CHAPTER TWO

EPISTEMOLOGY AND THEORY

Introduction

In this chapter I outline the basic epistemological and theoretical underpinnings of the dissertation, which are postmodern, social constructionist and ecosystemic in nature. This is an important starting point, as these underpinnings form the foundation on which this research project is based. In order to understand this research project, its premises, design and methodology, the reader needs to understand what view of the world the author adopts.

In this chapter I explore the concept of epistemology. I explain that the epistemological foundations of this paper sprang from both the theoretical perspectives adopted by myself as the author of this text and my personal life experience. I discuss how postmodernism challenges traditional views of reality. I attempt to show how postmodernism, and constructivism and social constructionism as branches of postmodernism, have similarities and differences in their perspectives on the world. I explain how, within the domain of psychology, ecosystemic theory flourished along with the rise of postmodernism. I then outline the basic tenets of ecosystemic theory, and give a comparison of how these tenets are similar to postmodernist social constructionism.

Epistemology

Bateson (1979) defines epistemology as:
A branch of science combined with a branch of philosophy. As science, epistemology is the study of how particular organisms or aggregates of organisms know, think and decide. As philosophy, epistemology is the study of necessary limits and other characteristics of the processes of knowing, thinking and deciding (p. 242).

Often the word “epistemology” is assumed to be a synonym for “paradigm” and “world view”. There are, however, fundamental differences between these concepts (Dell, 1982). According to Auerswald (1985), a paradigm refers to “a subset of rules that define a particular segment of reality” (p. 1). “Epistemology” means a paradigm of paradigms, or a metaparadigm, which is a theory of knowledge. Epistemology therefore functions at a metalevel and allows us to understand how we understand our experiences in the world (Keeney, cited in Oosthuizen, 2002). Guba (cited in Marovic, 2000) refers to epistemology as being on a continuum between subjectivism and objectivism, which refers to “the relationship between the knower and the knowable” (p. 14).

According to Guba (cited in Marovic, 2000), at the objectivist end of this continuum one finds the logical-positivist epistemology, where the observer’s descriptions are seen as value free and the observer is separate from the observed. A “post-positivist epistemology” (Guba, cited in Marovic, 2000, p. 14) is found somewhere around the middle of the continuum, and is a kind of “modified objectivism”, where the observer is seen to influence that which is observed. The observer is not separate from the observed, and therefore cannot be wholly objective. At the subjectivist (or postmodern, constructivist) end of the continuum, observer and observed are regarded as inseparable. The observer constructs that which is observed, and an independent reality “out there”
does not exist. Instead, many different realities exist simultaneously, as each person creates these through his or her individual perceptions, senses and cognitions.

The subjectivist or “relativist” position sees reality as relational and contextual. No objective reality exists outside of each person’s constructions of that reality (Parker, 1998). The objectivist, or “realist”, position is that there is one objective reality which exists “out there”, which can be measured. These different positions along the continuum can be seen as different epistemologies.

If epistemology operates at a meta-level of “how we know what we know” about our experiences, then epistemology is the process of how one understands one’s understandings about one’s experiences in the world. The idea that one’s experience in life contributes to the formation of one’s personal epistemology lies at the heart of this dissertation. Accordingly, epistemology is more than an adequate integration of existing theory into a framework of understanding. It is an integration of personal experience and relevant theory as an explanation of how one comes to understand and know one’s world. In addition, through reflecting on how, as a researcher, one affects what knowledge is constructed, one has the ethical responsibility to become aware of one’s own epistemological basis of knowing the world.

A personal epistemology forms through the process of coming to know and understand one’s world. According to Keeney (1983), the first step in understanding one’s own epistemology is to realise that we draw distinctions, or make punctuations, when we describe something. “An observer observes by drawing distinctions. In other words, what we perceive always flows from an act of making a distinction” (Keeney,
If we can understand how someone comes to make distinctions or punctuate experiences, then we begin to understand that person’s epistemology.

Therefore, a fundamental aspect and beginning point of any dissertation is to present the author’s personal epistemology, as it explains the basis on which the research is built, what assumptions are made, and then why some aspects are chosen to explore in the research, and not others.

This research topic was chosen, therefore, through a process of this author’s own experience of training in clinical psychology, and of experiences prior to that training, which all came together to create an interest in how experience is not described by language, but rather how the language used to describe the experience actually forms the experience itself. How this experience is influenced by and, in turn, influences various discourses (as social constructions), which can operate to maintain the positions of people in relation to each other, for example, trainees in relation to trainers, is also a point of focus which is discussed further on in this chapter.

Postmodernism, social constructionism and ecosystemic theory, therefore, become the appropriate frameworks which create, and are created by, the various life experiences of the author, as these assumptions have a better “fit” with the personal assumptions of the author than those of any other epistemology. In addition, postmodern, social constructionist, ecosystemic theory is the explicit context of training presented at the University of South Africa (Unisa). Accordingly, it is the postmodern, social constructionist, ecosystemic perspective that this dissertation adopts. In this manner, theory and personal experience can be integrated into a coherent whole, and some
understanding can be reached as to why specific choices were made in the process of conducting this research project.

Postmodernism

Through the ages, epistemologies about how the world is viewed have shifted and changed. Postmodernism evolved from modernism, or logical positivism, described earlier. However, even before modernism emerged, during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, romanticism was a dominant worldview. The romantic period focused on the deep interior world of the person, which was seen to exist beneath the conscious, reasoning mind, and emphasis was given to “unseen, even sacred forces that dwell deep within the person, forces that give life and relationships their significance” (Gergen, cited in Becvar & Becvar, 2000, p. 90).

Becvar and Becvar (2000) use the following words to describe the romantic period:

The language of passion, purpose, depth, and personal significance was used to speak of heroism, genius, inspiration, and love. Moral values and a sense of ultimate purpose in life characterized a world view that continues today to influence our descriptions of people and their behaviour (p. 90).

As the end of the nineteenth century drew to a close, however, a new era, in the form of modernism, made its entrance. Modernism adheres to philosophical assumptions rooted in the western, scientific tradition (Marovic, 2000). Also described as the logical-positivist paradigm, it dominated most fields of science, including psychology, for many years (Marovic, 2000). Compared with romanticism, this was a more pragmatic approach
that searched for an objective truth, which was believed to exist “out there” in reality and outside of our own minds. This search was conducted through “systematic observation and rigorous reasoning” (Becvar & Becvar, 2000, p. 90). It was assumed that reality can be objectively observed and described through language, in a faithful and unbiased manner (Fuks, 1998). Meaning was thought to derive from outside experiences that “happened to” the observer (Marovic, 2000). The world was seen in terms of cause and effect, as predictable and measurable. There was a focus on subject/object dualism and either/or dichotomies.

In the domain of psychology, the modernist influence led to a focus on the individual, and supported the belief that mind is separate from external reality and can be examined by the therapist, objectively and in isolation from that external reality (Becvar & Becvar, 2000). The psychological fraternity thus attempted to achieve credibility by producing scientific research data that were quantifiable and generalisable (Marovic, 2000).

 Appropriately, an empirical and quantitative research methodology was adopted by the scientific tradition (Marovic, 2000). This methodology assumes that the researcher can attain objectivity in measuring research phenomena. It is reductionism, determinist and depends on laws and a law-like external reality (Becvar & Becvar, 2000).

 Over time it became evident to some that more than one “reality” exists, and that there are different “realities” for different people. These “realities” also continually shift and change, as we move through different experiences in life, and as we interpret and re-interpret these experiences (Anderson, cited in Oosthuizen, 2002).
This realisation of reality as multi-dimensional and fluid led to the development of a “postmodernist” position which opposes the idea that knowledge is universal and objective (Lynch, 1997). What we know, or what we believe, is seen by the postmodernists as a construction of “the language, values and beliefs of the particular communities and contexts” in which we find ourselves (Lynch, 1997, p. 353). Thus postmodernism proposes that more than one account, description or meaning of anything is possible (Doan, 1997). In addition, it is assumed that different accounts or descriptions do not have equal validity as some are disrespectful of certain groups within societies and help to maintain and legitimise the subjugation and oppression of these groups of individuals, for example, the oppression of black people in South Africa during the apartheid era.

Postmodernism therefore heralded the notion of knowledge, understanding and experience as relative and relational. Knowledge is seen as informed by the historical and cultural situations in which we find ourselves, and the position we occupy within those situations. There is a focus on how reality is socially and linguistically constructed through an interrelationship with context and through “dialogic” interaction between people (Oosthuizen, 2002). Thus the multifaceted nature of reality comes to the fore, superseding the notion of a single reality that can be objectively observed. Many possible experiences and understandings of one thing can occur simultaneously. Although one particular version of these experiences and understandings may predominate, this depends on who is taking part, how they interact, and what their context is (Anderson, 1997; Freedman & Combs, 1996).
In tandem with the idea that experience, and therefore reality, is relative, comes the idea that reality is constructed by the act of observing. This idea is central to an epistemology which can be seen as a branch of postmodernism, namely, constructivism, the assumptions of which are now to be outlined.

Constructivism

Constructivism is often regarded as falling under the umbrella of postmodern thinking. It is in many ways similar to postmodernism, but there are some important differences between the two approaches.

According to the constructivist position, the observer gives meaning to that which is observed, and it is through this meaning that reality is constructed ((Jonassen; Von Foerster; Von Glasersfeld; Watzlawick; cited in Rapmund, 2000). Constructivism is therefore consistent with the postmodern view that there are many possible realities that occur simultaneously.

However, constructivism takes any person’s account as true, and as valid as any other person’s account, as long as it makes sense according to the context in which that person finds herself or himself. Constructivist thinking maintains that no one “truth” or “reality” exists, as each person’s interpretation has equal validity within a specific context (Dickerson & Zimmerman; Doan; cited in Rapmund, 2000). Constructivism therefore contrasts with postmodernism because the former sees all stories or interpretations as having equal validity, whereas the latter regards some stories as having greater validity than others (Rapmund, 2000). According to constructivism, we each live in and construct our own reality, and that reality is therefore equally true for each of us.
According to this view, we cannot refer to a “universe”, but must rather talk of a “multiverse of many equally valid observer-dependent realities” (Becvar & Becvar, cited in Marovic, 2000, p. 16). “The constructivist view excluded the effects of a dominant social reality that influences the creation of meaning” (Held, cited in Rapmund, 2000, p. 106). Constructivism aims to understand the manner in which many realities or interpretations are constructed, rather than searching for reality itself (Simon, Stierlin & Wynne, cited in Marovic, 2000).

Constructivism assumes we can only know our own construction of reality (Hoffman, cited in Marovic, 2000). We cannot know anything about reality other than our own experience of it. We experience the world as it is because of the manner in which we construct it through our perceptions, senses and cognitions. We are not aware of this process of construction, so reality appears to exist independently “out there” in the world (Von Glasersfeld, cited in Marovic, 2000). Constructivism maintains that knowledge develops as we order and organise our world through our experience of it, rather than that knowledge reflects an objective, ontological reality (Von Glasersfeld, cited in Marovic, 2000).

Constructivist thinking assumes that the act of observing affects that which is observed. Consequently, what is “known” through the observation tells us more about what the observer has constructed than about the “object” that has been observed (Von Foerster, cited in Marovic, 2000). The traditional modernist notion of knowledge as objective is therefore challenged. The notion of “observed systems” is replaced by the notion of “observing systems” (Keeney, 1983). There is a move towards “the inevitable
ethical responsibility for what is invented and a focus on how the observer participates in the observed” (Valkin, 1994, p. 27).

So if a description of what is observed tells us more about the observer than about the observed, knowledge cannot be value-free and reality is seen as a construction. This leads to a “consciousness of construction which implies continuous reflexivity. Self-referentiality is intrinsic to our experience of reality and implies that the observer is part of the observed. This entails “‘knowing about one’s knowing’ and this is always a recursive process” (Keeney, cited in Valkin, 1994, p. 27).

Another branch of postmodernism is that of social constructionism, which is in some ways similar to, and in other ways different from, both constructivism and postmodernism.

Social Constructionism

Constructivists assume that an individual’s reality and the meaning of that reality are constructed through his or her own senses, cognitions and perceptions. Social constructionism takes this idea further to propose that an individual’s reality derives from meanings that develop within a historical, social and community context (Dickerson & Zimmerman, cited in Rapmund, 2000). Constructivism assumes that all constructed realities have equal validity, whereas social constructionism proposes that some realities are regarded and constructed as being more valid than others. Social constructionism also focuses on how language creates reality, and assumes that “we live with each other in a world of conversational narrative, and we understand ourselves and each other through changing stories and self descriptions” (Anderson & Goolishian, cited in Hart, 1995, p. 184). Constructivism does not take into account the role of language in the process of
creating meaning, nor the possibility that broader social networks contribute to that process.

In this way, the social constructionist position is similar to that of postmodernity, which assumes that all knowledge and understanding of the world develop through language and social interaction. Traditionally, the process of psychological inquiry focused only on the individual, but now social, political and economic considerations are taken into account in assessing an individual’s psychological makeup, which includes that person’s understandings and experiences of the world (Anderson; Gergen; Gergen & Davies; cited in Oosthuizen, 2002).

Social constructionism focuses specifically on the normative narratives, or larger societal discourses, which both inform and are informed by the meanings people attach to their reality. These discourses are often the yardstick against which people measure themselves and each other. Social discourses “are supported by the weight of numbers, tradition, and firmly entrenched by power structures” (Doan, 1997, p. 130). The “dominating analogies or interpretive frameworks” (Becvar & Becvar, 1996, p. 303) that exist in society organise and dictate what meanings are constructed by the individual. The concept of discourse is further explored in Chapter Four.

Social constructionism assumes that people’s personal realities and stories are often subjugated, denied and pathologised by the dominant discourses that exist in society. In this way, people begin to think about themselves in ways that are problem-saturated. They compare themselves with idealised roles or ways of relating to each other, which have been formed by these dominant discourses. Language is then seen as binding people in place, influencing them to think about themselves in certain ways, and
not others (Oosthuizen, 2002). Accordingly, knowledge is assumed by social constructionists to be power, as “cultural specifications” (Dickerson & Zimmerman, 1996, p. 80) are seen to strongly influence people’s lives.

Social constructionism, therefore, shares two basic premises with postmodern thinking: first, that language plays a role in the process of meaning-making, and second, that relationships are a central point of focus. These ideas are now discussed in greater detail.

*The Role of Language in the Process of Meaning-Making*

The modernist paradigm sees language as “a neutral, transparent medium, describing events or revealing underlying psychological processes in a more or less direct, unproblematic way” (Breakwell, Hammond & Fife-Schaw, 1997, p. 244). Postmodernism and social constructionism propose that meaning is created by the language we use to describe an experience, rather than that language simply reflects some inner experience (Anderson, cited in Oosthuizen, 2002). Language is seen as the means whereby we create meaning out of our experiences and make sense of our lives. It is seen, not as a representation of the world, but rather as constructing that world (Oosthuizen, 2002).

Both postmodernism and social constructionism assume that the meaning created through language is “fluid and provisional” rather than “static and fixed” (Breakwell et al., 1997, p. 243). The way we experience and come to know and understand our world is ever changing; the world is formed as we create it in the moment of collaborative social discussion. So language and the meaning that is created through it are viewed as an
“active and interactive process” (Oosthuizen, 2002, p. 6). Davies and Harre (cited in Oosthuizen, 2002) expand on these ideas when they talk of positioning theory, which assumes that both the discussion around a topic and the position adopted by participants in that discussion help to create the meaning around that topic. Accordingly, this dissertation explores how the hierarchical positioning of trainees and trainers mutually influences the meanings of their experience in clinical training. It is hypothesised that if this hierarchical arrangement between trainer and trainee is in fact explicitly denied by the trainers (even though trainees experience it as implicitly existing), this may contribute to an experience of confusion, powerlessness and double bind for trainees and an experience of power and control for trainers.

Language is therefore considered, in both the postmodernism and the social constructionism approaches, as playing an active role in fulfilling social functions by helping to construct individual and social realities (Gergen & Davies, cited in Oosthuizen, 2002). Language is not, therefore, a neutral medium which merely reflects “reality”. If reality is constructed through language, then meaning, experience and understanding are also a product of the language used to describe it. McNamee and Gergen (cited in Oosthuizen, 2002) propose that language actually limits and constrains peoples’ constructions of their world and themselves.

Focus on Relationships

Postmodernism and social constructionism focus on networks of relationships, rather than on the individual herself or himself. It follows that there is an interactional process through which meaning, knowledge and ideas are created. It is, therefore, only
through our experiences in relationship with others, that we form a sense of self and know that we exist (McNamee & Gergen, 1992).

In addition, postmodernism and social constructionism assume that the understandings and experiences we formulate about ourselves and the world are informed by the positions we adopt in relation to one another (Frankenburg, cited in Oosthuizen, 2002). In the context of training in clinical psychology at Unisa, therefore, the meanings attached to being a trainee are dependent on the meanings attached to being a trainer, and vice versa. Furthermore, the meanings around being a trainee are informed by the meanings of what a trainee is not. According to Keeney (cited in Oosthuizen, 2002), this conceptualisation can be linked to Bateson’s ideas of “difference”, which propose that a thing is only known and understood because it is different from another thing. For example, the concept of black is only known because it is different from, or opposite to, the concept of white. One forms a sense of identity through comparing how one differs from others. In this way, one adopts a particular position in relation to others, which informs and is informed by socially constructed meanings, and which affects and is affected by our experience of ourselves and the world. This position is not, however, fixed. It moves as aspects of our interactions change (Davies & Harre, cited in Oosthuizen, 2002). Relationships are therefore influenced by the meanings created through language (Anderson, cited in Oosthuizen, 2002).

This dissertation attempts to focus on how contexts (explicit and implicit) of training inform trainees’ experience and understanding of themselves and their training, and how the positions that trainees adopt in relation to the trainers influence the meanings and understandings of that experience. It is assumed that these positions involve
hierarchical roles, with trainers adopting a dominant, more powerful position in relation to trainees. It is, however, hypothesised that this hierarchy is not overtly acknowledged, but in fact denied, and that this leads to an inconsistency between the explicit and implicit contexts of learning for trainees, and contributes to an experience of confusion and powerlessness for them.

As postmodernism, constructivism and social constructionism emerged in people’s general thinking, so a similar shift occurred in the domain of psychology. There was a move away from the traditional, intra-psychic and individualistic focus to an ecosystemic way of working with people.

Ecosystemic Theory

Along with the rise of postmodernism in the general thinking of the time, a new theory flourished within the domain of psychology – namely, ecosystemic theory. Like postmodernism and social constructionism, ecosystemic thinking looks towards relationships as a central aspect of how to understand the world. Specifically, ecosystemic thinking considers that patterns of behaviour that develop within relationships should be a point of focus (Becvar & Becvar, 2000). Linear cause and effect are thought to be only a part of the bigger picture of reciprocal causality, recursion and shared responsibility. The context of relationship becomes central, and in this context individuals are seen to affect each other’s behaviour in a circular, reciprocal manner. Ecosystemic theory describes what is happening now in the relationship between individuals, and what patterns of interaction occur in the relationship. In other words, ecosystemic theory focuses on the processes that give meaning to the context. Subjectivity is seen to be inevitable, as the observer becomes a part of the reality she or
he is describing. Reality and meaning are seen as being constructed through each person’s individual perceptions, understandings and experiences (Becvar & Becvar, 2000).

Ecosystemic epistemology provides a psychological understanding of an “ecological relationship system” which is made up of the “identified patient, symptom, therapist, and larger social context” in an “informational network of human relationships” (Keeney, cited in Coale, 1994, p. 7). This reveals a shift in psychology from thinking about how to apply resources structurally to self-contained family systems in treatment, to thinking systemically about the broader context within which a family finds itself, which includes the therapeutic system, other relevant helping systems and the broader social ecology (Coale, 1994).

Ecosystemic theory is similar to postmodern social constructionism in that it focuses on language as informing the construction of meaning. A system (be it familial, therapeutic or societal) is no longer regarded simply as a group of people, but rather as an “ecology of ideas” that has formed through a linguistic process between people (Bogdan; Hoffman; cited in Coale, 1994).

Thus the “stories” of clients became important in ecosystemic therapy, as therapists listened to the dominant discourses, which were often problem-saturated. It was thought that these problematic discourses could be deconstructed, and that the therapist could co-create a reconstruction of alternative stories that could facilitate hope and change. This change process was seen to occur through the transformation of meaning in a client’s world (White, cited in Coale, 1994). This approach aimed to bring to the surface many of the non-dominant stories that clients held about themselves, which
had previously been overshadowed by the dominant stories that told the tales of their problems in life. These non-dominant discourses were seen to contain the possibility of empowering clients and amplifying their ability to solve their own problems.

Ecosystemic theory sees the therapist as a “collegial co-creator of new stories – a neutral guide in the exploration of possibilities” (Hoffman, cited in Coale, 1994, p. 7). The meanings that the therapist brings are no longer regarded as separate from the system of meaning that is constructed in therapy, but rather as an integral part of it (Coale, 1994).

These ideas can be applied to the theme of this dissertation, the aim of which is to reveal the implicit discourse of hierarchy and power relations in training, through the process of interviewing. In addition, the interview process is hoped to facilitate the construction of an alternative discourse which identifies the experience of inconsistency between explicit and implicit contexts of learning for trainees, and the feelings of confusion and powerlessness that go along with that experience. The aim of this construction of an alternative discourse is to create a different understanding of training for trainees, and to facilitate a sense of empowerment, personal agency and liberation for them.

Conclusion

The concept of epistemology, and how it forms a basis for this research paper, have been highlighted in this chapter. The author’s personal epistemology is considered an important factor in influencing the premises, design and methodology of this research. This personal epistemology is seen as having been formed through theoretical foundations and personal experience, and must be revealed if the reader is to fully
understand this dissertation. Postmodern, constructivist and social constructionist epistemologies have been outlined, along with their differences and similarities. It is acknowledged that a postmodern, social constructionist stance has been adopted in this text.

The aim of this chapter was to present personal ideas and theoretical concepts documented in the literature, in a clear, concise and cohesive manner. The ideas thus presented were formed through a process of constructing certain understandings. It was through reading certain sources, and not others, as well as having certain conversations, and not others, that the “reality” of this chapter was constructed. This “reality” could be altered should other texts be read and other conversations engaged in. This alteration could be an ongoing process, which has been halted only by the practical constraints of having to deliver a “finished” product in the form of a bound text, within a given period of time (Oosthuizen, 2002).

As the author is operating within a postmodern, social constructionist and ecosystemic epistemology, it must be acknowledged that the process of writing this chapter has been a critically reflexive one. There has been an attempt to remain aware of what meanings have been produced through language around certain understandings and experiences in the world. Meaning has been seen to change according to the context and relationships one finds oneself in. There has been an attempt to understand what functions are fulfilled by one’s own “languaging”. The meanings of words have not been taken for granted, and there has been a focus on how the reality of this text is constructed by these words.
The next chapter provides a review of relevant literature around key ideas that have shaped this dissertation, namely explicit and implicit contexts; double bind theory; and general experiences of trainees in training. It provides another view of the context of meaning constructed in this research paper.