

## **Chapter Four**

### **EPISTEMOLOGY AND METHODOLOGY**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, the epistemological framework for this study will be presented and the methodological paradigm outlined. Firstly, the researcher will begin with a brief explanation of postmodernism as an ontology, which prescribes the nature of reality. Thereafter, social constructionism as an epistemology, which specifies the nature of the relationship between the researcher and the study, will be described followed by a discussion of how social constructionism informs the present study. Then, the focus will shift to the actualisation of the epistemological assumptions through the chosen methodology for this study. This will entail an explanation of the chosen research paradigm, namely qualitative research, and a discussion of the correlation between the epistemology and the research paradigm. Thereafter, the characteristics of qualitative research and how these relate to the proposed study will be clarified. This will include a discussion on reliability and validity, the roles of participant and researcher, sampling and selection, data collection, and the interpretation of the stories through thematic content analysis.

#### **Postmodernism**

Scientific investigation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has predominantly been informed by modernism. At the core of modernism is the belief in a 'knowable' world out there that is governed by universal laws, which can reveal absolute 'truths' about the world (Auerswald, 1987; Fox, 1993). In addition, modernism asserts that the world can be understood, controlled, and predicted (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). In order to be accepted by the scientific community, research in the human sciences predominantly followed these principles. It concerned itself with the development of logical and empirical methods involving quantification, statistical inference, and controlled experimentation to test hypotheses, which generated results that were

objective and measurable (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). The aim was to discover generalisable laws to explain and predict human behaviour. However, over time, it became apparent that psychological investigation was unsuccessful in generating a collectively accepted account of human behaviour (Durrheim, 1997). Instead, various explanations were produced that were all supported by empirical observation and attained by scientific methods (Doan, 1997; Durrheim, 1997). With the presence of multiple 'truths', all having sufficient scientific basis for being accepted as *the* 'truth', the postmodern era was thus born (Doan, 1997). Postmodernism presents us with a radically different way of looking at life and 'reality', where we no longer think of ourselves as living in a *universe* but rather a *multiverse*. Postmodernists argue that an objective, universal, knowable 'truth' is a myth. All that has been found in the search for 'truth' are 'truths' that are only convincing within a particular time and culture. Thus, claims of knowing *the* 'truth' is an illusion. Instead, knowledge is understood to be "an expression of the language, values and beliefs of the particular communities and contexts" we live in (Lynch, 1997, p. 353).

Postmodernists replace the belief in 'truth' with the acknowledgment of valid perspectives that are embedded in an evolving context (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). In recognising the presence of perspectives, postmodernism consequently challenges the dominant authorities of knowledge, those "singular, totalising account[s] that claim to contain the whole truth and nothing but the truth" (Doan, 1997, p. 129) that result in the suppression of alternate perspectives. Postmodernists believe that when people are treated with the kind of 'objectivity' of the modernist perspective, they are regarded as objects, which dehumanises their experiences and ignores the specific meanings of the individual person (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). Thus, where modernist thinkers concern themselves with facts, postmodernists are concerned with the search for meaning and the comprehension of experiences.

Within the philosophy of postmodernism, lies the epistemology of social constructionism, which guides the researcher's thoughts and actions in the pursuit

of that which can be known and understood. The principles of the chosen epistemology for this study and the manner in which they correspond with the study will now be clarified.

### **Social Constructionism**

Social constructionism as a postmodern approach is founded on the belief that “we socially construct reality by our use of shared and agreed meanings communicated via language; that is, that our beliefs about the world are social inventions” (Berger & Luckman, cited in Speed, 1991, p. 400). The world within which we exist, is governed by institutions that are socially constructed by its members over many generations. These institutions are our society or culture and they establish the beliefs, practices, customs, and words that direct our behaviour and give expression to our experiences. Therefore, reality is subjective since it is viewed through the lenses that are bestowed on us by our culture. As Crotty (1998, p. 53) describes, “[c]ulture is best seen as the source rather than the result of human thought and behaviour”.

Constructionists believe that we make sense of our experience through constructions of meaning. However, the words of Karl Marx (cited in Owen, 1992), “social existence determines consciousness”, reflect the influence that culture or the social environment has on a person’s knowledge or meaning making. Therefore, it is through our *relationships* with each other and with the established institutions that the meaning of our experiences is born (Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1985).

#### The Basic Tenets of Social Constructionism

- The notion of a single, universal reality is replaced with the view that **multiple realities** are possible since ‘reality’ is subjectively constructed and language is the primary tool in that construction (Becvar & Becvar, 2003).

- The **languages** of our culture, that is the verbal and visual signs we use to represent the world to ourselves, construct what we think of as 'real' in our everyday existence. Thus, our sense of self – who we are, how we think of ourselves, as well as how we see and interpret the world and give ourselves meaning in it – is subjectively constructed through language (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988; Burr, 1995).
- **Knowledge** is understood through the use of language in conversation and the **meaning** that is created. However, it is viewed as ambiguous and perspectival as it is "an expression of the language, values and beliefs of the particular communities and **contexts**" we live in (Lynch, 1997, p. 353). However, social constructionism is critical of knowledge that is **taken-for-granted**, since knowledge is sustained through social processes, which are constantly changing (Doan, 1997).
- There is a movement away from the individual self towards a **relational self**. From this perspective, the self is no longer regarded as unique, unified, and autonomous since a person's sense of identity is constructed by the forces of the surrounding culture (Harre, cited in Owen, 1992).

It can be seen from the basic tenets above that social constructionism is consistent with postmodern thinking in the following ways. Firstly, the social constructionist view that multiple realities are possible is consistent with the postmodern idea of a multiverse, in that, if reality is socially constructed, multiple constructions are possible as well as multiple perspectives of this constructed reality. Secondly, the critical stance within social constructionism, which is taken with knowledge that is taken-for-granted, fits with the postmodern view that cautions us against accepting knowledge that is presented as "the whole truth and nothing but the truth" (Doan, 1997, p. 129), which results in the suppression of alternate perspectives. Lastly, both social constructionism and postmodernism are concerned with understanding, which is created through the meaning that is generated from lived experience.

### Exploring the Basic Tenets Further

By grounding knowledge in the joint activities of people and in what is created in these activities, such as communication, social constructionism attends to the relationship between words and the world. According to Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999, p. 149), “[l]anguage helps to construct reality”, through our interactions and conversations with others. This is possible because when the meaning of a word is agreed upon; a description is agreed upon too. However, this description will influence future descriptions, which in turn will direct our perception towards making certain descriptions and away from other descriptions (Burr, 1995). Thus, our language directs us in how we see the world and assists in generating the **meaning** we attach to experiences (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988).

Meanings are the descriptions of what the world represents and according to Anderson and Goolishian (1988, p. 372),

[w]e cannot arrive at or have meaning or understanding until we take communicative action, that is, engage in some meaning-generating discourse or dialogue, within a system for which the communication has reference.

In this view, language is essentially a shared activity, which is essential in the negotiation of understanding, where the study of knowledge becomes the study of the active use of language in human behaviour (Gergen, 1985).

The meaning of words and actions are contextually bound against an inherited social background (Shotter, cited in Bem & Looren de Jong, 1997). Thus, the language we use describes the culture of meaning we come from in that there is an agreed upon understanding of specific words. For example, the meaning of the word ‘divorce’ is defined by its established meaning within the context of society as the dissolution of marriage. However, the established meaning of the language that is utilised to describe experiences cannot describe fully the meaning that is

created from individual experiences since personal experience is distinctive. Thus, the meaning of the word 'divorce' is further defined by its use within a particular contextual situation, that is, for the spouse it may mean the leaving of a partner or lover but for the child it may mean the absence of a parent. Therefore, the **context** within which the meaning of lived experience is created thus becomes integral in the understanding of reality through the use of language (Burr, 1995). That is, the meaning is not generated in a word by itself, but by the word in relation to its context, and no two contexts will be exactly the same. Thus, the meaning of words are indefinite and negotiated between people in dialogue.

If meaning is generated within a particular context, and no two contexts are the same, then meaning is not static and can thus evolve. Furthermore, since meanings are developed through social interaction, the generation of new meanings is possible through the interactions and relationships we hold with other people (Gergen, 1997). Therefore, in being open to communication, we are confronted with other people's experiences and understanding through conversation. Lax (1992, p. 75) defines conversation as "any interaction between people in which there is some 'shared space' and there is mutual interaction within this space". Therefore, as a result of conversations, alternative meanings can be discovered, which can transform our understandings of our own meanings, thereby shifting our realities. The possibility that realities can be shifted through interactions between individuals highlights the notion that reality is **co-created** between people in relation to each other within a particular context (Gergen, 1988). That is, the emphasis on understanding is shifted from the individual to the process of co-constructing understanding.

Our realities are constructed in relationships with 'others', which includes the people and social institutions with which we engage. However, this construction also includes the understanding of ourselves (Becvar & Becvar, 2003; Gergen, 1985). As people, our daily existence is not experienced in isolation but through our interactions with each other and the wider social environment. We attribute meaning to these experiences, which assist us in defining our ideals, interests, and

goals, which constitute ourselves. Thus, the social constructionist view of the **self** is predominantly relational and multiple, in that it is comprised of the connections we create and sustain with the people, experiences, and places that give our lives meaning (Harre, cited in Owen, 1992). However, each person has different experiences and the contexts in which they are embedded shift and change too, producing different definitions of the world. Thus, **multiple realities** are possible since our constructions of reality are based on the “unique combinations of heredity, experiences, [and] presuppositions” (Becvar & Becvar, 2003, p. 84). Through this unique combination, we construct our own reality, and thus our perception of this reality is constructed as well. Therefore, to understand another person’s worldview, one must attempt to understand how that world is perceived as well as the assumptions from which that perception is constructed.

If our reality is born in the language we use, then it is nurtured and passed on in the stories that we live and tell. According to White and Epston (cited in Becvar & Becvar, 2003), in our endeavours to make sense of life, we arrange our experiences so that we may arrive at a coherent account of ourselves and the world around us. The stories of our experiences provide us with a sense of continuity and meaning, and are relied upon for the interpretation of further experiences. However, as previously mentioned, our experiences are embedded within a context and the meaning that is created from our experiences is affected by the surrounding culture (Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1985). This is possible since in any culture, certain narratives become dominant over other narratives, which specify chosen ways of believing and behaving within the culture (White & Epston, cited in Speed, 1991). Thus, the dominant or **grand narratives** influence us to ascribe certain meanings to particular experiences and to treat others as relatively meaningless. The meaningless accounts become marginalised as they do not fit with or may challenge the grand narrative. Therefore, the focus of social constructionist inquiry is on the meaning or knowledge that is created against the backdrop of socially shared understandings, which become institutionalised as the norms “against which people measure and judge themselves” (Doan, 1997, p. 129). However, it is especially concerned with the stories and voices that are

traditionally silenced in favour of the grand narratives (Doan, 1997), since it is through the internalisation of the normative experience that the lived experience is in danger of being denied, thus resulting in the meaning being lost.

### **Social Constructionism and the Present Study**

Social constructionists prefer stories that are based on a person's lived experience – that is, his or her own voice, perception, and experiences – rather than on some domain of 'expert knowledge' (Doan, 1997, p. 130).

Punctuating from this, the present study is focussed on adolescents' lived experience and their perceptions of their parents' divorce. Through their own words, the researcher aimed to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences than has previously been achieved through studies that have been grounded in the modernistic perspective. Their stories are not intended to challenge the findings of previous studies but to illustrate the complexity of their experiences, which may have been lost in previous studies in the search for scientific 'truth'. Therefore, the emphasis is on human experience and not what is claimed to be the 'truth' or 'expert' knowledge.

Divorce has become a recognised social construct with established connotations and meanings. However, to associate the culturally dominant meaning of this word to all adolescents who have endured their parents' divorce would be an inaccurate representation of their individual experience. The meaning of the word 'divorce' as well as their experiences of their parents' divorce is established within a specific context and in the relationships between the adolescents and those they interact with. Since the contexts and the relationships cannot be alike, the meaning that is generated cannot be regarded as synonymous either. The meaning is unique and their construction of their reality is in essence a co-



constructed process as it is dependent on the interchange of ideas, words, and negotiated meanings in their relationships thus far. This process of co-construction has continued in the conversations with the researcher as the exchange of words and ideas between the adolescents and the researcher creates further meaning within the context of the research interview.

The aim of social constructionist inquiry is to deconstruct the grand narratives that subjugate others (Doan, 1997), thus this approach underlies this research. Amato and Keith (1991) speculate that due to the prevalence of divorce within Western society, it is no longer considered taboo. Thus, the children of divorce no longer feel ostracised because the structure of their family is different to the common nuclear family (Amato & Keith, 1991). However, it is possible that the pervasiveness of divorce has also desensitised Western society to the challenge that divorce continues to be for those who experience it, especially the children of divorce. Furthermore, their experiences seem to have been minimised to that of a statistical representative in the form of the current divorce rate. This study intends to question this notion by giving a detailed account of the trials that these children continue to face and to bring into awareness that these are not statistical representations but human lives that have been altered through choices not of their own.

A further grand narrative that is deconstructed in this research is that of the nuclear family. For various reasons, the structure of the family is changing, with families being characterised as blended families, single-parent families, or families comprised of extended family members. Despite the changes to the structure of the family, the nuclear family, namely, the presence of both the mother and the father, continues to be viewed as the norm by Western society and a necessity in the successful socialisation of adolescents. As a result, those adolescents whose families exist outside of the norms of society may be viewed as disadvantaged and at risk. However, the possibility does exist that these adolescents who are raised within these changing families do develop into well-adjusted adults, thereby challenging the grand narrative of the nuclear family and its value. This is

paradoxical in nature to the previous narrative. That is, the prevalence of divorce has generated acceptance of children from divorced families, although they are still considered by society to be outside of the 'norms' of an acceptable family.

Another dominant perception within the Western culture is that adolescents are *either* resilient *or* vulnerable to the adverse effects of their parents' divorce. However, Smith (1999, p. 155) believes

the vulnerabilities and resiliencies of individuals are not stand-alone components but are aspects that go into the totality of the living web, where a person can be *both* resilient *and* vulnerable simultaneously, depending on the context they are in.

Thus, since contexts change over time, what may have been resilience in one context can become vulnerability in another (Smith, 1999). Therefore, it may not be their parents' divorce that influences their ability to manage themselves but the contexts within which their parents' divorce is embedded. One such context is that of the grand narratives held by the wider society, which become institutionalised and accepted as the norms of society. If the grand narrative ascribes meaning to these adolescents' experiences that construes these adolescents as fundamentally ruined, any other meaning that they themselves ascribe to their experiences would be regarded as either meaningless or invalid. Thus, their experiences are subjugated in favour of the normative experiences, that is, the way they are supposed to experience their parents' divorce in order for them to be members of the wider social context. Therefore, their view of reality and as a result their view of themselves is constructed from the need to conform as opposed to their lived experience.

Early viewpoints within the literature on the developmental phase of Adolescence have described this phase as being tumultuous for both the adolescent as well as the parents of these adolescents. Although this view is changing, it is still strongly

held within Western society. It is this particular narrative that is challenged within this study, especially within the context of divorce. One cannot negate that the physical and emotional changes that adolescents experience throughout this phase of development do result in changes in behaviour, which impact on the parent-child relationship. However, it is often the case that parents are unaware of how to manage the changes in an age appropriate and effective manner. As a result, parents frequently continue to deal with adolescents as if they were still children, thus limiting their communication with them and not listening to what they have to say. This especially becomes problematic within the context of divorce, since treating adolescents as you would children disregards their increasing ability to understand what is happening around them as well as the gravity of their emotional experiences. It is possible that adolescents need to be communicated with in an age appropriate manner regarding the divorce and consulted on the changes that will impact on their lives, since they are not children and want to be acknowledged for the life experience they have thus far.

The notion of multiple realities is brought forth in this research in the expression of each adolescent's experience and the meaning that each creates from his or her experiences of his or her parents' divorce. Each story is entrenched in a particular context with distinctive relationships that contribute to shaping his or her perceptions of divorce and what it means to be the child of divorced parents. It is the differences and the similarities in these stories that give them equal authority with other stories and highlight the presence of multiple views of what reality is. As Crotty (1998, p. 43) describes, "[a] tree is likely to bear quite different connotations in a logging town, an artist's colony and a treeless slum".

In order to achieve the aims of this study, the appropriate research paradigm that complements the epistemological principles that guide the researcher needed to be selected.

## **Research Paradigms**

Neuman (1997, p. 62) defines a paradigm as "a basic orientation to theory and research". It is a set of beliefs that constitutes the researcher's ontology, epistemology, and methodology. Therefore, the research paradigm reflects the assumptions about the nature of reality, the relationship between the researcher and what can be known, and how the researcher can discover what there is to be known about reality (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). There are two basic research paradigms that can be utilised, namely, quantitative research and qualitative research.

The quantitative paradigm relies primarily on assumptions from the modernist approach to science, which emphasises universal laws of cause and effect and is grounded in the belief that reality consists of a world of objectively defined facts. It focuses on measuring the social world by reducing social phenomena to numbers so as to explain, predict and control human behaviour. Furthermore, the quantitative researcher is considered to be detached from the objects or variables being studied, thus allowing the results of the study to be objective and value-free (Durrheim, 1999a; Neuman, 1997).

Since it was not the intention of the researcher to quantify and explain adolescents' experience of their parents' divorce, it is evident that the quantitative research paradigm was unsuitable to achieve the aims of this study. Therefore, the qualitative research paradigm was selected as the research design for this study.

The qualitative research paradigm argues against the reductionist approach that quantitative research has towards human experience and thus "attempts to capture aspects of the social world for which it is difficult to develop precise measures expressed as numbers" (Neuman, 1997, p. 329). When we reduce people's words and experiences to statistical equations, we lose sight of the human side of social life. It is only when we study people qualitatively, that we get to know them personally and experience what they experience in their daily

struggles. Thus, qualitative research is established on the notion of understanding and describing rather than explaining human behaviour (Stiles, 1993). Furthermore, the information in qualitative research is not given meaning through numbers as in quantitative research. Instead, it is understood and given meaning through the researcher's interpretations, which is informed by the participants' interpretations of the world, their definitions and meaning of their experiences (Stiles, 1993).

According to Terre Blanche and Kelly (1999) and Stiles (1993), qualitative research is conducted in the settings where people's lives unfold such as their homes and neighbourhoods. Accordingly, the subjects of study are viewed holistically in the context of their past and the situations in which they find themselves. When experience is removed from the social context within which it occurred, the meaning and significance is distorted, thus it is critical to understand what came before to grasp the meaning that is attributed now. This implies that the same experience can have different meanings in different contexts, which is consistent with the notion of multiple realities within social constructionism.

Another defining feature of qualitative research is the researcher's relationship with the participants. To acquire meanings, the researcher must get close to and be involved with the participants who are being studied thus blurring the boundaries of objective observation (Poggenpoel, 1998). As a result, the researcher is involved in an inseparable relationship with the participants. Therefore, the meanings that are generated are co-created in the research relationship between the researcher and the participants, which are further co-created within a reality constructed by the researcher and the participants. The participants are thereby transformed from being the subjects of the inquiry to co-researchers of their own meaning.

### Qualitative Research and Social Constructionism

As previously stated, the choice of an appropriate research paradigm is not only based on the suitability of its methodological techniques but on its fit with the ontological and epistemological principles of the study. It can be seen from the description of qualitative research, that the defining features correspond with the basic principles of the guiding epistemology of social constructionism that has already been discussed. To summarise, these include the following:

- To understand people from their own frames of reference, that is, the representation of reality through the eyes of the participants.
- To make sense of **lived experiences** through the creation of **meanings**.
- That meaning can only be generated through the expression of **language** in a **dialogue** with others.
- That the meaning is created within a **context**, therefore, participants need to be viewed in the context of their past and present.
- That **reality** is **co-created** in the relationships we hold with others, which includes the participants' relationships with others as well as the participants' relationship with the researcher.
- The nature of the research process is **inter-subjective**, that is, the researcher influences and is influenced by the research.

Therefore, in this study, the participants' lived experiences and the meaning that they have created of their parents' divorce is co-created in the context of the research interview in the form of a dialogue, since "perception can only evolve within the cradle of communication" (Hoffman, 1993, p. 89). The researcher's understanding of their experiences is reflected in the researcher's re-construction of their stories, which takes into account the social context from where the participants' experience comes from and the relationships they hold with others in this context.

## **Characteristics of a Qualitative Research Design**

Moon, Dillon and Sprenkle (1990, pp. 359-362) outline certain characteristics of a high-quality qualitative research study. These characteristics and how they apply to the present study will now be discussed.

### Reliability and Validity

In any research study, whether it is quantitative or qualitative research, the quality of the study needs to be addressed. According to Neuman (1997), reliability and validity are important in social research because the phenomenon being studied is ambiguous and not always directly observable. In quantitative research, reliability questions the data or observations and validity questions the conclusions that are based on the data (Durrheim & Wassenaar, 1999; Neuman, 1997). In essence, research findings are evaluated upon their ability to accurately reflect the phenomenon being studied and if this can be repeated, it can then be assumed to be the 'truth'.

This perspective of reliability and validity is challenged by social constructionism, in that, social constructionists believe that accurate reflections of reality are impossible to attain since reality is constructed and perspectival (Durrheim & Wassenaar, 1999). Furthermore, the idea of something being 'true' because it is repeated is rejected in social constructionism since reality is embedded in contexts, which are continually changing, thereby producing differences that cannot be repeated (Durrheim & Wassenaar, 1999). From this, it could be assumed that from a social constructionist perspective, the concepts of 'reliability' and 'validity' should be discarded, as they are incompatible with the paradigm. However, there is an ethical responsibility of qualitative researchers to assess research since it is a representation of people's lived experiences. Furthermore, the research contributes to the knowledge basis that is gained regarding the topic of inquiry. Thus, any misrepresentation can lead to misunderstanding of the knowledge and the people it represents. Janesick (cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 393) agrees that qualitative research cannot be assessed upon the "trinity of

validity [and] reliability” in quantitative research, as it is the language of psychometrics. However, she does not suggest researchers disregard their importance. Instead, Janesick (cited in Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p. 393) suggests the concepts of validity and reliability be replaced with “language that more accurately captures the complexity and texture of qualitative research”.

Therefore, in qualitative research, reliability is replaced with *dependability*, which addresses the trustworthiness of the observations or data, and validity is replaced with *credibility*, which involves the trustworthiness of the interpretations (Durrheim & Wassenaar, 1999; Stiles, 1993). Stiles (1993) outlines a number of guidelines to assess the dependability and credibility of a research study, to ensure that the research produced is of a high standard and meaningful. Furthermore, these guidelines inform the reader about how the researcher arrived at the meanings and themes in the interpretations.

The guidelines for attaining dependability are the following (Stiles, 1993, pp. 602-607):

- “Disclosure of orientation” which relates to the researcher disclosing her theoretical epistemology, expectations for the study, and preconceptions.
- “Explication of social and cultural context”, which relates to the context of the investigation. This includes making the social and cultural context of the researcher and the participants explicit. Furthermore, it involves clarifying the reasons for conducting the research, since this has an influence on how the participants and their stories are viewed. In this study, the reasons for conducting the research were for academic purposes and to create a balance in the literature on the topic of study.
- “Description of internal processes of investigation” concerns the researcher’s internal processes or the impact of the research on the researcher. This has been achieved in this study by incorporating the researcher’s reflections on the investigation process for each story as well as the impressions each story had on the researcher.



- “Engagement with the material” necessitates that the researcher develops rapport and establishes trust with the participants. Furthermore, the researcher is required to immerse herself in the transcripts to gain an understanding of the world from the perspective of the participants. Techniques that have been used in this study that are suggested by Stiles (1993, pp. 604-605) to ensure intensive engagement were: reading and rereading the transcripts, excerpting key passages, and moving back and forth between excerpts and unabridged versions.
- “Iteration: Cycling between interpretation and observation” which refers to a continual process of being a part of and apart from the process of interpretation.
- “Grounding of interpretations” entails linking the context and the content of the interviews or stories to the interpretations. This has been accomplished by linking the themes that were identified with excerpts from the transcripts.
- “Ask ‘what’ not ‘why’” questions, which grounded the participants’ experiences in the context in which they occurred. The value of ‘what’ questions is in their ability to generate richer descriptions of the meanings created by the participants.

The guidelines for ensuring credibility are the following (Stiles, 1993, pp. 608-613):

- “Triangulation”, which according to Kelly (1999, p. 430) refers “to the use of multiple perspectives against which to check one’s own position”. This was achieved by including a comprehensive description of the existing literature, the perspectives of each participant, and by engaging in a dialogue with the supervisor of the research.
- “Coherence” relates to the quality of fit of the interpretation with the experiences of the participants, as well as between the interpretations and the intentions of the research.
- “Uncovering; self-evidence” involves making sense of our experiences. Through the self-reflections of the researcher, the reader should be able to

understand the researcher's process of making sense of the research context. Furthermore, the researcher hopes the research has been useful in enriching the reader's understanding of the experiences of the participants and the subject under study.

- "Testimonial validity" involves validity obtained from the participants themselves. This involves gaining the participants' perspective on the researcher's interpretations of their stories. The researcher engaged with the participants as co-researchers and provided them with the opportunity to comment on the researcher's interpretations. This allowed for re-negotiation concerning the meaning of observations made by the researcher and the inclusion of different voices. However, the emphasis here was placed on the researcher's perspective of their experiences.
- "Catalytic validity" involves the degree to which the research was meaningful for the participants and generated any change. Since the influence of their parents' divorce on the participants' lives continues beyond the conclusion of the research process, the prospect that their involvement in the research process has assisted them, was desired.
- "Reflexive validity" relates to the way the data has influenced and changed the researcher's way of thinking.

Closely associated with the reliability and validity of the research study is the research ethic. Since the objects of inquiry are human beings and their lived experiences, certain guidelines need to be followed to protect the participants. Ethical concerns in qualitative research revolve around the following topics (Durrheim & Wassenaar, 1999; Strydom, 1998):

- Informed consent  
This involved obtaining verbal and written consent from the participants to participate in this study. However, it also ensured that the participants' decision to participate in the study was an informed choice, which was guaranteed by providing the participants with a clear explanation regarding the tasks that were expected of them.

- Confidentiality

The researcher needed to address the issue of confidentiality with the participants. This entailed the participants clearly understanding who would have access to the information supplied by them, how the information would be utilised, and their choice to have identities protected with the use of pseudonyms. Furthermore, the participants understood for what purpose the research was being conducted, how the information was recorded, and the manner in which the final information would be presented.

- Competence

To ensure the participants were not harmed in any way, the abilities of the researcher needed to be assessed. Thus, the researcher only conducted and collected information that was within the realm of her expertise. Furthermore, the role of the researcher needed to be defined for the participants and the researcher, to ensure the research relationship was adhered to.

### The Role of the Researcher and the Participants

The participants are actively involved in the research process as they are sharing their stories with the researcher and without them there would be no dialogue, no experiences to be understood, or interpretations to be made. Furthermore, the participants have an influence on the conclusions that can be drawn since it is their prerogative to disclose certain information or not. Therefore, as previously mentioned, the participants are viewed as the collaborators or co-researchers in the research process.

The researcher is described as the major data collection instrument in the research process (Terre Blanche & Kelly, 1999). His or her presence is necessary to develop rapport, foster the flow of conversation between the participant and the researcher, and to observe details in the social setting. However, the researcher is also a member of his or her own community with its own values and

beliefs, and thus enters the world of the participants with those beliefs. Furthermore, the researcher also enters the study with a specific view of the phenomenon being studied. Therefore, the researcher needed to clarify her role in the research process. In addition, the researcher needed to acknowledge her biases, since her ideas and beliefs cannot not contaminate the participants' stories of their experiences.

In this study, the researcher informed the participants about the purpose of her study to ensure clarity about their involvement with the study. She disclosed to them that her interest in the study stemmed from her observations of custody disputes and her exploration into the studies already conducted into the various aspects of divorce and its impact on the children of divorced parents. She revealed to them that it is her belief that these studies predominantly focus on children and that the conclusions drawn depict mainly the negative consequences of divorce on children. The researcher informed the participants of her belief that the voices of adolescents deserve to be heard and that a more accurate picture of how they have survived, despite the difficulties divorce presents, needs to be portrayed. The participants were made aware of the researcher's intentions, through this study, to provide adolescents with an opportunity to voice their perceptions and experiences so that they could perhaps assist other adolescents in their struggles and contribute to shifting the societal beliefs regarding the children of divorce.

To ensure that the researcher complied with the ethical guidelines of qualitative research outlined above, it was necessary for the researcher to define her role for the participants. She informed the participants that she was aware that the nature of the inquiry was of a personal nature, which may elicit emotions and conclusions that the participants may find difficult to contain on their own. Therefore, the researcher provided a debriefing of the interview after each session to ensure containment. However, the researcher emphasised that her relationship with the participants needed to remain defined within the context of the research, thus if the participants found they needed additional assistance, she would refer them to the appropriate professional.

### Sampling and Selection

Sampling is defined as a process whereby cases are selected for inclusion in the research study (van Vuuren & Maree, 1999), which “involves decisions about which people, settings, events, behaviours and/or social processes to observe” (Durrheim, 1999b, p. 44). In essence, sampling is mainly concerned with the size of the sample. Various types of sampling techniques can be employed depending on the chosen research paradigm and the purpose of the study (Durrheim, 1999b). Since qualitative research is concerned with acquiring rich and detailed information that can be analysed in-depth, small samples are selected so that the aims of the research can be achieved. In this study, the researcher used criterion-based sampling to select the participants. The inclusion criteria used for selecting participants were:

- The participants needed to be male and female adolescents.
- Currently, the participants must be in the developmental stage of adolescence. Therefore, they needed to be between the ages of 11 and 22 years of age.
- The participants’ parents must have been divorced for a period of at least one year.
- Participants must be willing and able to articulate their experiences.

Selection involves deciding on the units of analysis for the study. According to Goetz and LeCompte (cited in Moon et al., 1990), various methods of selection are available, which include, convenience selection, comprehensive selection, quota selection, extreme-case selection, typical-case selection, unique-case selection, and reputational-case selection. The selection method used in this research was convenience selection. Therefore, after the identification of the criteria for selection, the researcher made contact with people whom she knew were in contact with adolescents who fulfilled the criteria. Contact was also made with the Family Advocates’ Office in Pretoria and with other psychologists.

Due to the sensitive nature of the research topic, locating participants was difficult. The researcher was placed in contact with an adolescent girl, 17 years of age, through a contact of the researcher's supervisor. The male participant, 18 years of age, was located via a previous client the researcher had conducted psychotherapy with. Both the female and the male participants fulfilled the criteria.

The researcher contacted each participant telephonically to set up a separate meeting to further discuss the research with him/her. During this meeting, the study was explained to the participants and the nature of their involvement was clearly defined. The participants were informed about the researcher's intentions to explore their experiences of their parents' divorce, which would involve disclosing information regarding their parents, the divorce, and their families. The participants were also requested to discuss the study with both their parents. Thereafter, verbal and written consent to participate in this study was obtained by both the female and the male participant (See Appendix A1& A2 for copies of the consent forms). However, since the female participant was below the age of 18 years, written consent was also needed from both her parents, and subsequently obtained (see Appendix B for a copy of the consent form). Since the male participant was over the age of 18 years, written consent from his parents to participate in this study was not needed. However, the researcher felt that in order to maintain the ethical standard of the study, the consent of the male participant's parents would be required. Written consent was obtained from the male participant's mother, although, according to the male participant, he did not feel that his father would understand his involvement in the study, thus consent was not obtained from the male participant's father.

Due to the sensitive nature of the information being shared, the researcher needed to address the ethical concerns regarding confidentiality with the participants. The participants were informed that the information they divulged to the researcher would be used strictly for research purposes and that the researcher was under no obligation to reveal or discuss the interviews with the

participants' parents. Furthermore, the participants were assured that their names and other identifying information would be changed to protect them and their family's identities. Within the consent form, obtained from both participants, the participants were informed of the intention of the researcher to record the interviews and to have the interviews transcribed by an independent transcription service. Furthermore, they were informed of the intended time expectations of the interview. Although, in defining the participants' roles as co-researchers, the researcher explained to the participants that they could negotiate further interviews if they deemed it necessary. However, neither participant requested more time.

### Data Collection

In qualitative research, the data is usually presented in a visual and/or verbal form. The researcher collects data via observations, interviewing, and document analysis, which can be presented in the form of field notes, videocassettes, and audiocassettes.

Upon obtaining the consent forms from the participants and their parents, the data collection phase could begin. Personal data such as the name, address, gender, and age of the participants was obtained from the consent form. However, the researcher felt that further information regarding the participants' families and the structure of the families was best obtained during the interview process due to the topic of the study involving the divorced families. It was decided by the participants that the location of the inquiry was to take place in the homes of the participants when there would be minimal interruptions by other family members, as the participants expressed that they felt most comfortable in this context.

The method used to collect data was through interviews, which were recorded onto audiocassettes. The nature of the interviews was unstructured and in-depth. This particular interview style involves avoiding deliberately formulated questions

(Schurink, 1998). Instead, the researcher limited her contribution in the interview to the introduction of themes on which information was required, thus asking 'what' questions as opposed to 'why' questions (Stiles, 1993). The researcher encouraged the participants to speak freely with minimal interruption so as to allow them to express their feelings and share their experiences. In doing this, there was the possibility that the participants may have deviated from the research topic. However, the researcher felt that, for the participants, this digression was linked to their experiences and was therefore acknowledged as a valid inclusion into the meaning of their experiences.

The interview focussed on the participants' experiences within their families before and after the divorce. This included the current structure of the participants' families, their relationships with significant others, both within and outside of the family, and the manner in which they coped during and after the divorce. Furthermore, the researcher explored their view of the influence that the divorce has had on their lives, that is, the changes the divorce has brought to their lives. In essence, the aim of the interview was to gain a rich description of what the participants have experienced and their understanding of their experiences.

### Data Analysis

According to Rapmund (1996, p. 118), data analysis "is the process whereby order, structure, and meaning is imposed on the mass of data that is collected in a qualitative study". As with data collection, in qualitative research, the analysis of the data can occur in various ways. However, Crabtree and Miller (1992) assert that the choice of analysis style depends upon the goal of the research. Therefore, "when the goal is subjective understanding, exploration, and/or generation of new insights..., the more interpretive styles are preferable" (Crabtree & Miller, 1992, p. 20).

The purpose of an interpretive approach to research is accurately described by Terre Blanche and Kelly (1999, p. 139) as the following: "To make the strange



familiar and the familiar strange". This means that attempts are made to understand, describe and interpret people's experiences within the context that they occur so that the result is an interpretation that is an accurate reflection of the phenomena but also assists in generating a fresh perspective (Terre Blanche & Kelly, 1999). Therefore, the interpretive approach acknowledges that individuals are social beings and can only be understood in context. This view is shared by social constructionism, the guiding epistemology of this study.

Hermeneutics is a method of analysis that is described by Addison (1992, p. 110) as "the business of interpretation". According to Reason and Rowan (1981), modern hermeneutics was developed to understand and interpret experiences, texts, and behaviours of a person or group so that an understanding can be found of the underlying meaning. It takes into account that humans are historical-cultural beings and cannot be understood unless viewed within their social and historical contexts. Therefore, to understand a person's experience, one must first understand the cultural constructs it originates from and the language that represents it.

The researcher is a member of his or her own community or tradition with its own values and beliefs and therefore enters the world of the participants with those beliefs. Therefore, any interpretation of the phenomenon is informed by the interpreter's own beliefs. However, through the interpretation and the gaining of understanding, the interpreter is also able to expand those beliefs. Thus, hermeneutics allows for the union of two perspectives, that of the phenomenon being studied and that of the interpreter, where the current understanding is enriched by the historical and social contexts of both, transforming both perspectives.

The belief in the underlying meaning of experiences and the importance of understanding the context within which meaning is attributed correspond with the theoretical framework of this study and hermeneutics is therefore an appropriate

method of analysis for the data within the paradigm of qualitative research chosen for this study.

The steps that were taken in the data analysis were guided by the hermeneutic circle, where the interpreter gained an understanding through the

[c]ircular and spiral relationships between whole and parts, between what is known and what is unknown, between the phenomenon itself and its wider context, between the knower and that which is known (Reason & Rowan, 1981, p. 134).

Therefore, the use of the hermeneutical circle as a means of interpreting data means that the smallest statements must be understood in terms of the largest cultural contexts. However, it also implies that all the contexts in between must be taken into consideration, that is, the person, the family, and the community.

Since there are no established steps in the hermeneutic method of analysis, the researcher utilised steps delineated by Rapmund (1996) and Terre Blanche and Kelly (1999), which the researcher defined as a 'thematic content analysis'. They included the following:

Step 1: The researcher interviewed the participants and thereafter, she had the interviews transcribed by a person from an independent transcription service who subscribes to the ethical conditions of this study.

Step 2: Upon obtaining the transcripts, the researcher worked with one participant's story at a time to prevent the researcher being influenced by the other participant's story. Therefore, the steps that follow were repeated when the researcher began working on the next transcript.

Step 3: The researcher read through the transcript while simultaneously listening to the corresponding audiocassettes to **familiarise** and **immerse** herself in the text. This process assisted the researcher in identifying the emotional tone of the text. The researcher continued to read and re-read the transcript until she felt that she had gained a 'sense of the whole' story.

Step 4: Once the researcher felt that she was familiar with the 'whole' of the text, the researcher narrowed her focus through the process of **thematizing**, which allowed themes to emerge and develop. In the initial identification of the themes, the researcher did not limit the number of themes. Instead she allowed the 'parts' of the text to be explored openly and thoroughly. To assist in the process of thematising, the researcher **coded** sections of the interview that were relevant to the themes that were under consideration. Thereafter, the researcher examined the themes that had emerged and grouped similar themes under larger umbrella themes.

Step 5: Once the themes had been identified, the researcher re-examined the themes to ensure that the story as a 'whole' had been maintained in the identification of the themes. The researcher continued to work on the themes, known as **elaboration**, to ensure that the meaning was captured in the themes. Thereafter, the researcher reconstructed the participant's story in the form of the dominant themes identified, which were substantiated by excerpts from the text.

The reconstruction of the participant's story was influenced by the researcher's frame of reference, which was also influenced by the research topic. Therefore, the participant, as co-researcher, was given the opportunity to read the researcher's interpretation of their

story and provide the researcher with feedback. This enabled the researcher to ensure the integrity of the study.

Step 6: The researcher then constructed the final **interpretation** of the participant's story. Feedback from the participant was taken into consideration in the final interpretation of the participant's story. However, the final reconstruction was an interpretation of the participant's story from the researcher's perspective, which looked quite different from the original interview. This step also included reflections by the researcher on her role in the process of collecting and interpreting the meanings of the story, since the research relationship had an influence on the researcher.

Step 7: Once each transcript was individually interpreted and presented as a story, the researcher identified the common themes in both the stories.

Step 8: The final step was a comparative analysis of the findings of this study with the literature in Chapters two and three on Adolescence and Divorce respectively, as well as the theoretical framework of social constructionism. The researcher then evaluated the study and discussed future recommendations.

### **Conclusion**

The aim of this chapter has been to present the principles of the epistemology that guide the researcher within this study. However, it has also illustrated the manner in which the epistemological assumptions inform the choice of research paradigms and the methodology utilised in this research.

The researcher began with a brief presentation of the birth of postmodern thought within the scientific community, thus shifting the concept of reality or 'truth' from

an absolute reality or 'truth' to one possibility amongst many possible realities or 'truths'. Thereafter, the researcher highlighted how social constructionism can be subsumed under the postmodern umbrella since the basic tenets underlying social constructionism fit with the view of postmodernism. To reiterate, these include the following: that reality is a social construction; reality is co-created between individuals and the society and is therefore multiple; that language is the primary tool in the creation of reality; that knowledge can never be true and objective, since it is co-created through the use of language and is thus a subjective perspective of reality. In addition, postmodernism and social constructionism are especially critical of knowledge that is taken for granted, since it is this knowledge that is transformed into the dominant or grand narratives upon which society and individuals measure themselves. Thus, the individual voice is subjugated in favour of the only 'truth'.

Thereafter, the researcher illustrated how the above epistemological assumptions of social constructionism fit with the current study, with a special focus on the grand narratives that subjugate others.

To achieve the aims of this study, the researcher has shown how the choice of the qualitative research paradigm is informed by the epistemology that guides the researcher. Furthermore, the researcher described how the underlying features of the qualitative research paradigm correlate with social constructionism, in that both emphasise the value of meaning that is created through lived experiences and the importance of understanding this meaning in context.

In this chapter, the researcher has also addressed the issues of the dependability and credibility of qualitative research, which the researcher feels has been enhanced in this study through the explication of the researcher's role as a subjective collaborator and the inclusion of the participants as co-researchers. Furthermore, the researcher explored the characteristics of qualitative research and their application to the current study, which reiterated the value of language and conversation through the use of the interview as a data collection technique

and the proposed utilisation of hermeneutics as a process of data analysis. The researcher illustrated that the underlying principles of hermeneutics strongly correlate with the theoretical framework of this study, in that the process of analysis considers the parts as well as the whole, which is synonymous with viewing the individual and meaning in context.

The following chapters will now focus on the meaning generated from the interviews with the participants and will be presented in the format of the themes that emerged from their stories by the researcher from her frame of reference.

