's theory is that it fails to integrate the different constructs adequately, resulting in a fragmented view of the theory (Savickas 1997:252). Super's Life-Career Rainbow (see figure 2.1 below) can be seen as an attempt to provide an integrated model of his theory. This can be used to explain life-career theory and as an aid during career counselling (Savickas 1997:251; Super *et al* 1996:126; Super 1980:296).

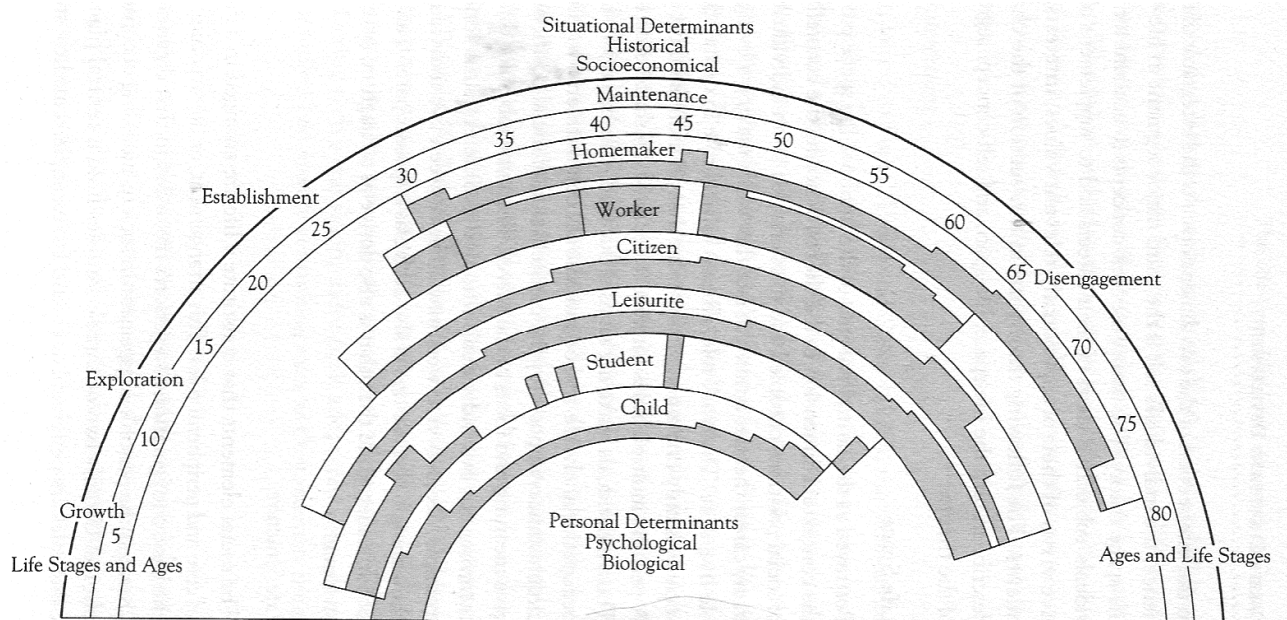


FIGURE 2.2: SUPER'S LIFE-CAREER RAINBOW [Source: Super, Savickas & Super (1996:127)]

The Life-Career Rainbow graphically represents career development in terms of the different roles (life-space) that people play during different stages of their lives and in different social situations (life-span) (Super *et al* 1996:126).

2.4.1.1 Life-span

Life-span refers to specific stages in a person's life, and the career-related developmental tasks that are associated with these stages (Super, Savickas & Super 1996:131). The stages are laid out in the table below (Table 2.1) (Super *et al* 1996:131-135; Bester 2004:293; Super & Hall 1978:334).

TABLE 2.2: SUPER'S LIFE STAGES AND RELATED DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS

Stage	Approximate Ages	Career-related developmental tasks
Growth	4 – 13 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Becoming concerned about the future (career concern) ▪ Increasing control over your life (career control). ▪ Convincing yourself to achieve in school and at work (career conviction). ▪ Acquiring competent work habits and attitudes (competency).
Exploration	14 – 24 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Crystallising a career choice. ▪ Specifying an occupational choice. ▪ Implementing a career choice.
Establishment	25 – 45 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Stabilising an occupational position. ▪ Consolidating an occupational position. ▪ Advancing an occupational position.
Maintenance	45 – 65 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Choosing to hold on to the position or to re-explore and re-establish a new career path. ▪ Keeping up with new developments and skills in the field. ▪ Innovating new ways of approaching tasks and challenges.
Disengagement	65 onwards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Deceleration of responsibility and involvement. ▪ Planning for retirement. ▪ Retirement living.

Super *et al* (1996:134) point out that individuals go through various transitions as they move between life stages, and that these are flexible. They also stress the point that a mini-cycle (a short period of growth, exploration and establishment) often occurs during the stages of the maxi-cycle.

Super and Hall (1978:334) stress that the dominance of any one developmental task in a stage does not mean that it is not encountered again in another life stage. Career decision-making is a task linked to the stage of exploration, and is first encountered during adolescence and early adulthood. However, exploration occurs throughout the career life-span whenever decisions regarding the career need to be made (Super & Hall 1978:336). The decisions that a young person needs to make when leaving high school include whether to enter the labour force or to engage in further schooling, which school to attend and what direction to study (Thom, Louw, Van Ede & Ferns 1999:435). More recently, whether or not to engage in a gap year has also become an option for some young people.

Super states that career maturity is the individual's readiness to cope with the developmental tasks with which they are confronted in their specific life stage (Super 1990:213), and that maturation is the central process of adolescent career development powered by psychosocial forces. Super and Hall (1978:340) identified six variables that lead to career maturity, namely:

- Planfulness.
- The availability of resources for exploration.
- Decision-making.
- Knowledge of careers.
- Knowledge of the world of work.
- Knowledge of the preferred occupational group.

Career decision-making is therefore an important aspect of career maturation. However, many researchers acknowledge the prevalence of career indecision amongst young people (Gordon & Meyer 2002:41), implying that many of them are not career mature. According to Jones (2004b:60) evidence suggests that taking a gap year aids young people to make a career choice, suggesting that the gap year could contribute towards the career maturation process.

In later years Super adjusted his view of career maturity to highlight adaptation rather than maturation as the central developmental process in adult career development (Super *et al* 1996:133). Savickas (1997:253-254) suggests that career adaptation replaces career maturity as a central construct of life-span, life-space theory. He defines adaptability as "... the quality of being able to change, without great difficulty, to fit new or changed circumstances" (Savickas 1997:254). He recommends this as an improvement on career maturity as it does not rely on the concept of a series of developmental tasks that need to be sequentially mastered, but rather suggests a continual process of change as new situations and challenges are responded to in a flexible way. Savickas (1997:253) identifies learning and decision-making as components of adaptation⁹, and according to Super's theory, career decision-making is influenced by both personal and situational determinants (Bester 2004:294). However, Savickas argues that planfulness is the most important construct of career adaptability (Savickas 1997:256).

Super's construct of life-span is criticised for its apparent rigidity in terms of the life stages (Super 1980:283). It also does not specifically address the complexities of the changing job market in terms of multiple jobs. However, Super's theory does specify that context (which would include the job market) is a very important factor in the career life-span (Super & Hall 1978:336). While Super's theory does not pertinently mention the gap year, it may be possible to see the gap year in terms of Super's theory as an extended exploration stage.

2.4.1.2 Life-space

Life-space refers to the roles that individuals play during their lives. Super stresses that context is an important aspect of any individual's life, influencing life roles and career behaviours such as exploration (Super & Hall 1978:336; Super 1990:201). Stead and Watson (1998:77) point out that issues such as discrimination, unemployment and worldview, which are important factors in the South African context, are not reflected in Super's theory. This implies that it is a theory with monocultural applications. However, the acknowledgement of the importance of context can be viewed as partially addressing this concern. Furthermore, Super *et al*

⁹ These are the central construct of Krumboltz's learning theory of career counselling and choice, which will be discussed in Section 2.4.2 below.

(1996:149) argue that the construct of life roles addresses multi-cultural and cross-cultural concerns by allowing the practitioner to explore the different life roles that are experienced by individuals within their cultural context.

Super suggested the following life roles within the context of the individual's life cycle (Super 1980:283-284):

- Child
- Student
- Leisurite
- Citizen
- Worker (including Unemployed worker and Nonworker)
- Spouse
- Homemaker
- Parent
- Pensioner

Other roles could include Sibling, Lover, Criminal etc., but the above-mentioned have been identified as the most common roles "lived" (Super 1980:284). One of the major criticisms of career theories that were developed within a positivist paradigm is that they ignore the multiple contexts of life and focus instead only on the work role (Richardson 1993:426). Savickas (1997:251) points out that Super's life-span, life-space theory addresses this concern by acknowledging the importance of other roles and viewing the work role in relation to other life roles.

Super (1980:283) states that the individual may fulfil more than one role at any give time, and will have multiple roles throughout the life-span. Furthermore, not all the roles will be played by the individual. For example, a person who never marries will not play the role of Spouse. Super *et al* (1996:128) state that at any given time people are likely to have core and peripheral roles which form their current "life structure". These roles are selected according to the life-space of the person and the tasks that he/she are engaged in. Super (1980:284) furthermore says that the roles are played in various theatres, with the principal ones being the home, the community, the school and the workplace.

Super acknowledges that these roles interact and have powerful effects on the individual's life (Super 1980:283-287; Super *et al* 1996:129). During transitions between life stages, individuals will change or rearrange the patterns of the roles that they play, which Super describes as "life redesign" (Super *et al* 1996:129). Life redesign is characterised by both foreseen and unpredictable transitions and challenges that lead to an adaptation of life roles (Super *et al* 1996:130).

2.4.1.3 Self-concept

According to the life-span, life-space theory self-concept is an important aspect of career development as people are more likely to experience job satisfaction if their work matches their self-concepts (Super 1990:223; Super *et al* 1996:125). Super (Super *et al* 1996:140) defines self concept as "a picture of the self in some role, situation, or position, performing some set of functions, or in some web of relationships." He proceeds to define occupational self-concept as "the constellation of self attributes which the individual considers vocationally relevant; these may or may not have been translated into a vocational preference" (Super *et al* 1996:140). Self-concept is typically associated with a specific role. An assortment of self-concepts, linked to the various roles played by a person at any given time, is known as a self-concept system (Super *et al* 1996:141).

Super *et al* (1996:140) distinguish between dimensions of the self-concept (e.g. personality traits) and the characteristics of these dimensions (metadimensions). They point out that these dimensions and metadimensions have implications for understanding how people develop and implement their self-concepts. The most important aspects are self-esteem, clarity, consistency, realism, complexity and self-efficacy. People with, for example, a simplistic or unrealistic self-concept would find it more difficult to select an occupation that provides a good fit with their personality, abilities, interests etc. The self-concept is therefore an important way to understand people's interpretations of their life roles and their position in their life-cycle.

The construct of self-concept in Super's theory is an important contribution to the field of career psychology: it focuses on the often neglected subjective experiences of the client and acknowledges that these experiences play an important role in the career

development process. This aspect of the life-span, life-space theory reflects the influence of the constructivist school of thought on Super's theory (Super *et al* 1996:170).

Super's theory provides a framework within which the researcher situates herself. However, the process of career decision-making also needs to be addressed. While Super's theory touches upon career decision-making, it does not deal in depth with the process. The theory of Krumboltz is viewed as a useful and relevant tool to aid in understanding career decision-making.

2.4.2 KRUMBOLTZ'S LEARNING THEORY OF CAREER CHOICE AND COUNSELLING

Krumboltz's theory assumes that people's characteristics can be explained on the basis of their unique individual learning experiences, while acknowledging the role played by innate and developmental processes (Mitchell & Krumboltz 1996:233). Krumboltz stresses the importance of experiences in making career decisions, and views the individual as an "active, intelligent problem solving agent" who uses experiences to interact with and learn from their environment (Krumboltz & Worthington 1999:314). He proposes that it is through direct and indirect learning experiences that individuals learn about themselves and the world of work. They use this information when making a career decision. The importance of learning is echoed by Savickas (1997:253) who views it as an important component of career adaptability.

Krumboltz (Krumboltz & Worthington 1999:322) views activities engaged in by young people during the school-to-work transition – which include the apprenticeships and community based volunteering that often occur during gap years – as offering valuable learning opportunities which allow young people to expand their abilities. These include occupation-related skills but also more generic life-skills such as communication skills, which Krumboltz feels may influence young people's employability when they enter their chosen career. Such experiences also aid them in making a career choice.

Krumboltz states that various factors influence career decision-making. These include (Mitchell & Krumboltz 1996:237-242; Tolbert 1980:26):

- Genetic factors and abilities (race, gender, intelligence, musical ability, muscular coordination).
- Environmental factors and events (community and neighbourhood emphasis, number and nature of training opportunities, family characteristics).
- Learning experiences (instrumental, i.e. direct, and associative, i.e. indirect, learning).
- Task approach skills (problem solving skills, work habits, emotional responses).

Krumboltz theorises that the complex interactions of the above-mentioned factors result in generalisations about the individual's reality (Mitchell & Krumboltz 1996:243). These can be categorised as generalisations about the self (self-observation generalisations) and about the world of work (world-view generalisations) and are based on learning experiences throughout the individual's life (Mitchell & Krumboltz 1996:243-244).

A study conducted by Lent, Brown, Talleyrand, McPartland, Davis, Chopra, Alexander, Suthakaran and Chai (2002:68-71) found that young people felt strongly that personal factors, such as ability and work-related experiences, impacted on their ability to make a career decision. However, relatively few participants in the study identified environmental factors as enhancing their career decision-making ability – rather, these factors were identified as barriers to career decision-making.

Task approach and life-skills such as problem-solving skills, reaction to change and work and study skills are viewed as important for career development and decision-making (Staley & Carey 1997:378). Picklesimer, Hooper and Ginter (1998:272-274) argue that life-skills play an important role in how young people are able to meet the demands placed upon them and influence both personal and career choices. They identified four dimensions of life-skills that are important for young people to master, namely:

- Interpersonal communication skills.
- Problem-solving/decision-making skills.

- Health-related skills.
- Identity development skills.

Therefore task approach skills such as problem-solving are also important aspects of career decision-making. It could moreover be argued that adaptability (as constructed by Savickas above) is an example of a task approach skill, as it implies being able to meet challenges and approach problems in an effective way (Savickas 1997:254; Staley & Carey 1997:378).

The factors of “learning experiences” and “task approach skills” as outlined by Krumboltz tie in with Donald Super’s definition of self-concept, which emphasises the view of self-performing certain functions. Super also states that personal and situational determinants influence career decision-making – these determinants link with the genetic and environmental factors proposed by Krumboltz.

Krumboltz identified the following task approach skills as being linked to career decision-making (Mitchell & Krumboltz 1996:245):

- Recognising an important decision situation.
- Defining a task realistically.
- Examining and accurately assessing self-observations and world-view generalisations.
- Generating a wide variety of alternatives.
- Gathering needed information about the alternatives.
- Gradually eliminating unattractive alternatives.

Krumboltz suggests that the field of career psychology needs to adapt to the changing world of work. His suggestions include that people need to be guided to expand their abilities; to prepare for change in their careers and in the workplace; to be empowered to take action; and, that career counsellors should play an active role in dealing with career problems (Krumboltz & Worthington 1999:315-321; Mitchell & Krumboltz 1996:251-252). His suggestions are echoed by Savickas, who stresses that the career counselling profession needs to explore ways of meeting the emerging needs of their client base as the world of work evolves.

2.4.2.1 The role of chance

In later publications Krumboltz explores the role of chance in the individual's career (Krumboltz 1998:563; Mitchell, Levin & Krumboltz 1999:115). He claims that career counsellors tend to act as though chance has no role in career development, yet many adults admit that chance played an important role in their careers (Mitchell, Levin & Krumboltz 1999:115; Krumboltz 1998:562). This led to the formulation of planned happenstance theory, which Krumboltz (1998:116) suggests can be considered as an amendment to the learning theory of career counselling. Planned happenstance theory is "... a conceptual framework extending career counselling to include the creating and transforming of unplanned events into opportunities for learning" (Krumboltz 1998:117). The importance of chance in influencing career choices and career paths is therefore acknowledged.

The evolution of Krumboltz's theory to include planned happenstance reflects the changes that the world of work has undergone, as well as how the views of career currently accepted in the field of career psychology have evolved. These changes are reflected in post-modern theories of career and career counselling, which aim to address the deficiencies of traditional career theories.

2.4.3 POST-MODERN THEORIES

Traditional views of career and human behaviour were lodged within the positivist viewpoint that was prominent at the time when they were developed. In reaction against the positivist approach to research and worldview, an anti-positivist viewpoint developed (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2004:19). This viewpoint is characterised by the point of departure that humans are not passive and their behaviour is not governed by irreversible universal laws. Rather, the emphasis is on the deliberate, creative and intentional acts of individuals (Cohen *et al* 2004:21). The interpretive and constructivist paradigms are situated within the anti-positivist viewpoint. The schools of thought that constitute the anti-positivist viewpoint can be referred to as post-modern approaches.

Such approaches to career development move away from traditional views of the person and advocate the active role of the individual in career development as well

as in the career counselling process (Bester 2004:301). Post-modern approaches focus on the meanings that individuals attribute to their careers, and aim to take into account the contextual factors that impact on the process of “meaning-making.” This stand tends to move away from reductionistic thinking and generalisations, and prefers to focus on the experiences of individuals. Whereas post-modern approaches to career development and career counselling are hailed as being more culturally and socially relevant, they are relatively new and therefore more research needs to be conducted.

Post-modern theories of career development are focused on the subjective experiences of individuals during their career spans (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey 2002:71). They emphasise responsibility and meaning-making (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey 2002:87), which is described as personal agency and refers to an individual assuming responsibility and action in their career development rather than passively accepting and falling prey to career-related circumstances. Various theories fall under the post-modern umbrella. Amongst these are narrative approaches, contextually-focused approaches and constructivist approaches to career counselling (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey 2002:87-92; Savickas 2000:60).

The narrative approach to career counselling focuses on the stories of the individuals as they pertain to their lives and particularly their careers. Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey (2002:87) point out that an important aspect of the use of narratives during career counselling is that it provides a “temporal organisation” in that each story has a beginning, middle and end. Furthermore, each narrative is unique and allows the individual to share personal meanings in order to portray their career and life story. This story allows them to make sense of their lives (Hatch 2002:28). The narratives elicited during narrative career counselling are deep with meaning and provide rich and complex tapestries of the person’s life, in their own words (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey 2002:87).

Contextual theory focuses on the importance of direct and indirect contextual factors on the actions and choices of the individual (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey 2002:90). Young, Valach and Collin (1996:207) propose that in contextual career theories acts are purposive and directed towards a goal; that the acts of an individual can only be viewed in the context in which they take place; that change plays an important role in

career development; and, that an objective and “real” truth does not exist. This focus on change is mirrored in Krumboltz’s work regarding planned happenstance and the importance of taking opportunities and embracing change. The epistemological assumptions expressed in this theory reflect the constructivist-interpretivist paradigmatic view of the subjective nature of truth and knowledge. Narrative theory’s acknowledgement of the uniqueness and subjective importance of each narrative and contextual theory’s emphasis on the actions of individuals reflects the post-modern view of and emphasis on personal agency.

This focus on action and on personal agency is also evident in constructivist career counselling approaches. According to Niles and Harris-Bowlsbey (2002:91), constructivist counselling is based on the supposition that people “construct meaning through the decisions they make and the actions they take.” This view of man is operationalised in a counselling approach that focuses on a cooperative relationship with the client, aimed at encouraging personal agency and action, facilitating meaning-making and negotiating realities thus reconstructing them in a personally meaningful way. This is illustrated in the career counselling technique of Brott (2004:190-191), referred to as the “storied approach”. Brott’s constructivist perspective on career counselling involves a process of co-constructing the client’s current reality (writing chapters about the past), de-constructing these perspectives (looking at the chapters from another perspective) and then constructing new meanings and perspectives (authoring future chapters) (Brott 2004:190-191). The focus on the past and future story of the client illustrates the link between narrative perspectives and constructivist approaches, and the common view of man shared by them.

Brott (2004:189) elicits the golden thread of personal agency when she describes the goal of constructivist career counselling as “uncovering themes and meanings in their personal stories so that they can *take action* in preferred directions” [own emphasis]. Encouraging reflexivity is also an important way to facilitate the birth of a new perspective or outlook (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey 2002:92; Savickas 2000:60). In constructivist career counselling the collaborative relationship between the counsellor and client is very important, and often the goal of this alliance is to make decisions or choices regarding the career.

2.5 CAREER DECISION-MAKING AND CAREER INDECISION

The ability to make a career decision is considered to be an important characteristic of a person who is regarded as career-mature. However, research suggests that the ability to make a career decision is affected by various factors, including identity formation, interest, parental relationships and the cultural and work-related context of the individual (Mortimer, Zimmer-Gembeck, Holmes & Shanahan 2002:440; Guerra & Braungart-Rieker 1999:256, 262 & 263; Tracey, Robbins & Hofsess 2004:2). As mentioned previously, Super and Krumboltz both view career decision-making as being influenced by various factors, including situational, environmental and personal factors (Bester 2004:293-296).

Mortimer *et al* (2002:440) point out that choices about school, work and family take place within the context of the labour market, and therefore an individual's decision-making is both constrained and enabled by circumstance. It is therefore very important to take contextual factors into account when working with career decision-making. The current labour market is rapidly changing, and is greatly influenced by information technology. The transition from adolescence to adulthood is sensitive to social and economic conditions. The call to become part of the global village and to be a "world worker" can thus be seen as a strong influencer of career decision-making of young people during the post-modern age (Mortimer *et al* 2002:440; Savickas 2003:89).

When looking at career decision-making the term "career indecision" crops up. It has widely been used to refer to problems related to career development – and specifically problems in career decision-making – and has negative connotations for many people (Mitchell & Krumboltz 1996:263). Gordon and Meyer (2002:45) identified self-information, decision-making, career information, and the integration of self-information and career information as relevant factors of career development when faced with career indecision. While career indecision has traditionally been viewed in a negative light, more recent conceptualisations have highlighted the necessity of a stage of indecision in the process of career decision-making (Savickas 1995: 3).

One of the most important tenets of planned happenstance theory is the shift from the term “career indecision” to that of open-mindedness. The principle of open-mindedness suggests that people should keep their options open and have an attitude of readiness to explore new opportunities, in order to be able to cope with the demands of the current world of work (Krumboltz 1998:561).

Krumboltz (Mitchell & Krumboltz 1996:262-263) goes so far as to suggest that overcoming indecision would be a bad outcome for people. According to him keeping options open and remaining open-minded are important aspects of making a career choice, as it allows the individual to keep exploring alternatives and learning to adapt to changing situations.

Career indecision can also be re-conceptualised to be seen as an expression of “...hesitation before transformation.” Savickas (1995:3) stresses that this hesitation does not stop forward movement, but rather offers an opportunity for the individual to transform himself and forge a new identity. He theorizes that the career indecision experienced by adolescents and young people occurs because they have not yet fully identified their “life themes”, and are still in the process of developing their identities. Such identity formation ties in with the integration of self-information and career information as identified by Gordon and Meyer (2002:45) as an important aspect of career development.

2.6 LIMITATIONS OF LITERATURE

A significant limitation in terms of the information on the gap year is the lack of literature about the phenomenon (Jones 2004b:7), which makes it impossible to conduct a comprehensive literature survey on this topic. The few sources available are therefore relied upon extensively, and this could lead to a narrow view of the topic, which may be biased in order to reflect the author’s views.

Presently, the major source of literature about the gap year is the report of Jones (2004b). However, this report is based on participants and companies in the United Kingdom, and one should therefore be cautious about making generalisations when dealing with the South African context. Furthermore, Jones (2004b:7-8) warns that

his report offers only a preliminary view of the gap year and that further research is needed.

Substantially more information and research exists regarding career development theories and career decision-making. This offers a different challenge to the one mentioned above, as the large number of sources necessitates a narrowing of the focus of the literature survey, implying that certain sources cannot be consulted.

Furthermore, these career theories (including Super and Krumboltz's theories) as well as the various post-modern approaches are still being developed and refined as more research is done and more information is gathered. As pointed out by Isaacson and Brown (2000:20) no perfect career theory exists, and it is unlikely that one will ever be developed. While the theories do evolve as further research is being done, the literature used during this literature survey does take into account the effect of globalisation and the phenomenon of the gap year. It is a growing trend, and this means that a new life role could be indicated for the many people who choose to take it.

Lastly, Bester (2004:309) points out that, whereas many theories exist regarding career development, these primarily have a euro-centric focus and have not been conceptualised to explain career behaviour in the South African context.

2.7 CONCLUSION

In this chapter an overview has been provided of the literature that informs the research and provides insight into the various phenomena that form part of the study. From this literature review it becomes clear that the existing literature regarding the gap year is limited, and what is available is based upon a Western context. The theories upon which the study is based are also dynamic in nature. These limitations reiterate the relevance of the study, but also imply that the researcher has to use caution when engaging with the literature as it cannot simply be generalised to the South African context. The identified limitations offer a challenge to the researcher, namely to address the gap in the literature within a South African context. At the same time, a certain amount of flexibility and creativity is demanded from both the

researcher and the reader as the potential ‘place’ of the gap year within existing career theories is hypothesised about. The questions arising from this are perhaps too complex to be addressed in a study of this small scale.

Another important issue that emerged from this chapter is the complexity of career development and the various factors that play a role in the process. While the researcher theorises about the potential implications of the gap year on these factors, it becomes evident that further research is required to adequately investigate the impact of the gap year on the dynamic and complex process of career development.¹⁰

This chapter touched upon some of the literature and theories informing the study, while the following chapter will focus upon the research design and methodology of this study, and the research participants.

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¹⁰ This is addressed in Section 5.7.1 of Chapter 5 where the recommendations for further research are discussed.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter aims to describe in more detail the research design and methodology of the study. Cohen *et al* (2004:3) point out that ontological and epistemological assumptions inform the research methodology and data collection strategies that are adopted by the researcher. For this reason it is important to explore the conceptual framework and paradigm from which the study will be approached. This in turn will lead to a discussion of the research design and methodology.

A case study design was chosen, as it allows the researcher to compare and contrast the experiences of the research participants. The case study methodology as well as the research process to be followed is discussed in this chapter. The trustworthiness of the enquiry will also be dealt with.

3.2 THE CONSTRUCTIVIST-INTERPRETIVIST PARADIGM

According to Cohen *et al* (2004:5-6) the researchers' views of the nature of the world (ontological assumptions) and of the nature of truth (epistemological assumptions) will impact on how the research is conducted and which techniques are employed. Researchers tend to align themselves either within the positivist or anti-positivist paradigm or school of thought. Positivism refers to the traditional scientific view of the world, characterised by realism, rational thought and scientific enquiry. Anti-positivism refers to a school of thought developed in reaction against the positivist paradigm. It tends to be associated with idealism and is concerned with subjective experiences and naturalistic enquiry (Cohen *et al* 2004:8-21).¹¹

The researcher aligns herself within the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, which is essentially anti-positivist and views truth as being socially constructed between

¹¹ Refer to Chapter 2 for more detail regarding these paradigms.

individuals, and based on personal knowledge. This paradigm argues against the existence of a single, knowable reality and rather embraces the belief that reality is constructed and interpreted by individuals – it is a “subjective reality” (Smit 2003:128; Cohen *et al* 2004:19).

The aims and process of the research is deeply affected by the researcher’s assumptions regarding the nature of truth and reality. Due to these views a qualitative research approach was selected. Smit (2001:56) points out that qualitative research “... takes an interpretive approach to its subject matter – that is to say, things are studied in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings that people bring to them.” The task of the qualitative researcher is therefore to find a way to discover the meanings that the research participants attribute to their worlds.

The nature of qualitative research demands that inquiry takes place in the form of naturalistic research rather than contrived experiments. Research methods such as interviews and techniques aimed at gaining understanding of the participant’s views and experiences are therefore appropriate methods to use when conducting qualitative research based on a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm (Henning *et al* 2004:20). However, although these techniques are useful, McMillan and Schumacher (1993:14) point out that the researcher herself is the primary research instrument in a qualitative study. This implies that the researcher should be aware of her own views and biases in order to be an effective instrument.

In keeping with the tenets of the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, the researcher will aim to be aware of her own subjective reality and truth and to lay this aside while exploring the participant’s personal truths. An important aspect of this exploration process will be the testing of understanding through continuous enquiry; also the creation of meaning between researcher and participant during the conversations that will form the basis of the data collection.

3.3 CASE STUDY DESIGN

Case study design has traditionally been viewed as a poor research method on the basis that case studies are “unscientific” (Babbie *et al* 2002:280; Yin 2003:xiii). However, it has gained status as a qualitative research approach, and Cohen *et al* (2004:181) point out that a case study design is well suited to research conducted from out of a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm.

Case studies can take many forms, but good case studies are supposed to have the following characteristics. Firstly, they study a specific phenomenon that is bound by time, place or event (Merriam 1998:27; Cohen *et al* 2004:181; Babbie *et al* 2002:281). Secondly, they provide “thick” and detailed descriptions of the phenomenon as well as the context in which the phenomenon occurs (Merriam 1998:29; Cohen *et al* 2004:185; Babbie *et al* 2002:281-283). Thirdly, case studies are particularistic, in other words, they focus on a specific phenomena (Merriam 1998:29). Finally, case studies are heuristic, as they contribute to the readers’ understanding of the phenomenon (Merriam 1998:30).

According to Merriam (1998:38-39) case studies fall within one of three categories, namely:

- Descriptive case studies (providing narrative accounts of the phenomenon).
- Interpretive case studies (developing conceptual categories in order to “illustrate, support or challenge theoretical assumptions”).
- Evaluative case studies (explaining and judging the phenomenon).

This study primarily takes the form of the second of these, namely an interpretive case study. However, as pointed out by Merriam (1998:38), the major challenge when engaging in this sort of case study is the quality and quantity of existing theory and literature about the topic. As very little information is available about the gap year, an important part of this case study is to formulate tentative hypotheses based on the data gathered and to compare these to existing literature dealing with the gap year and with theories about career decision-making.

The study will explore the experiences of three participants, and therefore can also be described as a comparative case study (in which multiple cases are compared).

3.3.1 STRENGTHS OF THE DESIGN

Case study design was selected for this study specifically because of its affinity for providing “rich and holistic accounts of a phenomenon”, thereby expanding readers’ experiences and understanding (Merriam 1998:41). When working from a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, this is an important characteristic and strength of the study. The case study design allows for the detailed exploration of the gap year as well as the construction of shared meaning through the use of multiple sources of data.

The flexibility of the research design will allow the researcher to address unexpected events and information as they arise during the research process. The use of multiple sources of data and the openness of the research process will serve to put the research participants at ease and allow them more freedom to express themselves in different ways. The “curious” stance of the researcher in a qualitative case study design will ensure that the participants play an active role in the research process, moving from being mere sources of information to being co-researchers.

Another advantage of selecting a case study design is that it allows for the generation of hypotheses and data regarding the gap year phenomenon, thereby possibly informing future research and expanding the knowledge base in the field (Merriam 1998:41). Finally, the use of participant checking throughout the research process is an important aspect of the research design – it attempts to address researcher bias and to ensure a more accurate portrayal of the data.

3.3.2 WEAKNESSES OF THE DESIGN

Although the case study design is appropriate for this research, it does have some inherent weaknesses. A common criticism against this method is that it does not allow for generalisation of the findings to other contexts (Merriam 1998:40). The use of three case studies in the design is an attempt to address this weakness. Even so,

the limited number of cases implies that the contribution of the research lies in the attention it gives to complexity and detail, rather than in the scope for generalisation of the findings.

Another commonly cited weakness is that case studies tend to be affected by researcher bias despite attempts to avoid this through reflexivity (Cohen *et al* 2004:184; Merriam 1998:42) Whereas the constructivist-interpretivist approach acknowledges that shared meanings are constructed between the researcher and the participants, it is imperative that the researcher's voice does not dominate the conversation. This is a universal criticism against any research conducted from within a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm.

3.4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Data will be collected in various forms in order to ensure the generation of rich, descriptive data as well as to address issues related to the rigour of the study¹². The research participants will be involved throughout the data analysis in order to ensure that their experiences are accurately portrayed. Figure 3.1 below offers an overview of the data collection and data analysis process.

3.4.1 RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Participants were selected using purposeful convenience sampling. The criterion for inclusion in the study was that the participants had engaged in a gap year prior to the research being conducted. The criterion for “engaging in a gap year” was informed by the definition of the gap year as stipulated in the Review of Gap Year Provision (Jones 2004b:24), whereby the gap year is defined as:

“...any period of time between 3 and 24 months which an individual takes ‘out’ of formal education, training or the workplace, and where the timeout sits in the context of a longer career trajectory.”

¹² See section 3.5 of this chapter.

Having already known the participants before the study was conducted, the researcher had existing relationships with them.¹³ A brief background of each of the participants follows in Boxes 1 to 3.

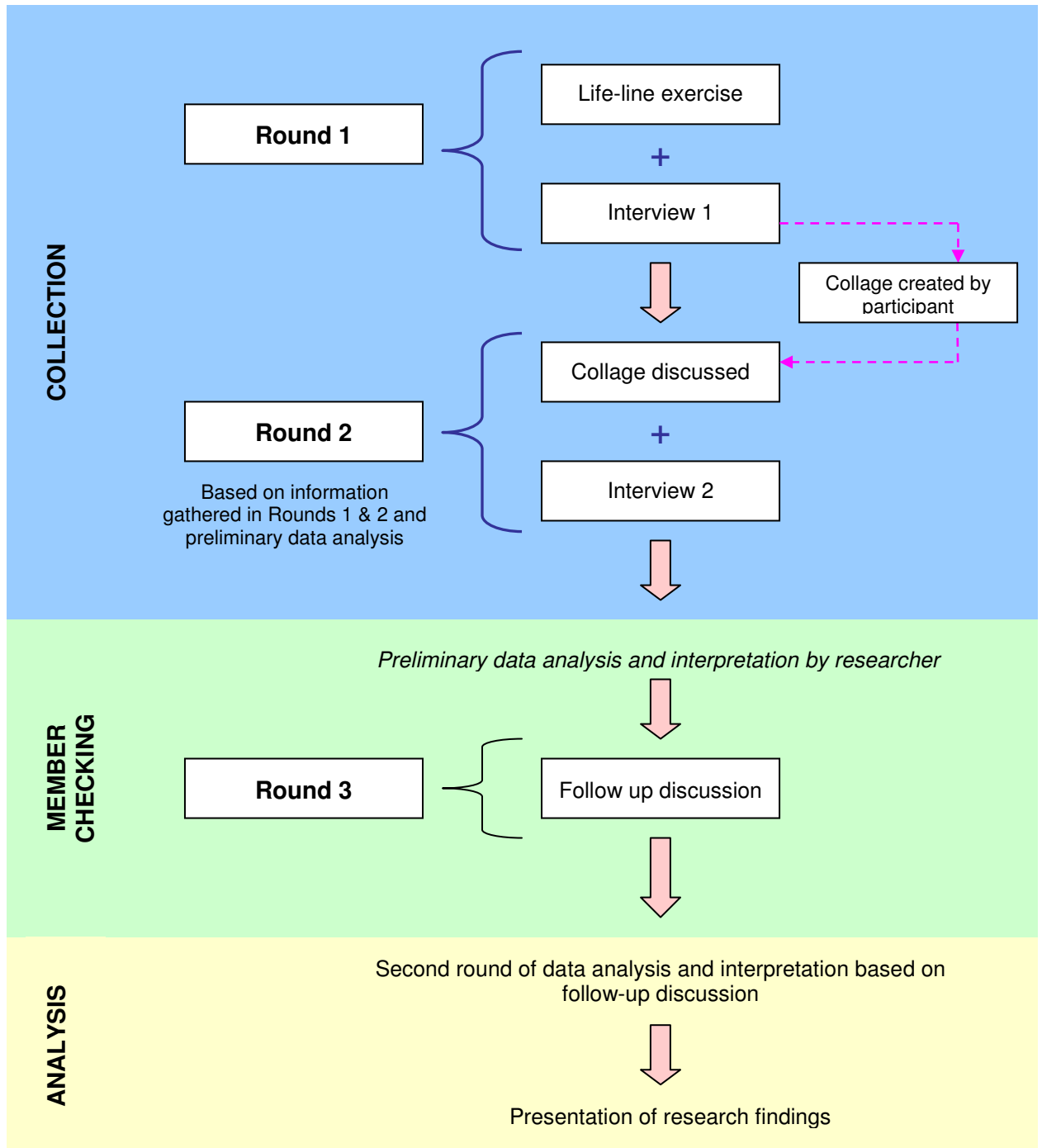


FIGURE 3.1: OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH PROCESS

¹³ The ethical considerations of this are discussed in section 3.4.1.1 of this chapter.

BOX 3.1: ANNE'S BIOGRAPHY

Participant 1 - Anne

Anne is a 21-year-old woman. Her home languages are English and Afrikaans. Anne completed her grade eleven and matric years in one year through a technical high school, as she did not enjoy school. After completing matric, Anne was uncertain about what to do. She wanted to study but could not, as (a) she did not have university exemption and (b) she was uncertain about what to study.

She started working in an office as an administrative assistant. After a few months she moved to another company and worked there in a similar position. When she turned 19 she was given money by her mother, and decided to use it to fulfil her lifelong dream of travelling to the UK. Once there, she struggled to find a job for the first few weeks. She was appointed in a temporary position at a bank. This later turned into a full-time position.

When Anne returned to South Africa after a year abroad, she opted to study to be a kindergarten teacher and completed a year course while working part-time as a minder at an after-school centre. She currently works as a teacher and partner in a play group that is run from a relative's house.

BOX 3.2: BETH'S BIOGRAPHY

Participant 2 - Beth

Beth is 23 years old and her home languages are also English and Afrikaans. During school Beth showed great promise in the sciences and was therefore selected to be a part of the UP with Science Programme at the University of Pretoria, which included a guaranteed scholarship after matric. After matriculating, she started studying BSc (Financial Mathematics) at the University of Pretoria, but six months later dropped out of the BSc course.

Beth decided to find a job, and applied at a temping agency. She was quickly appointed as a receptionist, and was rapidly promoted. Within a few months she had a management position, and three people working under her. Yet she was dissatisfied with her job, and decided to investigate options regarding further studies. After some career exploration she decided on teaching, quit her job and became a full-time student.

Beth is currently a fourth year BEd (FET) student, and plans to teach maths and science at a high school.

BOX 3.3: CARL'S BIOGRAPHY

Participant 3 - Carl

Carl is 26 years old, and his home language is English. He started his high school career at a technical high school believing it would help him to enter a profession after school. However, in grade 10 he decided to change to another high school as he was unhappy in the technical school.

After matriculating, Carl worked to earn money in order to travel overseas. He and his girlfriend, Diane, travelled to the UK when they were 17 and found jobs working in a pub. Once they had earned some money they used it to finance a two-month long trip to the USA, where they travelled across the country.

After their vacation they returned to the UK and continued working in pubs there. Diane returned to South Africa after eight months, but Carl opted to stay longer in order to earn more money. When he returned, he started studying to be a refrigeration technician. He decided to put his studies on hold and tried unsuccessfully to find a job.

Over the next few months Carl returned to the UK twice to earn money and do something constructive, while trying to find a job in his chosen field. When he returned for the third and final time, Carl worked for various companies where he explored different aspects of his chosen profession (i.e. working within the air conditioning and refrigeration industry).

Carl was offered a position as a sales representative in a reputable company, and has been working there to date.

3.4.1.1 Ethical considerations

The research will be conducted according to the ethical guidelines stipulated by the University of Pretoria, and as suggested by various researchers (Cohen *et al*

2004:49-72; Babbie *et al* 2002:520-526; Strydom 2000:25-30). The following ethical issues have been considered and addressed:

- **Informed consent:** The participants were informed about the aims and process of the research before they were asked whether they would be interested in participating. Each participant signed a letter of consent that detailed the scope of his or her participation.¹⁴
- **Confidentiality and privacy:** When the participants were approached they were assured that the confidentiality of their responses would be maintained. This information was repeated at various times throughout the research. The use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying information from the data were done in order to ensure that the privacy of the participants has been and will be maintained.
- **Deception:** The participants were not deceived about the purpose of the research at any stage during the research process. The aims of the research were discussed with each participant before the research commenced. They were also provided with a copy of the consent letter that detailed the research aims and processes.
- **Harm to participants:** The participants were not harmed in any way (physically, emotionally etc.) during the course of this research. All participants were given the option to discontinue their participation or change the subject if they felt uncomfortable at any stage during the research. No human rights were infringed during the research.
- **Reporting results:** Participants were informed that the research results would be used as part of requirements for completion of a Masters degree in Educational Psychology. This was also addressed in the letter of consent. The participants were involved during the data analysis and interpretation, and therefore also in the reported results. The chapters on the results of the research will be made available to the participants before being submitted.

An important consideration was the fact that established relationships already existed with all of the participants. The researcher was aware that this could have ethical implications including, researcher bias, and the fact that the participants may have

¹⁴ Please see Appendix A for a template of the consent form that was used.

felt obligated to participate in the research. On the other hand, existing relationships ensured a shared frame of reference, making it easier for the researcher to understand the meanings that the participants attributed to some aspects of their lives. Due to the existing relationships a strong rapport with the participants had already been established. This is an important research tool.

The potential problems of working with friends and relatives were addressed through awareness and researcher reflexivity. The researcher endeavoured to limit role confusion (that of friend, relative or psychologist versus researcher) through reflecting on the process of the research throughout the conversations and by clarifying the role of researcher before the data collection commenced. The researcher also used participant validation (participant checking) of the findings to ensure that the participants' voices and views were accurately reproduced. The possible perception of obligation was addressed by explicitly discussing with the participants the lack of obligation on their part, and by going into detail about the research process, the aims of the research and the implications of participation.

3.4.2 DATA COLLECTION

Babbie *et al* (2002:279) and Yin (2003:97) agree that one of the principles of data collection in case study research is to use multiple sources of evidence, which results in rich and detailed data (Merriam 1998:28; Babbie *et al* 2002:282; Henning *et al* 2004:42). It also allows for triangulation of data (defined as "...collect[ing] information about different events and relationships from different points of view" – Babbie *et al* 2002:277). Babbie *et al* (2002:277) add that this entails using different sources, different methods of data collection and asking different questions. Triangulation is an important feature of qualitative research – evidence is corroborated by ensuring that recurring themes are elicited from the data (Yin 2003:98). Life-lines, semi-structured interviews and collages were used to gather data in this study.

3.4.2.1 Round 1 – Life-lines and interviews

After the preliminary literature survey conducted by the researcher, the first round of data collection with the participants took place: life-lines constructed by the

participants and semi-structured interviews. Each participant was seen individually during every stage of the research process. The conversations regarding the life-lines, as well as the interviews, were recorded and later transcribed.

The life-line is identified by Brott (2004:142) as a post-modern career counselling technique aimed at revealing the participant's past and present life story. It is an interactive method where the counsellor works with the client to construct a visual representation of his or her life to date and the important events, people and experiences that shaped each of their life stories. It is a technique that falls within the constructivist paradigm, as it allows participants to construct meaning and portray their personal experiences (Brott 2004:138). The technique was explained to each participant, and they were allowed sufficient time to construct a life-line focusing specifically on their career path and career decision-making. The life-lines were then discussed.¹⁵

The semi-structured interviews were based upon the information provided in the life-lines, which provided the semi-structured interview schedule for each participant.

Semi-structured interviews were then done. As pointed out by Kvale (1996:62), interviews are characterised by the premise that knowledge is not external to the individuals involved, but is generated between individuals, often through conversations. This is echoed by Smith (1995a:4) who states that the researcher tries, through interviews, to enter the "psychological and social world of the participant."

As relationships already existed with the participants, good rapport was established early on during the research process, and the participants all expressed their willingness to talk freely during the interview. Due to the nature of the semi-structured interview, the researcher was able to probe for responses during the conversation without being concerned about the sequence in which the questions were to be asked, and was able to follow the interests of the participant (as guided by the life-line) (Smith 1995a:3).

¹⁵ Please see Appendix B for the life-lines that were constructed by the participants.

The participants were then asked to construct a collage about anything regarding their gap years or careers, to be discussed during the next meeting.

3.4.2.2 Round 2 – Collages and interviews

In recent years educational researchers have been investigating the use of visual images in qualitative data collection (Novoa 2000:21; Margolis 2000:8). As Fischman (2001:359) points out, visual sources offer an alternative way of perceiving and undertaking educational research.

Collages were therefore selected as a research method, as it allowed an alternative mode of communication with the participants – through visual images. Each participant made a collage, which focused on an area of their gap year or career development that they felt, was important.¹⁶

The participants were then asked to discuss and describe their collages and the reasons for making each of the choices during the process of constructing the collages. Based on this, and on the information gathered during Round 1 of the data collection process, additional questions were asked in the form of another, follow-up semi-structured interview. This procedure also allowed for a form of participant checking, as the researcher checked her understanding of the content and meanings gleaned during the first interview. The interviews with Anne and Beth were recorded, but due to technical difficulties the conversation with Carl could not be recorded. Instead copious notes were made during the interview.

3.4.4.3 Round 3 – Participant checking

After the data from the first two rounds had been analysed by the researcher¹⁷, the themes elicited from the data were taken back to each of the participants in order for them to comment on the data analysis and offer their interpretations and views on the preliminary findings. These comments were integrated into the study before final submission.

¹⁶ Please see Appendix C for the collages of the participants.

¹⁷ See section 3.4.3 of this chapter and Chapters 4 and 5.

3.4.3 DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION¹⁸

Data was analysed according to a constructivist-interpretivist framework. The researcher strove to maintain awareness of her bias and subjective experiences and aimed to focus on the constructed meanings created by the participants.

Preliminary data analysis was done by coding the data manually. The codes were grouped into families, and these were then briefly discussed. Subsequently, the preliminary analysis was taken to each of the participants for comment on and discussion of the findings, as recommended by Cohen *et al* (2004:120) and Northcutt and McCoy (2004:17). The comments were then integrated into the findings before the final data presentation.

3.5 TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE ENQUIRY

The quality of the research that is conducted is an important consideration. By ensuring that the research is reliable and valid, the researcher strives to ensure that the data generated is representative of the participants' voices and offers an accurate portrayal of their stories. While some argue that modernist terms such as validity and reliability are not applicable to post-modern research approaches and practice (Seale, Gobo, Gubrium & Silverman 2004:407), Cohen *et al* (2004:105) state that validity and reliability have a place in both qualitative and quantitative research, but that the way in which it is addressed differs according to the approach chosen.

3.5.1 VALIDITY

A traditional definition of validity is that it demonstrates that a research instrument truly measures what it claims to measure. While the traditional definition can be viewed as being unsuitable for use in qualitative research, where the researcher herself is the primary research instrument, Cohen *et al* (2004:105) point out that the honesty and depth of the data, the selection of participants, as well as the triangulation of data, are all means of addressing validity in qualitative research. They also identify the objectivity of the researcher as an important aspect of validity.

¹⁸ The data analysis is discussed here briefly, but will be described in detail in Chapters 4 and 5 when the findings are discussed.

Furthermore, they point out that it is impossible for research to be completely valid. Rather, validity is worked towards, and is one of the goals of good research.

3.5.1.1 Internal validity

Internal validity is an important aspect of validity in qualitative research. According to Cohen *et al* (2004:107) internal validity occurs when the explanation or information portrayed in a piece of research is accurately sustained by the data. Avis (1995:1205) identifies 'credibility' as the post-modern equivalent of internal validity. It can be defined as the extent to which the research participant's perceptions are accurately portrayed by the researcher.

In this study, issues of validity were addressed by ensuring the triangulation of data by using multiple sources of data, and by utilising member checks. Internal validity (credibility) was addressed by checking the interview data, as well as the interviewer's understanding of what was said, with the participants after the interviews had been conducted, as suggested by Smit (2001:69). In an attempt to strive towards validity, participant checking of the data that was generated after the data analysis was also done (as outlined in Cohen *et al* [2004:108]).

3.5.1.2 External validity

External validity is the extent to which the findings can be generalised so as to be applicable to the wider population (Cohen *et al* 2004:109). However, as Schurink (1998a:241) points out, qualitative research is inductive in nature, and does not seek to generalise but rather to understand specific phenomena as they were experienced by the research participants. Some argue that case study research can be generalised to a degree, depending on the context of the reader, therefore the onus to generalise the data to other contexts rests upon whoever reads the research (Smit 2001:69).

3.5.1.3 Construct validity

In qualitative research construct validity refers to the shared understanding of the constructs used during the research (Cohen *et al* 2004:110). Striving towards

construct validity, definitions of the terms were discussed with the research participants in order to ensure that understanding was reached regarding the meanings of the various constructs used.

3.5.2 RELIABILITY

The use of the term “reliability” in qualitative research is contentious as researcher subjectivity is an acknowledged part of the research process. Therefore, different researchers studying the same phenomena may generate different data, all of which would be considered reliable accounts of the researcher’s observed realities. Dependability is identified as an alternative to traditional reliability (Cohen *et al* 2004:119-120).

Smit (2001:72) suggests that, when trying to ensure dependability/reliability in qualitative research, different researchers might perhaps not find the “same” results, but would agree that the findings make sense based on the data gathered. In ensuring reliability, it is important for the researcher to clarify and acknowledge her assumptions and how they may impact on the research.

As suggested by Smit (2001:72) and Cohen *et al* (2004:120), the researcher attempted to maintain reliability through self-reflection aimed at becoming aware of and acknowledging assumptions, and through participant validation (participant checks).

3.6 CONCLUSION

This chapter detailed the paradigm from which the researcher worked, as well as the research design and methodology employed during this study.

The researcher aligns herself within a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, and this informs the entire research study. The manner of engaging with the participants (i.e. ethics), the choice of research design and data collection methods, as well as the methods of ensuring trustworthiness are all influenced by the researcher’s conceptual framework.

The choice to engage in a purely qualitative study could be considered controversial, as questions regarding trustworthiness often arise. However, the researcher embraces the consequences of the choice as her conceptual framework is based upon her personal ontological and epistemological assumptions. The researcher acknowledges that ensuring validity and reliability when doing a qualitative study is challenging, as researcher subjectivity, an important aspect of this type of study, is frowned upon in traditional methods of ensuring validity and reliability. The researcher addresses this firstly through awareness, as well as through a thorough study of the definitions of and methods of ensuring validity and reliability within a qualitative study. The practice of personal reflection throughout the research process and when engaging with the information gained from the participants becomes an important research tool.

The following chapter discusses the findings of the study.

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CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter aims to describe the findings of the research that was conducted. It deals in detail with the themes and sub-themes elicited from the data analysis done by the researcher, and confirmed by the participants. The descriptions of the themes were also checked with the participants before completion of the chapter.

4.2 DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Each of the participants created a life-line that was a graphic representation of their career development and the path that they took to reach their current career.¹⁹ Each of the life-lines started during high school, and ended in the present. The participants were asked to indicate whether the experiences were positive or negative. Two of them indicated all the experiences on the positive spectrum of the life-line, whereas another used colours to indicate positive, negative and neutral experiences.

The life-lines were used as guides to the individual interviews – with the various points on the life-lines offering an indication of the important experiences which the participant feels shaped his/her career path. The common experiences indicated were as follows:

- School experiences, including factors at school that affected career choice, such as relationships and career guidance.
- Work experience after school and/or during studies.
- The gap year that was taken, including where it took place, and what sort of work was engaged in at the time.

The themes elicited from these interviews were taken back to the participants, and formed the basis (along with the collage) for further interviews.

¹⁹ See Appendix C for the life-line exercises.

During the second round, the interviews were recorded and transcribed. The second interview with Carl was not transcribed due to technical difficulties, and therefore field notes were written for that interview. The collages²⁰ were discussed during the second interview.

Content analysis of the research data was done. The data analysis followed these steps (Smith 1995b:2; Smit 2001:84):

- The recorded interviews were transcribed.
- The transcripts were re-read a number of times.
- The data were divided into smaller meaningful units. These codes were identified in the body of the interview and were noted alongside the interview transcript.
- Once all of the codes had been identified, similar themes were grouped together.

The findings of the thematic analysis are discussed below.

4.3 FINDINGS OF THE THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The themes and sub-themes relevant to the topic of the gap year and that arose from the content analysis are graphically represented in Figure 4.1 below:

²⁰ See Appendix C for the collages



FIGURE 4.1: REPRESENTATION OF THEMES AND SUB-THEMES

The themes were identified by the researcher, who then took them back to the participants in order to check the researcher's understanding and verify that the themes offered an accurate portrayal of the participants' views. Themes were identified and accepted by the participants, and are discussed in detail below.

4.3.1 IMPACT OF SCHOOL

The first theme is concerned with the experiences of the participants during their school career. This theme was included as educational context is a significant factor in determining post-school gap year participation (Jones 2004b:39). Based on the information gathered during the interviews and collages three sub-themes were identified, namely: “Feelings about school”, “Relationships (during school)” and “Career guidance”. The creation of these sub-themes was guided by those factors in the school context that the participants viewed as important to them personally and relevant to their career development.

Closer analysis suggests that the sub-themes “Feelings about school” and “Relationships”, while deemed important by the participants, are not directly related to gap year participation. However, the sub-theme “Career guidance” is linked to gap year participation. This is echoed by the research of Jones (2004b:39), who specifically identified the effectiveness of career guidance as a factor influencing post-school gap year participation.

4.3.1.1 Feelings about school

Anne, Beth and, to a certain extent Carl, all had negative experiences during their school years, which led to negative feelings about school in general. These feelings are illustrated by the following quotations:

- *“Okay well I started college because I didn’t like school...” (Anne).*
- *“I didn’t enjoy the technical school, didn’t enjoy the work and the people.” (Carl)*
- *“I’ll let you know, I was depressed all through high school...” (Beth).*

Beth expressed the opinion that the negative feelings about school resulted in her difficulties in adjusting to and coping with the academic environment at University:

- *“Most of the problem in high school was having to sit with people and stuff like that. At varsity I didn’t know anyone either, so it was just as bad... it felt like I went from the gagga (bad) stuff in high school to the gagga (bad) stuff in varsity.”*

Despite these negative feelings about their primary educational context, all the participants either studied further after school or aim to study further at a later stage, implying that the negative feelings about school did not impact seriously on their career paths.

4.3.1.2 Relationships

Both Anne and Beth experienced relationship difficulties at school. These difficulties resulted in their description of themselves as “loners” and as “not fitting in”. Anne expressed this in the following ways:

- *“I think I was very influenced by peer pressure and things like trying to be accepted by my friends.”*
- *“I also felt with my friends that I was always sitting on the sideline, I wasn’t part of the group, that also had a lot to do with wanting to get away from them and just making a new start.”*

While Beth reported:

- *“I felt very out and I will tell you my whole high school career I felt like a loner. I could never keep friends, it was actually very bad for me...”*

Neither Anne nor Beth feel that their relationships at school impacted on their career path and gap year as they did not have close friends who influenced their career decisions. Indirectly, a wish to avoid relationships influenced Beth when she chose to leave university and engage in her gap year.

Carl, on the other hand, reported positive experiences regarding friends, especially at the second high school he attended. However, he also feels that these friends did not impact greatly on his choice to engage in a gap year.

Anne and Beth both expressed the opinion that the relationships with their teachers impacted on their feelings about school and their ability to cope at school. For Beth this was positive:

- *“And it was a few teachers in high school that helped me get through high school, like Mrs. M., she... supported me.”*

While Anne experienced the opposite:

- *“And one teacher said that I had to do something, and I told her I’m not gonna do it and she said I will. And the day came and I didn’t do it and I got into trouble for that. And I just decided that I don’t like this any more and I left.”*

This opinion is not shared by Carl, who does not feel that any teachers had a special impact on him at school. Therefore it appears as though there is only an indirect link for one of the participants between relationships at school and gap year participation.

4.3.1.3 Career guidance

Anne, Beth and Carl all expressed dissatisfaction with the career guidance they received when they were at school. Anne felt that the career guidance at school should be more detailed:

- *“I know you have guidance as a sort of subject at school, I think they should have a more individual one on one... and then sitting down with the people then explaining to them what the careers entail, what they need to study first and how long it’s gonna be to study, what they can do with it and those sort of things.”*

This was also expressed by Beth in her collage. Under the word “Educate” she explains that:

- *“...you need to be educated more about what the jobs are out there...”*

Carl was of the opinion that:

- *“[t]hat stuff is a waste of time. It didn’t reflect what I wanted to do, so I didn’t listen... When I got tired of the tests I just coloured in the different blocks.”*

Both Anne and Carl relied solely on the career guidance that was offered at their school.

Beth, however, also participated in a career guidance assessment with an educational psychologist. She expressed anger and disappointment regarding her assessment because her test results were very vague and therefore inconclusive:

- *“I was disappointed in her because I wanted to know what I had to do and I didn’t know what I had to do, so I was angry and she helped me nothing.”*

It is evident that all the participants were still experiencing career indecision when they left school.

As all the participants were disappointed with the career guidance that they had received, and were still experiencing career indecision, it appears as though a relationship does exist between career guidance and gap year participation.

4.3.2 CAREER EXPLORATION

The theme of exploration is concerned with the various forms of career exploration that the participants engaged in during their career path. This theme was selected as, according to Super’s theory, it is the developmental stage associated with young people who have left school (Super, Savickas & Super 1996:131-135; Bester 2004:293; Super & Hall 1978:334).

Work experiences and studying were identified as the two major forms of career exploration that took place prior to and after the gap year. These forms of career exploration formed the first two sub-themes of this theme. They also led to the creation of a third sub-theme, namely “Motivations for gap year”, wherein the various motivating factors influencing the decision to engage in a gap year were identified.

4.3.2.1 Work experiences

Anne, Beth and Carl engaged in different forms of work over the course of their career paths. Many of these jobs were taken because they “needed to work” and to earn money while deciding what career to pursue. Anne and Beth both engaged in office and administration work, as well as working with children. All the participants spent some time working in the hospitality industry (usually as waitresses or bartenders). Carl spent time working in the field of promotions and sales.

None of the participants' present career choices is the same as the primary job that they held during their gap years. Anne and Beth both did office and administrative work, and are now training or qualified as educators. During his gap year Carl worked as a bartender. He now works in sales. However, all the participants had some experience in part-time or volunteer work before or after the gap year in the same field. For example, Carl had a part-time job in sales while earning money with which to go on his gap year; Anne worked part-time at an aftercare centre while completing her studies; and Beth volunteered to work with children at a homeless shelter shortly before registering to study education.

Beth and Anne both stated that the work experiences they had had before they decided on a career path had been “boring” and “unsatisfying”. They also shared the opinion that the work they had done during the gap year had definitely convinced them what they wouldn't want to do on a permanent basis:

- *“... I definitely found that I don't want to work in an office from working there” (Anne).*
- *“I was working with babies in their little crèche and dirty nappies and stinky babies and all that stuff. And that just helped me to realise that I need to teach the older kids” (Beth).*
- *“It introduced me to a different environment and it introduced me exactly to what I don't want to face for the rest of my life. It gave me the knowledge of this is not what I want ...” (Beth).*

Furthermore, Beth found the work environment to be very stressful, and she reports feeling very stressed and unhappy with the work that she did. This is expressed in the excerpts from her collage²¹ below:

²¹ See Appendix C for the complete collage.



FIGURE 4.2: BETH'S COLLAGE – EXCERPT 1

4.3.2.2 Studying

All the participants expressed a belief that studying is very important in order to make progress in their careers. This belief is reflected in the following quotations:

- *"...I feel that I've actually missed the boat in a way, because I haven't studied..." (Carl).*
- *"Studying is very important because it equips you properly for a professional career if you want to be professional" (Beth).*
- *"...I think it is important to have a degree or diploma or something to say at least you furthered yourself and bettered your knowledge of the field you are trying to go into" (Anne).*

The theme of studying was expressed in Beth's collage in the following way:

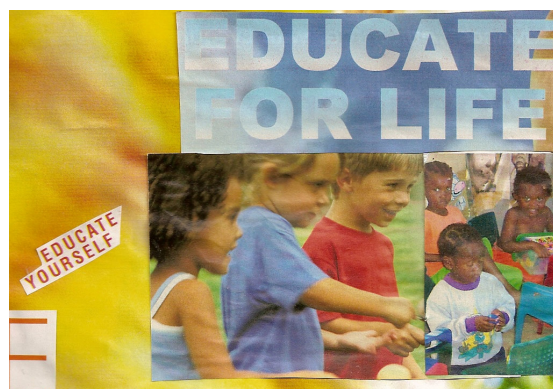


FIGURE 4.3: BETH'S COLLAGE – EXCERPT 2

- *“It’s the fact that I chose education as a teacher, it’s the fact that you need to be properly educated for the jobs that you want to do, the fact that you need to be educated more about what the jobs are out there, educate in many different ways” (Beth).*

Anne and Beth expressed their belief in the importance of a professional qualification in their chosen fields by stating:

- *“But for most people if you want to get paid properly one day, and to be able to support yourself, then you have to so study to have something behind your name ... I would like to say that I am a professional and I’d like to say that I studied for four years so that I know everything that encompasses my career that I am doing right now” (Beth).*
- *“...in the career path I’ve chosen I think people aren’t willing to entrust their children to you if you haven’t got something behind your name” (Anne).*

Carl expressed a fear that without furthering himself he could:

- *“...get caught being 50 years old and earning a salary that [he] can’t survive on.”*

This was echoed by Anne who stated:

- *“I didn’t want to be 60 and be an office lady.”*

All the participants also expressed the belief that they would continue or further their education later in their lives:

- *“[Studying] is still important to me, it is still something that I want to do, that I feel I have to do” (Carl).*
- *“...well maybe I will get bored having to teach every day then I will go into something else, equip myself with other certificates or who knows what else” (Beth).*

And when asked whether she sees herself studying further, Anne replied:

- *“Ja (yes), probably I think I would, just for that option of one day if I don’t feel like teaching the little ones anymore, at least be able to go into a private or public school and teaching the older ones.”*

4.3.2.3 Motivations for gap year

Amongst the participants a common motivator for taking a gap year appears to be uncertainty about what to study or what career path to choose.

- *“So I decided, instead of buying a car or going to study, because I wasn’t sure what I was gonna study yet, I would go overseas” (Anne).*

Another motivator appeared to be the need to do something “constructive” while deciding what to do.

- *“... it was mostly killing time until I decided. I thought that I would go overseas the second time and just earn money” (Carl).*
- *“I didn’t know what I wanted to do so I decided I needed some time, if I decide on something then I will decide on something” (Beth).*

The theme of the importance of time was also reflected in Beth’s collage.

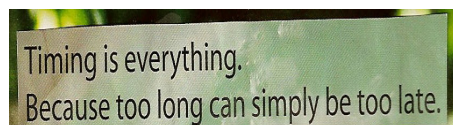


FIGURE 4.4: BETH’S COLLAGE – EXCERPT 3

She explains:

- *“The timing is everything because I didn’t take the right timing. I just went straight into something and that wasn’t a very good idea.”*

While in high school both Carl and Anne had thought about taking a gap year, but Beth did not consciously take the decision to take a gap year.

- *“I didn’t say I’m going to take a year off and then I’m gonna start studying, but the need to start studying was nagging at me during that time and the need to do something better with my life.”*

Family support was another motivating factor for the participants. Carl’s sister had taken a gap year, and he:

- *“... felt like if [he] didn’t do it then [he] would be the little failure in the family as well.”*

He reports that his family was very supportive of his going overseas. Anne was the first person in her family to have taken a gap year, but she also reported that her family had been very understanding, and that they had been an important source of support for her. Beth’s parents were not willing to let her take a formal gap year after school. She reported that she had felt anger because of their unwillingness to let her take a formal gap year. However, when she dropped out of university and started working, they became more supportive:

- *“...once the family saw how miserable I was (at university) ... then I was supported.”*

Finally, a motivator for Carl specifically, was the world of work in South Africa:

- *“I went to a lot of companies before that, before I went overseas the second time, and asked them. I said I would come and work for them for free, just give me the experience, nobody wanted to take me on.”*

This “lack of opportunity” motivated Carl to return to the UK until he had enough money and had decided what to study.

4.3.3 EXPECTATIONS OF GAP YEAR

This theme is concerned with the expectations of the participants regarding their gap years. Such expectations can also be seen as motivating factors contributing towards the decision to engage in a gap year.

The participants identified the expectation of making money to be important, so financial expectations form the first theme. Furthermore, Jones (2004b:38) stated that a significant number of people who take a gap year in the UK do so with the expectation of having different experiences. This expectation was also reported by the participants of this study. Therefore the second sub-theme consists of the experiential expectations that the participants had regarding the gap year.

4.3.3.1 Financial

The most common expectation expressed by the participants was that they would earn money during their gap year. Both Anne and Carl related their expectations to earn money in order to enable them to study after returning from the UK. Carl also stated that earning money had been the main reason why he had returned to the UK after his initial gap year, and that for him earning money was the most important motivator of all.

4.3.3.2 Experiential

Another expectation expressed by both Anne and Carl was that they had expected to have the opportunity to travel and experience the world during their gap years. Beth and Anne expressed the expectation that they would gain work-related experience:

- *“I was hoping to get a teacher’s assistant position, but I didn’t get that, so I continued looking for something in that line, then I just got a job through the employment agency...” (Anne).*
- *“I said I’m going to start working somewhere and see if I like it, because I wanted to try the business environment” (Beth).*

The participants had various expectations regarding the nature of the work that they would be engaged in. Beth expressed the expectation that it would have been difficult for her to find a job. This was echoed by Anne who had expected to have many small jobs in the UK. Anne and Carl had both expected more free time during their gap years in the UK, and both expressed the expectation that they would have had many short-term jobs while working there rather than having one long-term job. Beth too had anticipated having many short temporary jobs when she entered the job market through a temporary employment agency.

The participants shared their expectations about their personal development and growth. Anne expressed that she was hoping to gain:

- *“...some independence, and you know making sure that I can look after myself because there, there is no one to do things for you.”*

She sums up by saying that she was hoping to “find herself” while she was there. Beth, on the other hand, expected to experience what the “adult world” was like, and what the options were for people who did not choose to study after school.

Finally, two of the participants had expectations about being able to explore different career options during the gap year. Anne reflected:

- *“...I didn’t know at all what I wanted to do and I was hoping to hopefully get work in the fields that I would enjoy.”*

Beth echoes this with her comment about her expectations regarding her office job:

- *“...but this might be what I want to do for the rest of my life, I will see.”*

4.3.4 RESULTS OF GAP YEAR

The “Results of gap year” theme is concerned with participants’ views of the outcomes of the gap year. The extent to which the expectations of the participants (discussed in the theme above) were met, becomes the first sub-theme of this theme, in which the financial and experiential expectations of the participants are discussed.

According to a study by Jones (2004a:2-3; 2004b:58) there are many advantageous outcomes of engaging in a gap year. These include improved career and life-skills, finalisation of career choices and improved maturity, amongst others. Of the various outcomes identified by Jones, the participants found personal growth, life-skills and career decision-making to be the most relevant to their life worlds. These constructs were therefore identified as the other sub-themes under “Results of gap year”.

4.3.4.1 Expectations

All the participants met the expectations that they had regarding earning money. While Anne managed to use her money for studies, Carl reports that he “blew it” on anything but studies. Both Carl and Anne revealed that they did not bring as much money back to South Africa as they had hoped, which they report is due to the cost of living in the UK as well as the fact that they spent some of their money on their experiences while they were overseas.

Beth earned a lot more money than she expected during her gap year, and enjoyed the independence that came with earning a large salary. She reported that it was difficult to make the transition from earning a good salary to being a full-time student who does not have a fixed income. The role that money played in her gap year is illustrated in the following excerpt from her collage.



FIGURE 4.5: BETH'S COLLAGE – EXCERPT 4

Anne and Carl's expectations regarding opportunities to travel were met. Whereas they both managed to do some travelling and sightseeing during their gap years (in London and to the USA respectively), both also expressed the opinion that if they could re-do the gap year they would have seen more and spent more money on these types of activities. Travel and other experiences, such as concerts etc., form the main focus of their collages. The following extracts illustrate how important these various experiences were to them²².

²² See Appendix C for the complete collages.

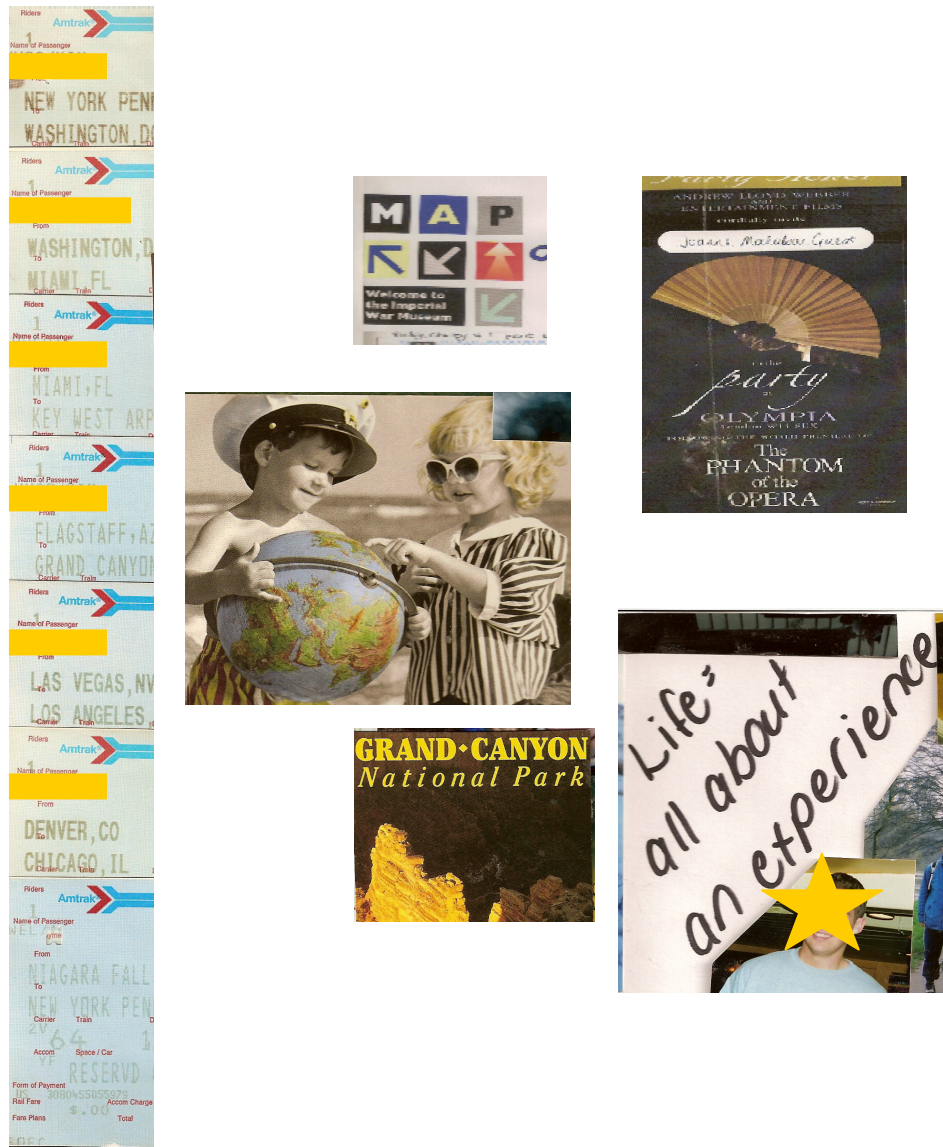


FIGURE 4.6: EXCERPTS FROM ANNE AND CARL'S COLLAGES

Anne's expectation of gaining work-related experience was not met. Rather, the work that she engaged in was in a different field. She expressed the opinion that the work experience proved to her that she didn't want to work in an office environment. This sentiment was echoed by Beth, who stated that her job during the gap year gave her 'clarity of mind' about what she did and didn't want to do with her life.

None of the participant's expectations regarding the nature of the work they would be doing were met. All the participants were employed in a long-term job rather than engaging in many short-term jobs. They also reported that the work had been less fun, more mundane, more boring and sometimes more stressful than they had

expected. Due to the nature of the jobs that the participants engaged in, the expectation of having the opportunity to explore various career options was only partially met.

Anne's expectation of gaining independence and experiencing personal growth was met. This is discussed in more detail below.

4.3.4.2 Personal growth

All of the participants agree that personal growth was an outcome of their gap year, even though it was not always an anticipated one. The participants experienced personal growth in terms of becoming more independent and responsible, more confident, less naïve, valuing their relationships with loved ones more, gaining various life-skills (discussed below) and insights into their own personalities and emotional worlds.

Illustrations of personal growth can be seen in the following quotations:

- *"It (discussing the gap year) has been a realisation of what has happened in my life because when I talk about this I realise how I feel and how much I've grown" (Beth).*
- *"I learnt that I can organise my life and I can be, you know, self-sufficient and independent and take care of myself" (Anne).*
- *"I think I just needed a break to get my head straight, get the confidence to know that I don't need to fit in anywhere" (Beth).*
- *"I learnt that I'm a pretty nice person ... and I did learn that I don't have as much patience as I thought I have, but I'm working on that!" (Anne).*
- *"I was very self-conscious and not self-assured enough" (Beth).*
- *"And something is not really gonna fall on your lap, you have to work for it or, you know, go looking for it ... more pro-active..." (Anne).*
- *"I was out to please other people and not to please myself ... if I cannot fix the problem now I cannot fix it. So that helped me to get a little bit of confidence in saying no" (Beth).*
- *"...and it made you appreciate what you've got back here because all that they've got is bad weather and the pub" (Carl).*

- *“I was still young, naïve...” (Carl).*
- *“...I think it’s made me a bit more confident because the people I was speaking to were all older than me and made you sort of see things from their perspective” (Carl).*

However, all of the participants said that, if there were a continuum on which personal growth and career growth could be represented, they would now be further along in terms of career growth than personal growth – indicating that the personal growth is ongoing. For Beth, the tree in her collage is a metaphor for the personal growth that took place during her gap year, and which will continue to take place. She said:

- *“It’s how I see my mind, I have lots of space to grow, it’s a very green tree.”*



FIGURE 4.7: BETH’S COLLAGE – EXCERPT 5

All of the participants concur that the personal growth that they experienced can largely be attributed to their experiences during the gap year.

4.3.4.3 Life-skills

The sub-theme of life-skills was elicited when the results of the gap year were analysed. These life-skills were mainly related to issues of independence, including skills such as budgeting, saving and working with money – as expressed by Anne:

- *“...so you need to work to get money and you need to buy food, budgets and stuff like that and also like trying to save, knowing how to save, and how much, because you can’t run out of money...”*

Skills related to taking care of oneself (e.g. ironing, cooking and cleaning) were also gained. Carl recounts:

- *“[w]e had to learn how to use an iron, I burnt myself a couple times, I mean it was all done. I had to do my shopping and my washing and everything...”*

All the participants felt that they had gained social skills. Carl stated that his work in the pub had equipped him with social skills, while Beth had learned to work with others in an office environment and how to act professionally towards them. Anne gained confidence in her social skills and interactions and reported:

- *“I used to be quite shy and ... I just realise that you can’t be ... people aren’t going to get to know you if you won’t let them.”*

Carl and Beth expressed the opinion that their respective schools could have equipped them better for the working world by teaching life-skills such as working with money, or by offering basic computer skills courses relevant to the workplace.

4.3.4.4 Career decision-making

None of the participants indicated a direct link between the gap year and their ability to make a career decision.

One of Anne’s goals for her gap year was to decide what she wanted to do. She recounts how she started “running out of time” during her gap year and that this motivated her to think about what she wanted to do, and motivated her to start investigating career options through the internet and through friends and family. However, she admits that she had always considered teaching, and while the gap year did not influence this choice, it showed her:

- *“...I could go and study by myself and you know succeed in doing it well because that’s what I wanted to do.”*

In other words, she felt more confident to distinguish between what she could and couldn't do, and felt better equipped to follow her dream.

Beth also found that her experiences during the gap year motivated her to decide on a career. However, career exploration was not one of her goals:

- *“Basically ..., it was actually running away, it was more running away from deciding what I have to do. And then it just actually came to me what I did want to do through the experiences that I experienced during the gap year.”*

This happened in the following way:

- *“It motivate[d] me to start thinking about what I really want[ed] to do. I think that when you get placed in a situation where you're doing what you don't want to do, you actually get the clarity of mind to decide what you do want to do...”*

However, Carl feels that, although the gap year was a wonderful experience and he gained many skills from it, he did not achieve clarity about what he wanted to do through his gap year experiences. For Carl, the focus of the gap year was to earn money to enable him to study when he returned; however, he is still uncertain about what he would like to study.

4.3.5 FEELINGS ABOUT GAP YEAR EXPERIENCES

The participants' feelings about the gap year are explored in this theme in order to address the research questions posed in Chapter 1. The sub-themes “Positive feelings” and “Negative feelings/regrets” are included under this theme in order to gain insight into both the positive and negative feelings that the participants have regarding the gap year.

4.3.5.1 Positive feelings

In general, the participants had very positive views of the gap year. For Anne and Carl a large part of this is related to the experiences that they had in the UK, whereas

for Beth the focus is more on the personal gains in terms of confidence. The following quotations illustrate these feelings:

- *“I loved the people I met, the friends I made, I loved going to the places that I went to and seeing many things, I loved meeting new people and learning about them and things like that” (Anne).*
- *“...I definitely say, take a year off, you might be a year behind when you get back from all of your friends but you will have all the experience” (Carl).*
- *“I was welcomed and I was praised, all of that, just all of a sudden and it was great, and it’s nice to be appreciated and I suppose I didn’t have the social, I wasn’t forced to be social with everyone in the office” (Beth).*

4.3.5.2 Negative feelings/regrets

The participants appeared to have a predominantly positive view of their gap year experiences. Some of the negative experiences and regrets that they identified include:

- Not seeing more and travelling more while in the UK.
- Having very little time to engage in leisure activities.
- Having very little privacy in terms of living arrangements.
- Missing family, friends and loved ones.
- A discrepancy between being independent and being partially dependent (e.g. not having a driver’s licence, not being old enough to rent a house in the UK).
- Experiencing stress about the nature of the work.
- Struggling to find work.
- Being concerned about finances.

Despite these negative feelings, none of the participants regret their gap year. All of them would recommend that their own children take a gap year, and all of them would choose to do a gap year again if the opportunity arose. This is expressed by Carl who stated:

- *“...I wouldn’t have changed it for the world.”*

4.4 CONCLUSION

The themes that were elicited during the analysis of the research data have been described in detail in this chapter. The following chapter will discuss the findings described in this chapter in terms of relevant literature on the topic. The research questions posed in Chapter one will be addressed through the findings of the study. The limitations and contributions of the study will also be described before recommendations are made for psychology practice and further research. Finally, concluding comments will be given.

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CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides a summary of the findings of the study, and compares them to the available literature about the gap year and career decision-making. The conclusions of the study will then be discussed, and the research questions posed in Chapter 1 of this study will be addressed. The limitations and contributions of the study will be discussed, and finally recommendations will be made regarding further research and implications for educational psychology practice.

5.2 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND COMPARISON TO LITERATURE

The analysis of the data gathered in this study led to the emergence of various themes that described different aspects of the participants' experiences during the gap year, and their feelings about the gap year. While all the themes combine to offer a picture of the gap year through the eyes of the participants, specific themes and sub-themes deal with the particular research questions of the study. This section aims to summarise the findings of the study, before the research questions posed earlier in the study are addressed.

Firstly, all the participants identified school as a factor influencing their respective gap years. All of the participants had negative feelings about school, and to a certain extent this was influenced by poor relationships at school. None of the participants are satisfied with the career guidance that they received at school. This is confirmed by Jones' (2004b:39) study which found that a lack of career-related advice and guidance influences gap year participation among school-leavers in the UK. Furthermore, participants in this study experienced problems in terms of a lack of guidance, a lack of personal attention during group testing and inconclusive results, all of which contributed towards career indecision. However, as pointed out by Savickas (1995:3), career indecision can be deemed a normal occurrence for young

people who have not yet finalised their identities (who are still in the process of maturing).

Secondly, the participants engaged in various types of career exploration prior to selecting a career. This included work experience in various fields, some of which were related to the final career choice, but many were not related at all. Most of the participants relied on practical job exploration rather than theoretical job exploration. However, some online research and the use of mentors did occur. Career exploration is an important and age-appropriate developmental task of the participants, and career decision-making is a developmental task linked to the stage of exploration (Super *et al* 1996:131-135; Bester 2004:293; Super & Hall 1978:334). All the participants stressed the importance of studying, and the view that studying is a prerequisite for having a successful career. This can be understood in terms of the context of the participants, who belong to a middle-class society in South Africa that holds educational qualifications in high esteem.

Participants' motivations for taking a gap year include the need to take time to resolve their career uncertainty. Dealing with career indecision is common amongst school leavers and Savickas (1995:3) views this indecision as an expression of hesitation before the transformation, which takes place as identities are forged and consolidated. Other motivators included the wish to engage in a "constructive pursuit" while making a career decision (and with that, to earn money), family support, and, to a certain extent, the nature of the world of work in South Africa. This is in contrast with the findings of Jones (2004b:38) who found that the most common motivator in the UK is to experience the world and to take a break from work or study. He identified educational context as the most important factor that influences the decision to take a gap year in the UK, but the findings of this study do not touch on whether that is the case here. Jones (2004b:38) also identified the family as being an influencing factor, which is echoed in this study. It can be inferred from the differences in the literature that gap year participants from South Africa engage in a gap year for different reasons than those from the UK. It appears as though the focus for South African participants is on furthering their careers, whereas for participants from the UK it is on having different experiences.

Thirdly, the participants had various expectations about what would happen during their gap year, and these also served as motivators for engaging in a gap year. All the participants expected to earn money while doing their gap year. Some of them expected to have the opportunity to gain work-related experience. This is confirmed in the study by Jones (2004b:34) where he found that young people in the UK focused on experiential aspects when deciding to take a gap year.

The participants of the study had different expectations about the nature of the work that they would be doing, including that they would struggle to find a job and that they would engage in many short-term jobs during their gap year. The participants had expectations about personal growth and skill development and about having the opportunity to explore different career options – these, however, were less prominent expectations. These findings are confirmed in the literature by Jones (2004b:38) who states that gaining life-skills, while recognised by participants, are not important motivators.

Fourthly, the participants reported different results of the gap year. They reported some discrepancies about the extent to which their expectations about what they would experience during the gap year were met. For example, the participants who went to the UK did not earn as much money during their gap year as they expected, nor did they have as much opportunity for travel as they had expected. There was also a difference between what they expected about the nature of their work and what they actually found. However, knowledge of the world of work (which the participants gained through their experiences) has been identified by Super and Hall (1978:340) as one of the variables that leads to career maturity. Therefore, despite the differences between expectations and experiences, the experiences could be regarded as valuable in terms of personal growth.

The most compelling result of the gap year is the amount of personal growth that took place. Super (1990:225-226) suggests that personal growth, in terms of increased maturity and skills gained, is an important part of career development. All the participants reported an increase in independence and confidence, and gained insights into their own personalities and relationships with others. These skills impacted on the participants' abilities to cope with the developmental task of career

decision-making, and therefore impacted on their career maturity (Mitchell & Krumboltz 1996:237-242; Super 1990:213). However, all the participants acknowledge that they are still developing as people, emphasising the dynamic nature of career development as described by Super (1990:225-226) and Super and Hall (1978:334). The personal growth and increased maturity that takes place is cited by Jones (2004a:2-3) as a commonly acknowledged advantage of the gap year in the UK. In addition to this, the participants experienced an increase in life-skills related to taking care of themselves, working with money, and interpersonal skills. This confirms the findings of Jones (2004b:58) who established that improved life and career skills were an advantage of taking a gap year. Mitchell and Krumboltz (1996:237-242) also point out that task approach skills such as the life-skills gained by the participants are an important factor in decision-making. This statement is echoed by Picklesimer, Hooper and Ginter (1998:272-274) who argue that life-skills are necessary to meet the demands placed on young people, thereby implying that life-skills themselves can be seen as a factor contributing towards career maturity.

The final “result of the gap year” in the findings is related to career decision-making. The participants reported that the gap year did not directly lead to a career decision, but rather improved their confidence – and thereby their ability to make a career decision. This ties in with the theory of Super, which states that increased maturity is characterised by the ability to make a career decision (Super & Hall 1978:340). The sub-theme of personal growth is therefore strongly related to career decision-making. Not all the participants feel that the gap year helped them to make a career decision. For one participant it merely facilitated a career path that he had already selected during high school.

The fifth set of findings is related to the participants’ feelings about the gap year. They reported both positive and negative feelings about what they had experienced. The positive feelings are related to their experiences as well as to their personal growth. The negative feelings are related to regrets about experiences during the gap year, stress-related to work and financial concerns. However, despite negative feelings, none of the participants regret their gap year as a whole.

5.3 CONCLUSIONS OF THE STUDY

This study aimed to investigate the experiences of three young people who had engaged in a gap year prior to the commencement of this study. The purpose of the study was to investigate the influence of the gap years on the participants' career decision-making. The experiences of the participants were explored through semi-structured interviews, life-lines and collages. These forms of data were analysed and themes regarding the gap year were elicited. Based on the themes that were elicited through the data analysis, it appears as though the gap year has a positive impact on those who take it.

The findings of the study indicate that negative feelings about school do not impact negatively on the decision of whether or not to study further after leaving school. However, there does appear to be a trend regarding dissatisfaction with career guidance whilst at school, and possibly misconceptions regarding the purpose and practice of career guidance. A lack of adequate career guidance may contribute to career indecision amongst school leavers. It appears as though many young people engage in practical job exploration (in terms of engaging in various forms of work after school) more often than in theoretical job exploration such as doing online research or speaking to practitioners of various careers. The study suggests that people believe that studying and earning a qualification will make it easier to find employment and earn a better salary. Studying further appears to be a priority for young people, and in some cases the gap year serves to help them to earn money with which to finance study, and helps them decide what to study.

There appears to be an interaction of various factors that influence peoples' choice to engage in a gap year. These include family support, expectations about the gap year and career exploration. However, the primary motivator for taking a gap year appears to be taking time out before making a decision. Therefore, experiencing career indecision can be said to be an important motivator for young people to engage in a gap year before making a career choice. Earning money also appears to be an important motivator for people who chose to take a gap year overseas.

The findings indicate that, while people have different expectations of the gap year, and different motivations for engaging in one, the results after the gap year are similar. The conclusion can be reached that the gap year has a positive influence on personal growth and the acquisition of life-skills, which leads to increased career maturity. During this process the participant is better equipped to make a career decision, which is an important aspect of career maturity. The study suggests that one of the largest factors that impact on career decision-making in relation to the gap year is that it allows people time to mature.

It appears as though people's expectations of the gap year tend to be partially met, but some discrepancies exist between expectations about the world of work and the actual experiences of people entering the job market. It appears as though the different types of gap years (e.g. those taken overseas and those taken locally) have similar outcomes in terms of personal growth, despite differences in the types of activities that the people engage in during the gap year.

Finally, the findings of the study suggest that people feel that the gap year is meaningful in terms of facilitating personal growth and specifically gaining independence and life-skills. Despite some negative aspects, the overarching view appears to be that the gap year is a beneficial experience in terms of career development.

5.4 ADDRESSING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

5.4.1 PRIMARY RESEARCH QUESTION

- **How does the gap year impact on career decision-making?**

Career decision-making is a complex process, and various factors interact to lead to a decision. The results of the study indicate that the gap year has an indirect impact on career decision-making. The gap year impacts on the process of decision-making in the following ways:

Firstly, the gap year offers an opportunity for people to take time to resolve their career indecision and gain career maturity – an important part of which is making a

career decision. This is potentially an important function of the gap year, as career indecision affects many, if not all people at some stage during their career development, and is prevalent amongst young people when they leave school. Career decision-making is acknowledged as an important aspect of career maturity, and the gap year allows people to take the time to mature.

Secondly, it appears as though the gap year facilitates personal growth, and specifically confidence and self-knowledge. This also contributes to greater career maturity, while increased self-confidence leads to the ability to make a decision and to trust that the decision is the correct one.

Thirdly, experiences during the gap year teach people about the world of work and exposes them to different work environments. Knowledge about the world of work is viewed as a characteristic of career maturity. This exposure also contributes to some extent towards making a career decision. For example, when people find themselves in an environment that they don't enjoy, it motivates them to find a more suitable environment and also leads to an increase in self-knowledge about personal interests and preferences.

In summary, it appears as though the gap year increases participant's career maturity. As a part of the maturation process, a career decision is made.

5.4.2 SUB-QUESTIONS

- **What motivated the participants to take a gap year?**

The findings of the study indicate that various factors motivated the participants to take a gap year. The most common motivator reported was the need to take time before making a career decision – the existence of career indecision motivated the participants to take a gap year. Other factors included the need to engage in a constructive activity while deciding what to do, and the support of the participant's families. Earning money was an important motivator for the participants, with the two participants who went overseas being particularly motivated by this.

- **How do the participants feel about their experiences during the gap year as related to career decision-making?**

The participants have an overall positive view of the gap year. The participants do not feel that the gap year directly led to a career decision. Rather, it was the vehicle whereby they matured sufficiently to be able to make a decision.

The participants feel that their experiences during the gap year exposed them to the type of job environments that they were not interested in, and thereby demonstrated to them what sort of work they would like to go into. Furthermore, the participants feel that their experiences during the gap year led to increased confidence and independence, which in turn enabled them to make a decision or to be more comfortable with the decision they had made.

- **What do the participants value about the gap year in terms of career decision-making?**

The participants value the time that they took with their gap year. This time allowed them to gain self-knowledge and to explore the world of work before making a decision. The participants agree that this was a very valuable aspect of the gap year, as it allowed them to become more “ready” to make a decision, although it should be noted that there were varying degrees of certainty after the gap year. They also value the personal growth that took place during the gap year, as well as the life-skills that they acquired during that phase of their lives.

- **What are the participants’ perceptions regarding whether or not the gap year prepared them for career decision-making?**

All the participants already had an inclination towards a specific career before engaging in their gap years, but were uncertain about these directions. Therefore, it can be said that they were already in the process of career decision-making, and that this did not take place after the gap year only. Two of the participants feel that the gap year made it possible for them to finalise their decision and start pursuing their careers, therefore it helped them to complete the career decision-making process. However, one of the participants, while reporting personal growth, still experienced uncertainty regarding his career decision. Therefore, it cannot be said that the gap

year prepared the participant's for career decision-making, but rather that it contributed to the decision-making process.

5.5 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The small number of participants limits the generalisability of the results. However, as a case study design was followed, it may be possible to make context-bound generalisations to others in a similar position. The small scale of the study also resulted in a sample not representative of the broader South African society, therefore the impact of socio-economic status and culture has not been taken into account. Furthermore, the use of purposeful convenience sampling restricted the sample to a very small and somewhat homogenous group. This generates opportunities for further research²³.

A further limitation of the study is the lack of literature available on the topic of the gap year, and the fact that the available literature tends to be situated in a Western context. This has resulted in the need for the researcher to make inferences from related literature during the study. The researcher attempted to address this limitation by reviewing as wide a range of related literature as possible.

5.6 CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY

The study contributes to the knowledge base in the field of educational psychology. The study is situated within a South African context, and highlights some of the differences and similarities between the experiences of gap year participants reported in the existing literature, as compared to the participants of the study. Furthermore, the case study design allowed for an in-depth investigation into the experiences and perceptions of gap year participants. This detailed view of the experiences of the participants may be seen as a contribution in itself, as the existing literature tends to be based on brief testimonials and quantitative data collection techniques. The nature of the study allows for a better understanding of the complex nature of the experiences, perceptions and feelings of participants who engage in a gap year.

²³ The recommendations of this study are discussed in section 5.7.

The study also offers insights for educational psychologists into the factors that contribute towards a successful gap year, and the pitfalls experienced by the participants. This has implications for the practice of educational psychology (and specifically career counselling) in South Africa²⁴.

Finally, the findings of the study contribute to the understanding of parents and their children regarding the advantages and disadvantages of engaging in a gap year. It may offer another view of what the gap year entails and what it can offer, which in turn could aid in making decisions about whether or not to take a gap year, and what sort of gap year to engage in. This study therefore adds to the career exploration options available to young people faced with making a career decision.

5.7 RECOMMENDATIONS

5.7.1 FURTHER RESEARCH

The study offers a preliminary view of the phenomenon of the gap year in the South African context. Further research is recommended to deepen the understanding of the gap year phenomenon, as well as the contributing factors. Further research could include:

- A larger study of the experiences of South Africans who engage in gap years, with a sample that is more representative of South African society.
- A comparative study contrasting the experiences of gap year participants and non-gap year participant, and where the participants are selected using purposeful sampling.
- A longitudinal study focusing on the career maturity of people before, during and after the gap year.
- A comparative study of the career maturity of young people who have taken a gap year as opposed to those who have not taken one.
- A long-term study of career satisfaction of people who made a career decision after taking a gap year, compared to people who did not take one.

²⁴ The recommendations of this study are discussed in section 5.7.

- A study of the career exploration practices of people who are engaged in a gap year.
- A study of the relationship between adequate career guidance and engaging in gap years.
- An investigation into the expectations of young people regarding career counselling, the gap year and the world of work.

The findings of further research studies would also add to the body of knowledge and would address the lack of availability of information regarding the gap year within the South African context.

5.7.2 PRACTICE

The study aimed to address the question of whether the gap year has an impact on career decision-making, which is a question posed by parents and young people seeking career counselling and guidance. Therefore, the findings of this research have implications for the recommendations that psychologists make to their clients, as well as for the practitioner's own understanding of the phenomenon.

The findings imply that the contribution of the gap year is in increased self-knowledge, confidence and independence rather than directly leading to a career choice. These findings are therefore valuable to psychologists, with a view to addressing expectations that clients may have regarding the gap year. Furthermore, the findings can guide psychologists to help their clients design a gap year that will be personally meaningful and beneficial.

The findings of the study can also be useful in parent guidance as a means to discuss and address issues of career indecision amongst school leavers. An increased understanding of the process of career decision-making and the contribution that the gap year makes to decision-making may equip parents to better understand their children's indecision when leaving school, as well as to support their children during a gap year.

5.8 CONCLUSION

The gap year is a growing phenomenon that is quickly becoming a part of many people's career paths. Due to the effects of globalisation it is easier for people to engage in gap years, and many young South Africans are joining this international trend to become part of the global village. The popularity of the gap year is growing, and therefore information about the gap year and the implications thereof is likely to form an important part of career counselling practice in the future.

However, expectations and misconceptions exist regarding the gap year, and for that reason continued research about it is important. This study aimed to address only one aspect of this very complex phenomenon, namely career decision-making.

Although the gap year can be seen as a valuable form of career exploration, it appears as though the true value of the gap year may be in the personal growth that it facilitates, the time it allows people to take before finalising their decisions, and its impact on career maturity. The gap year helps people to resolve their career indecision by providing opportunities to experience the world and to gain self-knowledge, thereby becoming more career mature. Because of this, upon completion the gap year empowers people to make a better informed career decision.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Template of consent form

APPENDIX B – LIFE-LINES

Anne's life-line

Beth's life-line

Carl's life-line

APPENDIX C - COLLAGES

Anne's Collage

Beth's Collage

Carl's Collage

APPENDIX D – ETHICAL CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

TEMPLATE OF CONSENT FORM

INVESTIGATING THE IMPACT OF THE GAP YEAR ON CAREER DECISION-MAKING

3 March 2006

Dear Participant,

As part of my Masters degree in Educational Psychology, I am investigating the gap year, and the impact that taking a gap year has on career decision-making. I would herewith like to invite you to participate in this study. This research looks to explore what you experienced during the gap year and aims to get an in-depth understanding of your gap year and how this has influenced your career decision-making.

Your participation in this research project is voluntary and confidential. You may decide to withdraw at any stage should you wish not to continue to participate in the research. You will not be asked to reveal any information that will allow your identity to be established by people who read the research.

As a research participant, you will be asked to:

- Create a life-line;
- take part in an interview; and
- create a collage.

This will take place over 2 meetings and will take approximately 4 hours of your time. I will provide guidance and materials for all of these activities. It would also be necessary for you to be available for a follow up meeting to discuss the research findings, to ensure that I am giving an accurate account of your opinions, views and feelings. This would take approximately 2 hours.

The discussions and interviews would be tape-recorded for research purposes.

The results from this study will be submitted to the University of Pretoria in the form of a mini-dissertation, as part of the requirements for the Masters degree in Educational Psychology.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please sign this letter as a declaration of your consent, i.e. that you participate in this project willingly and that you understand that you may withdraw from the research project at any time. Participation in the first phase of the project does not obligate you to participate in follow up individual interviews, however, should you decide to participate in follow-up interviews your participation is still voluntary and you may withdraw at any time. Under no circumstances will the identity of interview participants be made known to others.

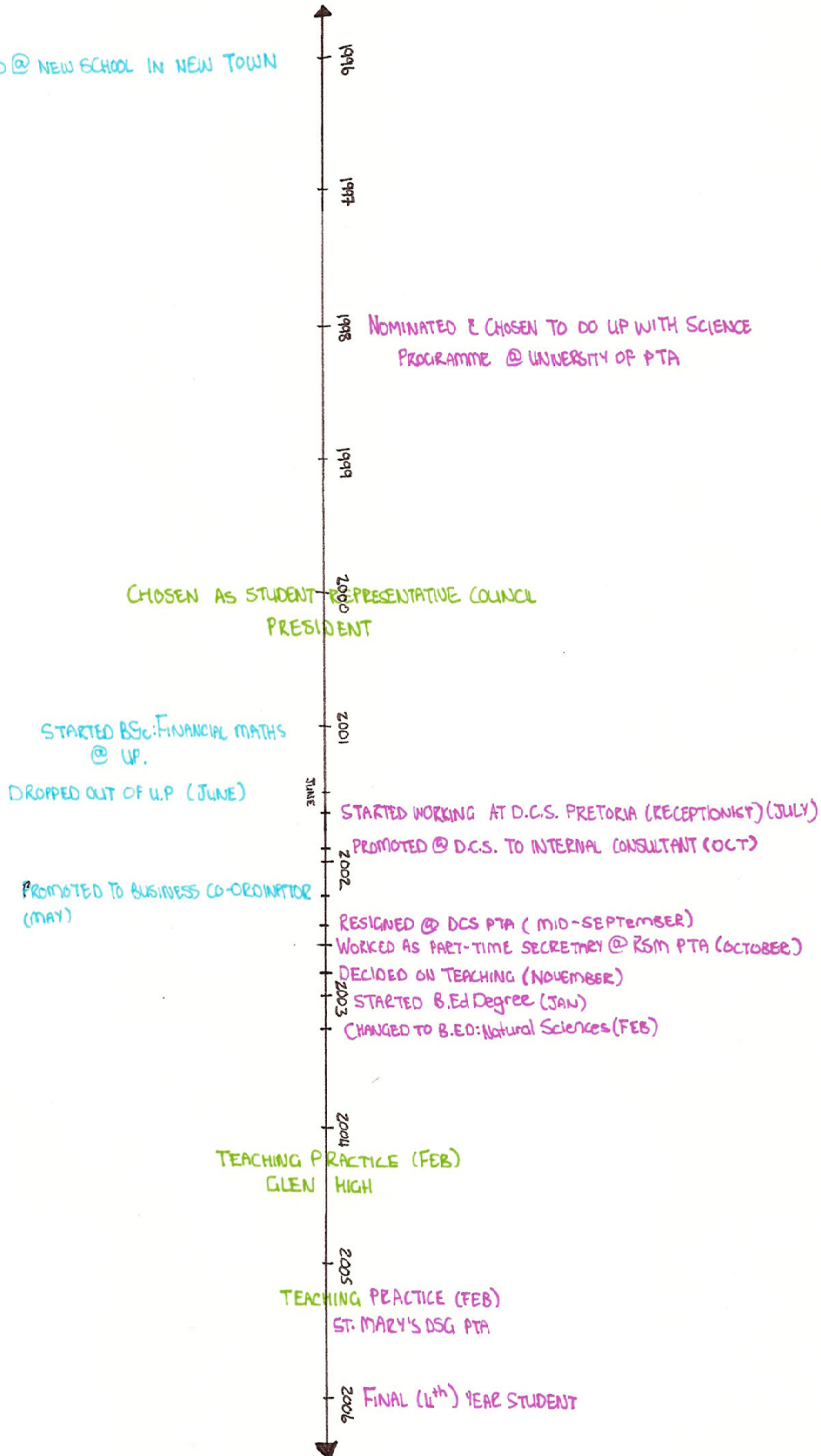
Participant's signature: Date:

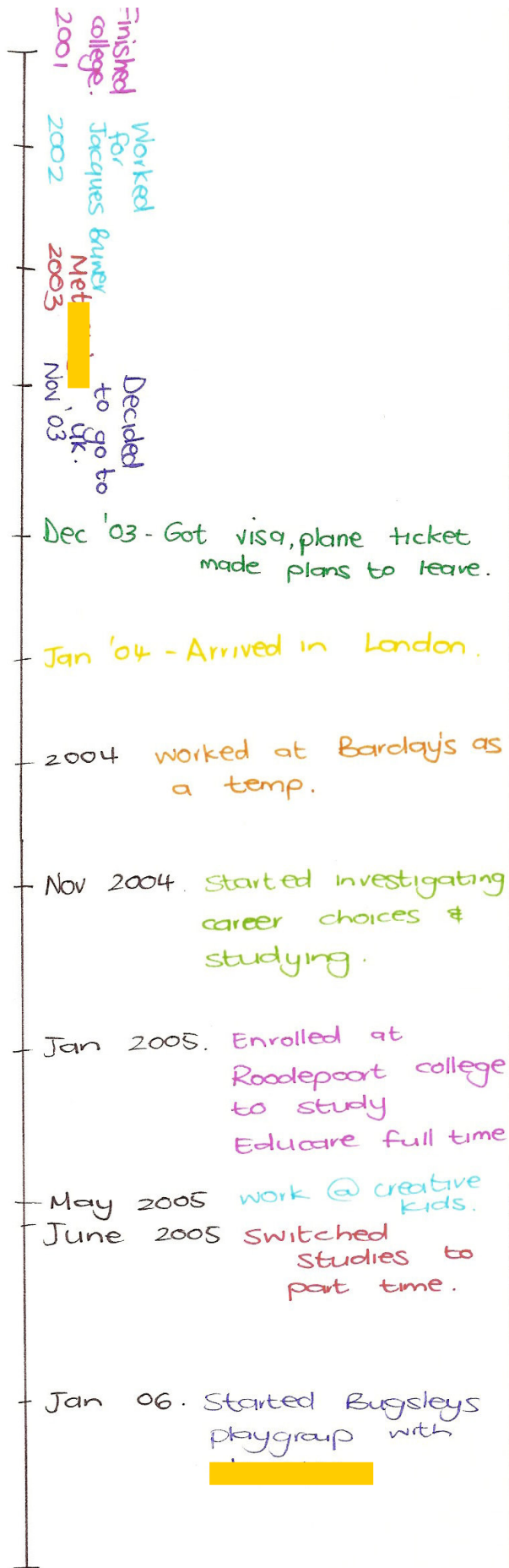
Researchers signature: Date:

Yours Sincerely

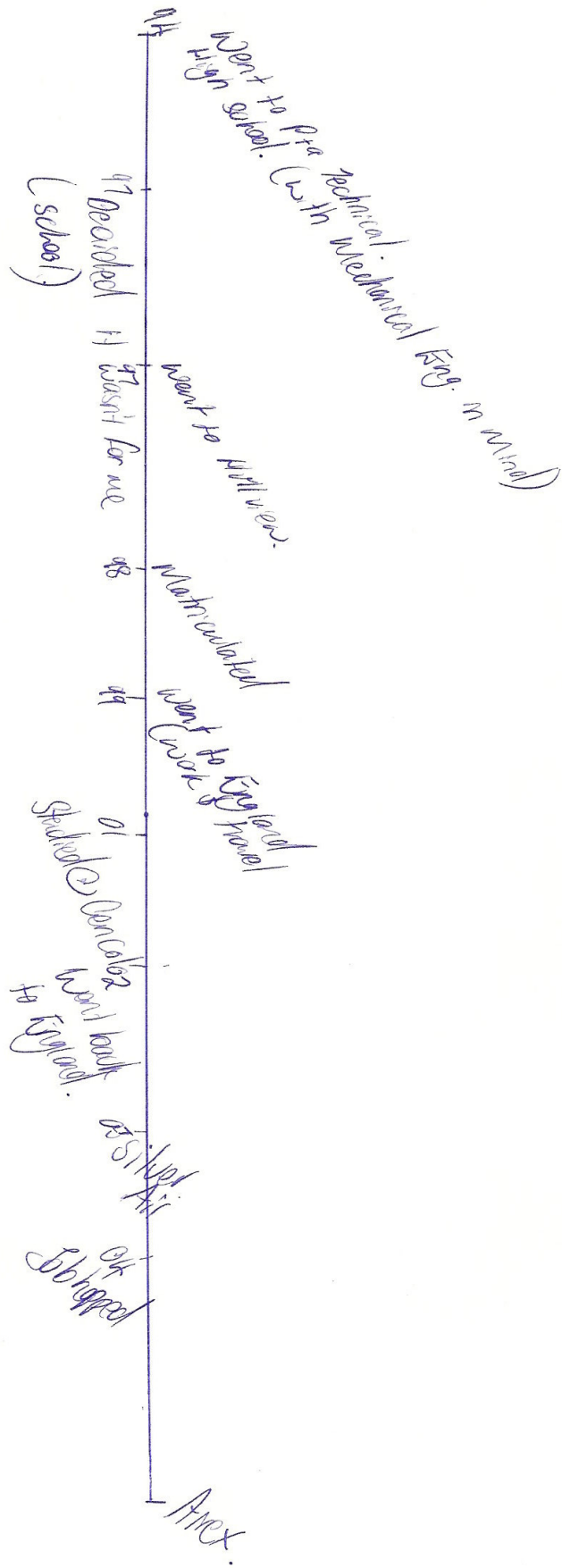
Melinda Coetzee

STARTED @ NEW SCHOOL IN NEW TOWN





APPENDIX B:
CARL'S LIFE-LINE





APPENDIX C: ANNE'S COLLAGE

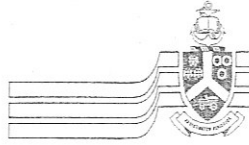


APPENDIX C: BETH'S COLLAGE



APPENDIX C: CARL'S COLLAGE

APPENDIX D: ETHICAL CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE



UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
FACULTY OF EDUCATION
RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

CLEARANCE NUMBER : EP06/03/04

DEGREE AND PROJECT

M.Ed Educational Psychology

An Investigation of the impact of the gap year on career decision-making

INVESTIGATOR(S)

Melinda Coetzee

DEPARTMENT

Educational Psychology

DATE CONSIDERED

22 March 2006

DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE

APPROVED

This ethical clearance is valid for 2 years from the date of consideration and may be renewed upon application

**CHAIRPERSON OF ETHICS
COMMITTEE**

Dr C Lubbe

DATE

22 March 2006

CC

Dr. S.E. Bester

Mrs Jeannie Beukes

This ethical clearance certificate is issued subject to the following conditions:

1. A signed personal declaration of responsibility
2. If the research question changes significantly so as to alter the nature of the study, a new application for ethical clearance must be submitted
3. It remains the students' responsibility to ensure that all the necessary forms for informed consent are kept for future queries.

Please quote the clearance number in all enquiries.