

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation is the story of the invaluable time I spent with children living in an impoverished community on the outskirts of a major city during my training as a clinical psychologist. Life for them was about survival. They were children who knew of pain and abuse as part of everyday life. Children who in their fighting for life seemed unaware of basic values as I knew them. Children who were not afforded the opportunity to know their own individual worth, as they attached themselves to larger groups/gangs in an attempt at survival. Children who did not, *dared not*, believe in their own uniqueness and its inherent beauty. Life on the street was, after all, a dangerous kind of existence.

I wanted to reach out and touch them gently. I needed to give them a space where they could recognize and acknowledge their own beauty. I needed to affirm each one of their dynamic little selves, and encourage their unique, vibrant personalities to shine through their smiles.

I think for both the children and myself, a context of *hope* was needed in what seemed to me at the time to be such a desperate place. We all needed a place of sharing that could foster some sense of hope. A different type of gang was needed: A gang of hope... and so, within this village of gangs, a playgroup emerged.

I feel myself returning there. To a place where the joyful song of one child cannot hide the horrific screams of another. To a street corner where one three-year-old child happily kicks a ball, while another sadly describes this as the place where her mother was brutally murdered. The memories of this street come flooding back. I feel my stomach tensing anxiously as I recall the harshness, my own fears, the children's fears; and yet there is a warm feeling in my heart that

speaks of how this street and its people touched me. How I was privileged to have my life enriched by others whose passion for living was tangible and often almost contagious.

Research aims

I invite you, the reader, to share in these experiences, where I entered and explored the world of these little children in the context of a cross-cultural playgroup setting. The investigation was primarily aimed at exploring the meanings around being a child living in this particular village. How did these children make sense of this place in which they lived? How did they understand their lives, and their futures that lay ahead? The context of a playgroup was used to facilitate the exploration and enhancement of each child's particular interpersonal ways of relating, as well as each child's specific skills of coping and surviving within this community.

Therapeutic goals included fostering a group context in which alternative social skills and possible ways of being could be explored and rehearsed. It seemed as if these children knew only about verbal and physical abuse as ways of being heard and accepted at a social level. I wondered about the possibilities of exploring what were to me more respectful ways of being in relationship. The use of play also facilitated the children's expression of urgent needs, such as nutritional and medical needs, as well as encouraging their expression of aspects regarding home relationships and life experiences. As the investigation progressed, it became increasingly important to focus not only on the positive value of the playgroup, but also on the inhibiting and limiting aspects, both socially and emotionally, of the playgroup setting for these children.

In this dissertation I want to share some of the children's stories, as I understood them, with readers who are interested in working within cross-cultural community contexts; with readers who are interested in group work; with readers who love children; and also with mothers whose

struggles in raising children are in many ways universal, and yet also have aspects that are unique and personal within that particular mother-child relationship and community context.

I want to highlight not only the joy and the sense of hope that was shared between myself, my co-therapist and the children, but also the inherent difficulties that were so much a part of my journey down this street. I trust that although the written words may in many ways be limiting and lacking in terms of describing the richness of my experiences, I might in some way be able to capture and share the vibrancy, the aliveness, and the spirit of this meaningful place.

My journey

I remember my first impressions of this street. I remember, too, my instinctive pre-verbal reaction being an overwhelming sense of fear. In retrospect, I realize how this fear was based on my own stereotypical and prejudiced assumptions.

Anderson and Goolishian (1988) describe meaning as being a phenomenon that is intersubjective. Meaning is created and experienced by individuals in conversation and interaction with others. Human action therefore takes place in a reality of understanding that is co-created through social construction and dialogue. Following from this, a therapeutic system can emerge as the language system in which the client and the therapist co-create meaning with each other.

Prior to entering into dialogue with the members of this community (in which possible future contexts would be created where new and shared constructions could emerge), I had only my previously constructed meaning structures to use as lenses to help interpret my initial experiences. The socially constructed meanings of my childhood and early adulthood resulted in my feeling vulnerable and scared. Again, I defensively responded to these emotions by labelling

everything around me in terms of the meanings that I had adopted as a child. Many of which, in retrospect, now seem biased and judgmental.

Helmreich in Slonim (1991) says that stereotypes and prejudices contain elements that are false or inaccurate, that they evoke emotional feelings, and that they result from habits of judgment and expectations that have become routine to us.

I was so lost and in this unfamiliar territory that my existing assumptions about this culturally different place and its people were all that I had at the time. This was a place where people were brutally gang-raped and murdered in the streets. And there we were: me, my co-therapist An-Maree, and our personal assumptions. I desperately needed a map. I wanted to know where I was going, whom I was going to meet, and most of all, what would happen to me in this place. But there cannot be any roadmaps of a winding, bustling, little street in a village on the very outskirts of a big city unless there is a meeting between the different realities, and the co-creation of such a map by all those involved. No matter where I looked, no matter whom I asked, there seemed to be no answers to any of the questions that were taking their toll of both my mind and body. On reflection, one of the few things that remained stable throughout the two years that I visited this place was the slight tensing of all my muscles during each visit. It was a kind of inherent warning signal; a constant reminder of the ever-present possibility of physical danger.

And so continuing without any external and obvious roadmap, I walked. This was a careful, tentative walk filled with the construction of new meanings. Each step was as if in slow motion. The sense of not knowing was overwhelming. Anderson and Goolishian (in McNamee & Gergen, 1992) discuss one of the underlying assumptions of social constructionism as that the expertise of the therapist lies in his or her ability to facilitate the development of a conversational space wherein she or he asks questions from a position of 'not knowing'.

The therapist assumes, therefore, that there are problems in language which are meaningful and addressable in relation to the particular context that is co-created through dialogue. In adopting the stance of 'not knowing', the therapist shows a genuine curiosity and a need to know more, so that new narratives and meaning structures can emerge as part of the dialogical process. By relying on explanations given by the client (in my case, the children and the community context in which they lived), the struggle to understand becomes a collaborative endeavour that facilitates the possibility for movement and change for all those involved in the therapeutic or research process. Thus, although my sense of not knowing what to expect or what to do made me feel scared and vulnerable, it was this fear, based on my existing meaning structures, that became useful in facilitating contexts in which these meanings, and those of the children, could be explored further.

Slonim (1991) describes how, often, when we encounter families and people that are different from our own, especially those of other cultures, we react by thinking that they are strange and possibly inferior. We even tend to be suspicious and fearful of them. She also suggests it is human nature to reject and label that which appears so different from us.

I saw children who seemed both to look and smell unkempt, that I immediately wanted to take them to be washed, and labelled their mothers as incompetent and uncaring. I heard the children's voices repeatedly using language that made me squirm and immediately questioned the way that they were being spoken to in their homes. I invited them all to come and play with us. On reflection, I don't think that I initially wanted to create an investigative context of play. In fact, I really wanted to save. I wanted to take responsibility for these poor, unkempt children. I wanted to make everything better. I suppose that I really needed them to experience what it felt like to be nurtured, loved and cared for like my own children, and myself when I was a child. How

extremely arrogant! But that was the only roadmap I could access. It was a roadmap that I was to explore much more fully before I could continue with any kind of journey in the creation of new constructions along this special street. This roadmap incorporated my existing meaning structures and intuitive knowledge (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Slonim (1991) says that as a prerequisite to understanding others, it is essential to understand our own families and culture. She says that each culture has its own value system and that even though we can learn to speak act and even think in another culture, it is far more difficult, if not impossible, to *feel* in the value-attitude system of that culture. She does say, however, that we can become more sensitive to those different values by becoming more aware of our own culture and recognizing its peculiarities.

White (1995) suggests that a dominant story exists within each culture. It is these stories or narratives that define what a life would look like if it were 'right', that shape the lives of each one of us. Each story of what is 'right' is culture-specific, inherently influencing our thoughts and actions in relationship with ourselves and others. Our behaviour thus functions in reproducing the dominant way of being in that particular culture. Narrative therapy involves providing a context where, through entering into the telling of the stories of our lives, culturally-specific meanings can be explored in dialogue. This process can then facilitate the unfolding of different ways of thinking and being, through the co-creation of alternative stories. I thus needed to reflect on the culture-specific meanings underlying my dominant story. This was the beginning of an exploration of my own roadmap, my own family, my own culture, as I continued to try and find my way.

As I think about this notion of needing to explore my own roadmap, I am again reminded of what it means to be a therapist and exactly what constitutes psychotherapy. In terms of having

included myself and my own roadmap in my observations of everything that happened in the street, I worked at a level of abstraction termed ‘cybernetics of cybernetics’ (Varela, 1979). At this level, everything that is happening is entirely self-referential, and therefore a recursive analysis occurs, which emphasizes the mutual connectedness of the observer and the observed. According to Boscolo, Cecchin, Hoffman and Penn (1987) another important point to consider is that since all observers perceive the world through their own lens of culture, family, and language, the resulting product represents the ‘observer community’ rather than something private and self-contained. So who was I in this community? What were my existing meaning structures?

I was brought up in a middle-class, white South-African family home during the apartheid era. I only attended one primary and one high school, where prizes were still awarded for full attendance. All fellow pupils and teachers were also white. My mother drove me to school from grade one. I was fetched again when the final bell rang each day.

My home was situated in the suburbs. It was a large four-bedroomed house with a swimming pool. High walls and electric fences separated our family from next door neighbours’ homes. I married at a young age and had two children of my own. This family also lived in a large four-bedroomed home with a swimming pool, again separated from neighbours’ homes by huge, high walls and electric fences. The only noise in those streets was the engines of mostly luxury vehicles as they sped past.

No wonder the noise in this special street sounded so different. No, there was nothing wrong with my ears; this was noise of real difference: meaningful noise! Keeney and Ross (1985) describe how meaningful noise modifies a person's frame of reference in a way that enables a new class of meanings and behaviours to emerge. Many new meanings and different behaviours were to emerge for me in this place. It was as if I had been transported to a realm where the volume

was turned up significantly. Engines revved, dogs barked, music blasted from various radio stations, children laughed and screamed. There was an ever-present buzz of varying sounds, with children everywhere. I became acutely aware of the quietness of the life I had led previously.

There music was turned on specially for ballet lessons or for very specific listening pleasure. Television had only been switched on after homework was completed every afternoon. All children attended school in the mornings and took part in extra-mural activities in the afternoons. They were very seldom seen playing in the streets, and definitely not without adult supervision. The adults that I knew very rarely shouted to each other across the street. On the contrary, they hardly even bothered to greet each other! These adults were different. They smiled, they greeted, they shouted, they drank alcohol at 10 o'clock in the morning and then shouted some more.

I remember how the sounds seemed to make their own music. There was always a rhythm, a beat to which I learned to walk. Sometimes the pace was quick, sometimes a bit slower, but always there. This walk often became a dance. And during each visit, a different dance evolved as I choreographed according to the particular beat of that day. Bateson (1972) proposed that the unit of therapy is a cybernetic circuit where both therapist and client aim to become part of learning and evolution. What is learnt and evolves is the circuit of which they are both part. As applied to my experience in this community, the patterned behaviours (dances) that evolved as part of this cybernetic feedback loop became indicative of the particular kind of choreographed relationships that evolved between all the other participants and myself. By varying my behaviour in contextually-relevant ways, different spaces were created for new dances to unfold.

An important part of my journey included learning to accept and appreciate the uncertainty of life. These people knew and accepted life's unpredictability. They lived with joy and they

lived with death. I saw children happily playing in open graves in the graveyard. Life and death seemed to have found a way to co-exist comfortably and naturally within this community.

I had been brought up in a family and culture where the pain of death was so frightening that I had been taught only to pick at what was new, exciting and joyful, almost anticipating possible flaws, failures and deaths.

Oriah Mountain Dreamer (1999) says that in doing this we often rob ourselves of the joy that lifts our spirits. The people in this street really seemed to feel joy. They trusted the moment by willingly acknowledging that they were not often in control. Life was unpredictable and they had learnt to celebrate the good fortune in this as well. In celebration of both living and dying, the children, particularly, knew how to laugh, sing and dance. Their beautiful voices and agile, little bodies strongly expressed their needs. These needs, I assumed, included being able to enjoy life to the full, irrespective of how difficult the circumstances, in addition to the more universal human needs of being heard, accepted and loved.

On reflection, I suppose that it was not only I who invited the children to play, but also the children who presented me with enchanting invitations of song and dance, as I joined in with and bore witness to their particular experiences.

White (1995) says that it is important that therapists acknowledge the privileged nature of their work in terms of having other people open their lives to them in some way. Therapists, therefore, need to accept responsibility by situating their particular connections and responses to the stories and actions of others within the context of their own personal experience, imagination, purposes, curiosity, and so on. For An-Maree and myself, the connections were immediately evident. She is a singer herself, someone who has sung in choirs. When asked what singing means to her, An-Maree responded by saying that singing brings her freedom to give voice to thoughts

and feelings that lurk in her heart, mind and body, but are otherwise difficult to express. Sometimes this is because they are still on a pre-verbal level; sometimes because they are unwanted messages, taboos. She said that singing also helps her to hear her struggles and joys more clearly. It creates a context of listening to meanings that resonate between people. This voice is not easily disqualified.

An-Maree's singing voice serves as a way to express and explore her repertoire in a way that is fun. She said that she has also learnt to listen with attention and not to disregard the meanings or feelings that surprise her when voiced in this way. I, on the other hand, am a dancer. A person who attended ballet classes as far back as I can remember. A person who went on to teach other little girls how to point their toes. A person who had through her body, found her own strong voice in the expression of emotions. I hear the music of my hurt, my anger, my laughter, from deep within me, and then move my body in accordance with that particular music. It is a way that I awaken my soul. It is as if I can connect with others on this level. The freedom of this kind of physical expression is significant for me in that I seem able to move beyond the restrictions and judgmental consequences of verbal communication that I have experienced within many contexts of my life.

It seems that An-Maree and I knew what Wright (cited in Pearson, 1996, p. 75) meant, when he said that 'Behind every moving voice is a dancing body'. We knew, too, that behind every dancing body, there was a moving voice. Through the spontaneous use of their voices and bodies, as described by Syz (Pearson, 1996), these children shared an innate sense of aliveness and connectedness with us. Voice and dance thus became shared ways of expressing problems, as well as sounding out possible alternatives regarding solution-oriented behaviour.

It was as if in our humanness, we had connected through song and dance, even though our skin colours were different. These people are referred to as 'coloureds'. In this country this word has many derogatory meanings and associations: people who are seemingly neither black nor white, who do not really have their own identity. I remember how I immediately questioned these assumptions that I had grown up with. Somehow I sensed a strong cultural identity as I walked down this street among, yes, extremely 'colourful' children. Children of colour. Children who are colourful from within. Like the solitary flowers that stood out so brightly as they grew wildly in some of the tiny, overgrown gardens, so too these coloured children stood out in their contrasting brightness. In some way, I suppose, it was in seeing all these children joining with me in a group that the beauty in the creation of my own special bouquet really become apparent.

The context of a playgroup

An ecosystemic epistemology. Underlying an ecosystemic epistemology is the assumption that behaviour occurs as part of an interactional context. Circularity, as described by Boscolo et al. (1987), is based on the idea that people are connected to each other within this type of interactional context by particular patterns that evolve through time. These patterns of behaviour are reciprocally connected, thus making any specific punctuation of the patterns within the system arbitrary.

It is also accepted that the observer is part of everything that is observed, making him or her subject to all constraints and necessities of the particular part-whole relationship in which he or she exists. Views from all sides of any relationship within the system, therefore, need to be juxtaposed in order to generate some sense of the relationship as a whole (Bateson, 1972). Von Foerster (1981) states furthermore that the observer enters into the description of that which he or

she observes in such a way that objectivity is not at all possible, and that there is no such thing as a separate observed system.

Bateson (1979) states that a descriptive language is needed to reflect on a given process such that all the elements are depicted as recursively moving together. This circular way of thinking forces the therapist or researcher to acknowledge himself or herself as an inextricable element of that which he or she attempts to describe, perturb and change (Hoffman, 1981). The self-referential nature of this dissertation, therefore, reflects the above epistemological assumptions such that I am inextricably included as part of all aspects of the process of this research, including the written descriptions.

As part of the process of immersing myself in the context of this particular village, and because of my connection with the children, the formation of a playgroup seemed to become a useful interactional context in which to further my research. Basing my work on ecosystemic principles, I, the participant-observer, could use various forms of play as interventions to perturb the system in different ways. Keeney (1979) suggests that, although the punctuation of any symptomatic type of playing behaviour displayed by any child is arbitrary, it is an important function in communicating about the system as a whole. This idea is further explored here as an indicator of the ecology of relationships within the entire group.

Social constructionistic lenses. As my underlying theoretical orientation is social constructionism, my research was based on a critical approach to the conventional view that knowledge is based on objective, unbiased observations of the world. According to Burr (1995) it is important to adopt a critical stance to our taken-for-granted ways of understanding, and to be suspicious of our assumptions about how the world appears to be. She says that the categories and

concepts that we commonly use to understand and make sense of the world around us are historically and culturally specific. Consequently, no particular understanding (not any of the children's, neither mine nor yours as the reader), is necessarily *better* than any other, but rather *different*, as diverse historical, familial, and cultural beliefs are reflected as varying forms of *knowledge*.

Following from this then is the assumption that *knowledge* is not derived from the nature of the world, but is rather constructed between people through the social processes and actions in which they constantly engage. Burr (1995) describes how because these social interactions and negotiated meanings can take so many different forms, there are always many possibilities for the constructions that emerge. Different constructions then elicit different responses, consequently either sustaining or excluding specific patterns of social interaction. The focus of an inquiry from this perspective in terms of the exploration of meanings, is thus not so much about who people are or what they have, but rather about what they do, and how they do these things together. It was, therefore, through the observation of the processes of how the playgroup developed, what happened between the children, An-Maree, and myself, and how new interactions emerged through change, that meanings could be explored further.

I think that the formation of a playgroup really also began as a way for me to find my fit within this community. Maybe, for me, connecting with children was more comfortable in the context of such an unfamiliar community setting. The children did not have any apparent expectations, and were very accepting of my presence. I spontaneously connected, and, as was common practice within this particular community when there was a sense of connection, a little *gang* began to form. This 'gang' then developed into the therapeutic context of a group. Within this group different types of play were used to explore both social and emotional aspects of the

meanings of being a child in this village, as well as to enhance alternative ways of being in relation to already existing and newly co-created meanings.

For me, it was particularly fascinating to see how in bringing together many different children in one group, each child's unique qualities became increasingly evident as she or he began to relate interpersonally within that context. This was not unlike the creation of a bouquet of flowers where each flower seems accentuated as it is viewed in relation to the other flowers. Yalom (1975) describes how a group develops into a social microcosm because each member will behave in an unguarded manner, and so more vividly recreate and display their particular interactional styles in the context of the group.

In the formation of this group, one of the more obvious obstacles, like a rock that I kept tripping over in this street, was exactly who I was in terms of this bouquet. What exactly was my role? Was I the designated florist who should decide, change, arrange and organize the flowers until they were to my liking? Was I going to be the string that kept all the flowers together in the bouquet? Or was I simply just another type of flower within the arrangement? On reflection, I was to fulfil many different and changing roles. The challenge for me as a therapist was to create the kinds of contexts where I could express and explore various different parts of myself, and then incorporate the children's feedback into whatever happened next. This co-created context also enabled the children to act and react reciprocally, so voicing themselves differently.

My journey continues

In the early stages of my journey I soon discovered the importance of boundary setting. I desperately needed to give these children something that would nourish them. So, in some way, it was as if in needing to give them water to drink, I did not consider that glass bottles could get

broken, and people could get hurt. I needed to learn to take the precaution of using plastic bottles with these children. I needed to take the responsibility for making decisions, creating certain rules and setting some distinct boundaries in order to facilitate a shared and meaningful kind of evolving process between us.

During the two years that I visited this street, I was confronted over and over again with various issues concerning responsibility. I realized that in taking responsibility in setting boundaries for the children, I was also finding ways of taking care of myself. This made me think a lot about how many times as a mother I had framed my actions as taking responsibility for my children, and yet, had also simply been protecting and looking after myself. It seemed to me that for the mothers in this poverty-stricken community, taking responsibility for their children had many different meanings to those that I had always taken for granted. How did these mothers then need to protect themselves? What did it mean to take responsibility for these mothers who were living in such extreme and harsh circumstances? I began to notice the contrasting shades of responsibility. Various different meanings emerged as I tried to explore and understand who was responsible.

As I wrote this dissertation, I wanted to describe and explore further some of the themes that both enabled and, at times, crippled me in my walk down this street. In the next chapter I look at some of the theoretical assumptions underlying my journey. These include a description of *ecosystemic principles*, as well as a reflection of a more *postmodern, social constructionistic* theoretical approach in understanding my journey. Telling my story to you, the reader, in this way, also necessitates a description of assumptions underlying a *narrative approach*. This approach assumes that the realities we inhabit are expressed in the language we use, and are then kept alive and passed along in the stories we live and communicate (Freedman & Combs, 1996).

Geertz (1978, p. 377) writes ‘... stories matter. So ... do stories about stories.’ As this dissertation is a reflection of a narrative about myself with others in this community village over two years, so you too now become part of this ever-evolving narrative as your stories, and their meanings for you, the reader, become interwoven with mine and the children’s.

Following this theoretical chapter is a chapter describing naturalistic research methodology. Theoretical aspects of working cross-culturally with children in a group context, as well as the use of specific methods of play are reviewed with reference to existing literature. A chapter with vignettes from my personal journal follows, indicating the experiential information on which my observations were based. Specific thematic concepts are then discussed in the analysis and interpretation of the data. In the exploration of these themes, you, the reader, may question my selection of themes that necessarily resonate with me. For me it feels that, as described by Thomas Merton in Pearson (1996), my journey down this street was also an inner journey. It was a matter of growth, deepening and surrender to the creative action of love and grace in my heart. It is for this that I thank the children, and so choose to focus on *respect*, *responsibility* and, above all, *hope*.

This dissertation ends with a discussion from a meta-perspective regarding my experiences and beliefs concerning the usefulness and value of this research project.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Keeney and Sprenkle (1982, p. 5) define **theory** as a ‘description of the relation between one’s epistemology and habits of action’. Therefore, to help you, the reader, to understand theoretically how I entered into and participated in this research, and understood its outcomes, a description of my underlying ecosystemic epistemology follows.

An ecosystemic epistemology

This research project was undertaken to elucidate the behaviours and meanings of a group of young children in terms of their understandings of their world. The way in which I included my needs as part of the developing research project, as well as the continuous nature of the research process are based on my ecosystemic epistemology.

An epistemology can be defined as ‘a set of immanent rules used in thought by large groups of people to define reality’(Auerswald, 1985, p.1). The word ‘paradigm’ can be used ‘to denote a subset of rules that define a particular segment of reality’ (Auerswald, 1985, p.1). Major epistemological changes are termed ‘paradigm shifts’ in scientists’ formal theories about nature. An important paradigm shift that occurred in the sciences was from the Cartesian-Newtonian, positivistic approach (where the main focus was materiality), to a systemic, cybernetic approach, which leads us to a world of form, pattern and relationships (Keeney, 1982).

Bateson formally based his epistemology on cybernetics, systems theory and ecology (Bateson, 1972). This way of thinking is rooted in the connection of all parts of a system to the whole, complete, circuiting system. In Bateson’s words, ‘if you want to understand some

phenomenon or appearance, you must consider that phenomenon within the context of all completed circuits that are relevant to it' (Bateson, 1971, p. 244).

Within this ecosystemic epistemology, core concepts are used to provide understanding of some of the underlying assumptions of the approach. These concepts are highlighted below.

Behaviour is always **contextually bound**. According to Bateson (1972) this approach assumes that, in order to gain any understanding, one needs to focus on the behaviour in terms of the relational and interactional context of all parts of the whole system. The interrelatedness and interdependence of all phenomena should be taken into consideration. This makes it necessary to adopt a holistic view. **Holism** refers to an understanding of reality in terms of integrated wholes whose properties cannot be reduced to smaller units. Becvar and Becvar (1996) state that the whole is larger than the sum of its elements because of the interaction between the elements. Humankind cannot be studied in isolation, but rather, our behaviour should be understood in terms of its connectedness – in relationship systems. Consequently, this type of connection and interrelatedness means that change in one part of a system will affect the whole.

Bogdan (1984) states that people behave according to how they define the situation in which they find themselves. These definitions are based on generalizations learnt through repeated interaction with others. Within systems, certain generalizations (ideas / meanings) are encouraged, while others suffer a kind of extinction, so that the ideas of each person in a system lead that person to behave in ways that confirm or support the ideas of every other member of that system. Within this **ecology of ideas**, behavioural repertoires and patterns emerge that are specific to the particular system (Bateson, 1972). Working from an ecosystemic epistemology, a therapist attempts to discern the **patterns** of behaviour that connect each person in a system. The

assumption underlying this is that specific behaviours relationally **fit** together in maintaining the balance of the system as a whole.

Janoski in O'Connor and Lubin (1984) describes how the 'fit' or 'congruence' within a system can be understood according to the function of each component in the overall working of the ecosystem. However, she emphasizes that the relational fit between the parts of the system is not static, but in a **constant state of flux**. There is always movement and change as the system evolves in an attempt to maintain equilibrium. This evolutionary process has been conceptualized by Lancaster (1980) as **equifinality**, where the two fundamental regulatory processes of a system are stability and growth.

Bateson (1972) emphasized that because each member's ideas and behaviours support and sustain the ideas and behaviours of every other member, the system displays order, pattern, or redundancy. These processes form a stable basis for the system. In the acquisition and modification of ideas and behaviour of one or more of any of the members of the system, new interactional patterns necessarily evolve. This new learning brings about change and growth. The specific manner in which each member might respond and fit in terms of a different ecology of ideas within the system, cannot be pre-determined. Thus new, **evolving** patterns are discontinuous and **unpredictable** (Bateson, 1979).

As stated previously, change in one component is associated with change in other components. A person's ideas (thoughts) and behaviours (actions) are thus both caused and causative simultaneously (Minuchin, 1974). Information enters the system resulting in a sequence of interactions that eventually feed back in a cyclical fashion, which once again evokes reactions. These mechanisms, which function to regulate a system through the exchange of information are termed feedback loops (Keeney, 1979).

Bateson (1972) describes a cybernetic circuit as being like a **recursive** chain of transformed differences, that is, a **circular** linkage of differences. Keeney (1979) describes how these circular patterns of differences and consequent actions are **reciprocal**. This means that any change will at some point return to influence itself indirectly via its direct influence on other parts of the feedback loop. The cybernetic functioning of two varieties of feedback loops occurs in the regulation of the interactive **processes** of the ecosystem. Negative loops stabilize the system when it is congruent, and positive loops change the system when it needs to move from incongruence to a more congruent state (Bateson, 1972).

Following from the above, symptomatic behaviour or 'dis-ease' is not regarded as labelling individual pathology. Instead **symptoms are communicative of complex interactional patterns within systems** that have, over time, become incongruent and stagnant (Watzlawick, Bavelas & Jackson, 1967). Therefore, the symptom is representative as an indicator or metaphor of the relational redundancy within the system.

Viewed from this perspective, behaviours that appear to be conflicting opposites in a system, one usually framed as 'symptomatic' and the opposite as 'normal', are instead acknowledged as a pattern of interaction that helps to stabilize the organization of the whole system. Distinctions are not drawn in terms of the either/or duality of exclusive opposites, but are accepted as part of a more encompassing and connected **recursive complementarity** (Keeney & Ross, 1985). 'Recursive complementarity refers to the higher-order view of a distinction where the interaction between its different sides is emphasised. Here, two sides must maintain a difference to interact, while the interaction connects them as a whole system. Recursive complementarity thus points to how the different sides of a relation participate as a complementary connection and yet remain distinct' (Keeney & Ross, 1985, p. 35).

For example, within the group of children I worked with during this research project, when one child physically attacked another by hitting and biting, the rest of the group members often responded by cowering into their own little corner, and consequently excluding this child. In keeping with this aggressive, symptomatic behaviour, it would have been easy to use the labels of an ‘abuser’, and a group of ‘victims’. From an ecosystemic epistemological base, the behaviour is seen as indicative of relational patterns that include the themes of abuse and power. In this example, the ‘abuser’(who may be asking for attention in the only way he or she knows how) is then also ‘victimized’(especially within a group context) by being excluded. The apparent ‘victims’ thus also become abusive and powerful by ignoring the attention-seeking behaviour, and so the pattern often becomes perpetuated within the system, by the ‘abuser’ repeating the symptomatic behaviour. This type of pattern elucidates the assumption of recursive complementarity in systems.

Another very important assumption underlying the ecosystemic epistemology is that **observers are always part of that which they observe**. If we consider the previous example, it is clear that I have drawn a distinction by using the linguistic frames of ‘abuser’ and ‘victim’. My perceptions of ‘abuser’ and ‘victim’ are based on my personal life experiences and biases. Other people observing the children might have used completely different terms to describe the same process, as they would be seeing the children through their own personal lenses. Descriptions of what is observed thus reveal properties of the observer (Keeney, 1982).

In the process of describing, distinctions are continually being drawn. Thus ‘knowing’ a world, necessitates drawing distinctions. Since drawing a distinction or punctuating a system is a way of constructing a world, knowing and constructing are inseparable (Keeney, 1982).

Following on from this, an ecosystemic thinker / researcher / therapist realizes that

his or her knowledge of the world, which is perceived as ‘real’, is always a consequence of his or her own personal constructed world of experience (Keeney, 1983). Any punctuation or demarcation of a whole system (circuit) is always arbitrary – every place is a beginning and an end (Keeney, 1983). Keeney also describes how in an attempt to understand the ‘truth’, observers make **arbitrary punctuations** based on their own frame of reference. (This principle, known as self-reference, is discussed further under the heading: Second-order Cybernetics). This **truth (knowledge) is relative** and dependent on the total context in which it is formed, and thus lies within the eyes of the beholders. Each member of the system acts in terms of his or her own self-referentiality in constructing his or her own ‘truth’ or reality. This relativity and interdependence of processes between the members thus enables the continuous evolution of new meanings, and the construction of a shared reality within systems (refer to the heading: Social Constructionism).

First- and second-order cybernetics

According to Becvar and Becvar (1996) it is important to note the paradigmatic shift of systems theory from a simpler, first-order cybernetic epistemology, to a more complex second-order cybernetics of cybernetics approach.

First-order cybernetics. This implies that reality operates according to the basic principles of a cybernetic system, that is, the principles of recursiveness and feedback / self-correction (Keeney, 1983). These principles are discussed above in terms of feedback loops, equifinality, congruence and holism.

Second-order cybernetics. Cybernetics of cybernetics (Von Foerster, 1974) no longer only views systems in the context of interactional relationship, but also at a higher level of

abstraction that includes the observer in that which is observed. As discussed previously, it is at the level where the complete circuit, including the observer, interacts with and reflects back on itself. The circuit thus becomes a self-referential system. Accordingly, Varela (1976, p. 29) defines a whole system as any domain of 'self-referential, mutual, reciprocal interactions'. In order to study systems, therefore, it is assumed that the principle of self-reference is acknowledged, and that observers include themselves in relation to that which is observed. Observers necessarily describe the system of which they are a part. Maturana (1970) explains that we become observers by interacting with the recursively generated representations of our own interactions within systems.

Any communication (including this dissertation) can thus be defined as describing 'our' (meaning the complete circuit, including all the members, of which the arbitrary delimitation 'I', is always a part) representations of our interactions (Keeney, 1983). This self-referential way of description, which places the autonomy of the observer at the centre of his or her worldview, is consequently also linked to important aspects of research, such as *responsibility* and *ethics*. These are discussed further in chapter 3 of this dissertation.

Boscolo, Cecchin, Hoffman and Penn (1987) elucidate the work by Von Foerster (1981) concerning the notion that because observers are part of what they observe, there is no separate observed system. Furthermore, because observers perceive the world through their own lens of family and culture, the final representation is not something private and self-contained. The resulting product is thus not one of a fixed, representational reality, but rather one of an 'observer community' (Boscolo et al, 1987, p. 14).

Postmodernism

In keeping with what has already been discussed with regard to a second-order view of systems, social construction theory is inextricably linked as a set of lenses that enforces an awareness of the way in which we perceive and experience the world (Hoffman, 1990). **Postmodernism**, can be described as the cultural backdrop from which social constructionistic theory has drawn (Burr, 1995). Underlying this theory is a way of thinking in which the feedback loops of cybernetic systems are described more in terms of intersubjective loops of dialogue (Hoffman, 1991). Potter (1996) elucidates the position of postmodernism in relation to three main themes:

A feature of society. He describes how postmodern society includes computer networks that enable people to communicate across time zones. Capitalism has transcended the boundaries of nation states, and connects people worldwide due to increasingly advanced technological developments. The way in which we can now ‘see’ what is happening on the other side of the world, or ‘speak’ to others via media such as the Internet, for example, has necessarily led to the blurring of issues about the very nature of knowledge and facts.

Postmodernism and theories of knowledge. Lyotard (1984) speaks about how the radical changes in scientific thought and development have led to what he understands as a crisis regarding man’s need to try to understand and legitimate our social world in terms of all-embracing creeds, such as that of Marxism. Lyotard (1984) criticizes these types of creeds as being particular ways of using language to legitimate scientific, theoretical ‘knowledge’ as ultimate truths. He describes this ‘knowledge’ more in terms of a traditional, pre-scientific form of knowing that is embedded in culture, namely, a narrative knowing. Although Lyotard

acknowledges the role and usage of language in his work, he is criticized for not including his own narrative and reflexive exploration as part of his work (Potter, 1996).

Postmodernism and description. According to Potter (1996) postmodernism is particularly about description, being closely connected with the arts, literature and cultural studies. He views description as acknowledgement of both representation and reflexivity. He speaks of postmodernist description (e.g. a historical sequence in a film), as the telling of history not only as processes and connections, but also as events that are memorable to the narrator. He suggests that the narrator's story is built up of cultural images and constructs. The point that he makes is not that history becomes irrelevant, but that its relevance is constructed as part of the narrator's story (Potter, 1996).

Social Constructionism

In the light of this backdrop, **social construction theory** is based on the assumptions that ideas, concepts, and memories arise from **social interchange** and are mediated through **language**. According to Hoffman (1991, p. 5) 'All knowledge, the social constructionists hold, evolves in the space between people, in the realm of the "common world" or the "common dance". Only through the on-going conversation with intimates does the individual develop a sense of identity or an inner voice'.

Berger and Luckmann (1966) distinguish three processes involved in the way that any social group constructs and maintains its 'knowledge':

Typification. This is the process by which people sort their perceptions into types and classes. We learn these cultural categories, for example, co-dependency, from family, friends, and teachers. We then perpetuate the social construction of these concepts as *real* elements through the use of language when speaking with others.

Institutionalization. This is the process by which institutions arise around sets of typifications, for example, the institution of marriage. Institutionalization enables families and societies to organize and maintain their 'knowledge'.

Legitimization. Berger and Luckmann (1966) use this term to refer to those processes that legitimize typification and institutionalization within a society. When an institution gains sufficient legitimization, it is perceived to have an external, fixed reality of its own. Language is used to legitimize these constructed social realities. According to Freedman and Combs (1996), it is by agreeing on the meaning of a word that we agree on a description, and then that description shapes the meanings of subsequent descriptions. These descriptions direct our perceptions toward making still further descriptions, and away from making others. Our intersubjective dialogue thus tells us how to see and understand the world. Anderson and Goolishian (1988, p. 378) write 'Language does not mirror nature; language creates the natures we know'.

According to Berger and Luckmann (1966) *reification* is the overall encompassing process of which the three processes described above are parts. Reification includes accepting the products of human activities as if they were something other than human products. This process is necessary in terms of allowing us to speak with others efficiently. In other words, without reifying

‘knowledge’, we could take absolutely nothing for granted, and would need to contextualize every single word that we spoke. The importance is, however, to remain aware that even seemingly useful social constructs are neither part of some external, pre-existent reality (Freedman & Combs, 1996) nor individual phenomena, but are distinctions that have been drawn through social interactions between human beings (McNamee & Gergen, 1992).

A social constructionistic framework enabled me, as participant-researcher, to remain open and flexible regarding the apparent meanings of both the children and myself. I did not need to feel intimidated or overwhelmed by cultural ‘knowledge’ that I seemingly did not have. Neither did I need to be an expert regarding my own culture. I could simply bring myself, my experiences and past learning, and enter into dialogue with the children. I was not in search of supposedly fixed answers, but believed that simply by being curious and sharing my story with the children, I could further explore their stories and meanings about life.

Social constructionistic thinking also underlies my belief in the possibilities for difference and change. As quoted earlier, it is within the ‘common dance’ (Hoffman, 1991) or space where dialogue happens between us, that we develop and grow within ourselves. My aims in doing this research included offering the children a context where they could practice and incorporate different skills into their behavioural repertoires, and thus their meaning systems, which might then enhance their personal growth in relationships with others.

Narrative approach

‘The stories people live as well as their stories about those stories, is all that a therapist (researcher) has to work with. In this sense, therapy (research) is a conversation, an exchange of stories ...’ (Keeney, 1983. p. 195).

As discussed earlier in this chapter, Bateson (1972) theorized that it is the perception of difference that triggers all new responses in systems. He also showed how the **mapping of events through time** is essential for the perception of this difference, for the detection of change. Freedman and Combs (1996) describe how the narrative metaphor of Michael White combines Bateson's concepts, in that a story is a map that extends through time. White (1995) emphasizes that he is not speaking in representational terms, as if he is proposing that a story is a map of the territory of one's life. He says that he is not talking about stories as if they are descriptions of one's life, but rather the structure of life itself.

In telling stories, and in the process of interpretation, we derive meanings that have real effects on our behaviours and the decisions we make in our lives. White (1995, p. 13) says that 'it is to propose that it is the story or self-narrative that determines which aspects of our lived experience get expressed, and it is to propose that it is the story of self-narrative that determines the shape of the expression of our lived experience. It's to propose that we live by the stories that we have about our lives, that these stories actually shape our lives, constitute our lives, and that they "embrace" our lives'.

White's particular emphasis is not on trying to solve problems, but rather on working with people in such a way as to share in their stories and to render 'thicker' or more lucid descriptions of their stories.

White (1995) emphasizes that there is no single story in life, as there is no story that is free of ambiguity and contradiction. It is in living through the ambiguity that further meaning-making occurs, and sub-stories unfold. It is within the telling and living of the multi-storied processes of life, that therapists / researchers can bring forth and thicken (Geertz, 1978) possible **alternative stories** that do not support or sustain the problems presenting in people's lives. Within new

stories, people create different opportunities to live out new self-images. Consequently new possibilities for relationships arise, and new futures become possible (Freedman & Combs, 1996). These assumptions fitted well with the aims of my research, namely, that I wanted to investigate the meanings that these children had about their lives, as well as offer a space where alternative meanings and ways of being could be explored.

Culture as story is an important aspect of a narrative approach (White, 1995). White (1995) explains how within every culture there are dominant stories about what it means to be a person of worth in that culture. Dominant stories based on discourses about what is 'right' are culture-specific. Discourse can be defined as 'a system of statements, practices, and institutional structures that share common values' (Hare-Mustin, R., 1994, p. 19). These dominant cultural discourses then influence people to think and behave in certain ways, so reproducing the dominant way of being of a particular culture.

Children are particularly vulnerable to the dominant discourses, especially discourses that disqualify their voices. Working from a narrative perspective, the therapist (researcher) creates contexts, through sharing in the child's stories, in which the child's knowledge and skills can be honoured. (Morgan, 1999). The saying of 'not-yet-said' stories becomes possible through dialogue with others (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988). Instead of Humpty Dumpty simply being put back together again, this approach encourages the children to tell how Humpty Dumpty's cracks cannot just be fixed, and how Humpty Dumpty can consult on the effects of his fall. He can also learn different ways of preventing further tumbles, and / or find ways to free-fall (Morgan, 1999).

White (1991) speaks of the importance of **outsider-witnesses** in providing contexts that amplify and authenticate these stories. He describes **definitional ceremonies** as contexts in which

people, in the presence of others (outsider-witnesses), bring forth opportunities for both self- and collective- proclamations of worth, vitality and being. Outsider-witnesses acknowledge and encounter not only the story that they are hearing, but also the privilege that is granted to them as they weave their own stories into the lives of others (Myerhoff, 1986). From a humble position where witnesses take responsibility for their responses by fitting them into the contexts of their personal lives, they can identify and reflect on **unique outcomes** (sparkling moments of difference), which they perceive in the stories of others (White, 1991). It is through the telling of history through storying that these unique outcomes or exceptions render alternative stories. These unique outcomes are always further explored through questioning and seeking for **richer descriptions** of the person's story.

This research project included weekly sessions with children in a group context. By simply entering into conversations with the children, I was exposed to glimpses of their stories. Morgan (1999) tells how once there is conversation with a child, it is possible to take small steps toward celebrating who they are. For example, in the village where I worked, when a child told me that it was his or her birthday, this seemed like a different voice and an opportunity to co-create new meanings. In this village it was as if every day was the same. Life happened in the streets. Life happened in gangs. Individual celebrations like birthdays were seemingly insignificant and not validated in any way. So it was this different kind of voice that I, as an outsider-witness, reflected on, encouraged and celebrated with the children. It was then also within this type of interaction that each child's unique, individual, self was given a place for expression and differentiation. Weingarten (1991, p. 289) writes '... the self continually creates itself through narratives that include other people who are reciprocally woven into these narratives'.

The way in which I have written this document is also a telling of my story, in which you, the reader, are now invited to participate as an outsider-witness in the further construction of meanings.

In summary, in the exploration of the meanings of what it meant to be a child in this village, and in the co-creation of a context where these children could learn and experience different interactional ways of being, the underlying assumptions of an ecosystemic epistemology and theoretical underpinnings of social constructionistic theory were necessarily important. The narrative approach to therapy was also addressed as a backdrop to understanding the significance of storying with regard to the children, the researcher, as well as with regard to this text.

The following chapter includes a description of naturalistic research methodology used. Existing literature on specific aspects of play within group contexts is also discussed.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The design and methodology used in this research are based on the naturalistic research paradigm. As discussed in the previous chapter, post modernistic thinking and social-constructionism are the theoretical lenses through which I interpreted my research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe naturalistic research in terms of five underlying axioms that are clearly recognizable in their reflection of social-constructionistic theory. These axioms include the following:

that realities are multiple, constructed, and holistic;

that the knower and known are interactive and inseparable;

that only time- and context-bound working hypotheses are possible;

that all entities are in a state of mutual simultaneous shapings, so that it is impossible to distinguish causes from effects;

that inquiry is value-bound.

A description of specific aspects of the naturalistic design and methodology based on these axioms follows.

Statement of the problem

My research design and methodology is based on constructionistic thinking where reality is not perceived as reified and objective, or as external to the observer. Instead, it accepts that we can only know that which we construct through language in relationship with others (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988). According to Moon, Dillon and Sprenkle (1990) qualitative research questions tend to be open-ended and discovery-oriented, often being modified as the study proceeds. The

focus of the study is not in seeking a singular, stable and predictable ultimate truth ‘out-there’, as in the conventional scientific paradigm (Atkinson, Heath & Chenail, 1991), but rather in seeking to understand the holistic complexities and context of the research problem.

The aim of my research was to explore the *meanings* around being a child in this particular village. According to Le Vay in Cattanach (2002), children carry internal stories with them as a way of understanding, describing and making sense of their personal and social relationships. His notion of narrative identity is based on the theory that in sequencing and ordering their life events through the process of storying via the medium of play, children can understand more about who they are and their place in the world. My assumptions included that the village in which these children lived was a dangerous, confusing and unpredictable place. I was interested in using play as a means of gaining access to the children’s personal stories (and meaning structures) regarding their coping skills and interactions with others in such a place.

Linked to this were secondary aims, which included using the context of intergroup relationships and the therapeutic relationship with me to explore and develop the uniqueness of their individual selves. I also wanted to offer the children a space where they could believe in the possibility of change, for example, by experiencing their part in the evolution of new, co-created meanings (cf. ch. 5). *Meanings* about the world in which these children lived were thus never accepted as ultimate truths, but were instead *meanings* that could be co-created through various people’s active engagement in their construction (Terrel & Lyddon, 1996).

Within the context of the group in the village, certain *meanings* were co-created. Within supervisory contexts, languaging about my experiences in the village brought forth other realities, and the unfolding of other significant *meanings*. Now, as you the reader participate in a different way by reading this dissertation, further co-created *meanings*, which are informed by your

personal values and assumptions will inevitably emerge and become part of this work. A collaborative process regarding the meanings of the children in this village will thus continue to unfold.

Context

According to Moon et al (1990) qualitative research occurs in a fluid, flexible and responsive way in relation to the data and its context. For me, this meant that it was important to immerse myself in the context from which the data was derived. I needed to get a feel for the setting in which I was working, as events and actions needed to be addressed in a holistic way by exploring the natural context.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe how naturalistic inquiry demands a natural setting, because phenomena of study, whatever they may be, take their meaning as much from their contexts as they do from themselves. For me to find any way of exploring these children's world, I needed to become part of their unique village over time.

'No phenomenon can be understood out of relationship to the time and context that spawned, harbored and supported it' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 189). This process necessitated that I initially acknowledged myself as a perturbing element within a community context to which I was extremely foreign. I could then, as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) continue my research over an extended period to systematically identify and explore all other significant mutual shaping that evolved within the context.

Immersion in the context. In contextualizing this research it is important to know that I was sent to this particular community village to gain practical experience for my Masters degree in Clinical Psychology. In accordance with the underlying ecosystemic epistemology

according to which I was being trained, behaviour was seen to be contextually bound, and the observer always a part of that which he or she observed (O'Connor & Lubin, 1984). I was asked to find ways of embedding myself in the context, and so find an area of concern that connected with my views and being, and with which I could become involved. I was presented with a given place filled with opportunities and struggles, and was left to find myself, express myself, and fulfil my own particular needs in relationship with that place and its people.

Context of the therapeutic playgroup. The physical building in which I officially worked was the Child Welfare Offices in the area. Located adjacent to this building was a crèche. The children immediately associated me with these two places. I was labelled 'Juffrou', an Afrikaans word meaning teacher, from the very first day. Another strong assumption existed among the people of this village regarding Child Welfare. This was a social work system where the staff members were seen as helpers, possibly even *saviours*, in terms of supporting the community through government-sanctioned social interventions. The people of the community initially seemed to associate me closely with these meanings as well; that is, I was seen to be involved with social actions, such as the placement of children in foster care.

The hall – a context for the meeting of different realities. Burr (1995, p. 4) describes how 'the goings-on between people in the course of their everyday lives are seen as the practices during which our shared versions of knowledge are constructed'. The way in which I could gain understanding of these children's realities was thus not through objective observation, such as testing, but instead by engaging with them through social processes and interactions. The

place where these interactions occurred, that is, the Child Welfare Hall, was therefore a context for the meeting of different realities.

Initially my reality included needing to help or *save* the children in a way that was different from what they were used to. I wanted to hug them. I wanted to give them each some focused attention. They seemed so neglected, as if they were sent out into the streets early in the morning, and for the rest of the day had to fend for themselves. These were my constructions on entering this context, which was so different from what surrounded me in my childhood. Caring may have been shown, but not in ways that I had learnt to understand. I needed a space in which I could show the type of care that I knew how to show; a space that would enable our talking and playing together. Their reality included needing a space large enough for them to run around and shout loudly. The hall in the Child Welfare building was the middle ground. It had four walls. I could attempt to contain the children in some way. It had a wide, open space (often not quite wide enough!) between the four walls where they could still feel free to bring their extremely energetic, vibrant little selves.

The hall was significant too as the place where the people congregated to worship God, to attend any formal meeting and to be part of any important community event. It was accepted as a place of sharing; a place where we, too, began to share. Thus the hall was simply defined as the physical space in which we could meet and connect. There was no fixed or predetermined knowledge of how our coming together would evolve.

The context of a group. An inherent process that occurs in the context of groups is that of the development of group rules and norms (Yalom, 1975). Yalom also says that it is within a group context that each member behaves in ways that mirror their behavioural patterns within

the wider social context of which they are a part. A group is thus seemingly a miniature social microcosm, being representative of that wider social context. The particular way in which the rules and norms evolved over the two-year period, in relation to my personal biases and assumptions, and the beliefs and consequent behavioural patterns that existed among the children, were useful information for my research. A rich description of this evolutionary process is presented at the beginning of chapter 5.

Novy in Cattanach (2002) describes another important factor regarding the usefulness of a group context for therapeutic work with children. She says that this type of context invites experiences of validation and friendship. It is in having the opportunity to be part of something and feeling integral to its success that often helps children combat feelings of social isolation and worthlessness. New parts of their identities can be constructed through their experiences of collaborative creation within the group. She believes that it is through connecting with others that the children also connect with themselves.

Pfeifer (1992) proposes that particularly within children's groups, two complementary *cultures* exist. He says that *culture* 'is the network that supports us all and connects us to one another' (Pfeifer, 1992 p. 360). He highlights the importance of seeking to understand the *indigenous peer culture* (the culture the children bring), in collaborating to build a meaning system that is uniquely designed to address the needs within a group therapeutically, that is, the *therapeutic group culture*. He also says that it is 'by understanding the process by which a particular culture or meaning system emerges and develops within a children's group that the therapist may gain access to the developmental worlds of individual members, which are revealed in the children's collective representations (Pfeifer, 1992, p. 358).

The thinking underlying the formation of a group context for my research was based on the above ideas. I worked from the assumptions that by including myself as a participant-observer within the group context, I could bear witness to the ever-changing interactions and emerging culture of the therapeutic group. My aim was thus to co-create a space where I could gain access to the meaning structures of the group as a whole, thus enabling the exploration of individual meanings of what it meant to be a child in the community.

Sampling

‘Purposive sampling can be pursued in ways that will maximize the investigator’s ability to devise grounded theory that takes adequate account of local conditions, local mutual shapings, and local values (for possible transferability)’ (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 40).

Whereas in positivistic research a sample is chosen that in some way is seen to be representative of a population to which the results may be generalized; naturalistic inquiry, being context-bound, deals with each context in a specific and localized way. Instead of selecting a sample where the focus is on the similarities that can be developed into generalizations, purposive sampling is used to detail the many specifics that give a particular context its unique flavour.

Moon et al. (1990) say that for qualitative research designs, small samples are deliberately chosen because they seem to fit research goals. There is a tendency to look intensively at a few cases in their natural context, rather than to take a broader look at many cases. This makes sense since the focus for this kind of research is most commonly from generalization to theory, rather than from generalization to populations.

In our group the process of sampling was linked to *the ritual of meeting* in the village.

For practical reasons, owing to my training schedule, I could only be with the children for about two hours every Wednesday morning over a period of two years. Initially I was aware of how rigid this felt for me. Always the same time. Always the same day of the week. In the beginning there seemed to be an inflexibility in that. However, I also began to notice, and to appreciate the ritualistic value of these meetings, and how this helped me in the selection of a sample that was fitting within the context, and also appropriate to my research questions and design.

For me the ritualistic nature of our meetings included an early Wednesday morning walk in the street, a gathering of any children who wanted to join me, approaching the hall together, and then sharing with each other for a couple of hours. The uncertainty of what happened on a practical level and interpersonally in each session, was complemented by the certainty that it would take place. So each week, a dependable space of meeting was created where some kind of meaningful process could evolve.

It was apparent within the first few weeks that the group consisted of mostly the same children each week. The predominant ages were three to five years old. Initially a pre-school group of about 15 children began to develop. This number varied between about 10 and 20 children over the course of the two years. Donovan and McIntyre (1990) discuss the importance of *consistency* in structuring a play area or therapeutic space for a group of young children. They describe how children are intensely symbolic by nature, and how children are exquisitely perceptive of, and sensitive to, the space around them. It is assumed, therefore, that everything about the therapeutic space, including the specific time allocated to it, as well as the presence of the other members of the sample group, begins to be experienced by the child in a very personally meaningful way.

Over a period, this ritualistic meeting experience with its consistency and dependability, became a comfortable habit for the children. It was within this space where individuals became accustomed to the other members of the sample group each week, that the development of all kinds of creative variations and differences was possible (Donovan & McIntyre, 1990).

Participants and the role of the researcher

According to Moon et al. (1990) the subjects in qualitative research are called participants, as they assume a more active and egalitarian role than the subjects in a typical experimental study. The researcher, on the other hand, usually assumes the role of participant-observer, interacting with the participants frequently over an extended period. Reason & Rowan (1981) describe how in participatory research, the researcher's role is like a co-producer of learning, as she or he is dependent on personal interaction with those from whom the data comes. 'The task of the researcher becomes one of creating an atmosphere of respectful receptivity to the subject's experience of the phenomena' (Becker, 1978, pp. 6-7).

Lincoln & Guba (1985) describe how only the human as instrument is sufficiently adaptable to be able to encounter the complexity of the meanings that emerge through interactions with others. Naturalistic research assumes the existence of realities that are multiple, constructed, holistic, relative to context and evolving over time. Only the human is capable of identifying the inherent values that underlie these many different constructed realities, and so be in the position to take the resultant biases into account.

A qualitative researcher, as an important instrument of the research, assumes and accepts the presence and **utilization of tacit knowledge**. Lincoln and Guba (1985) discuss the importance of appreciating and including the 'felt' knowledge of all those involved in the research. This type

of knowledge ‘speaks’ beyond the use of literal qualities in giving meaning to experiences that include abstract ideas and feelings as integral parts of a process that can fairly and accurately mirror the value patterns of all those involved (Terrell & Lyddon, 1996).

Initially, I tapped into my tacit structures, which included a strong mothering voice (having two children of my own who were similar in age to the children in the sample group). This tacit knowledge enabled me, in my initial insecurity and fear within such unfamiliar surroundings, to connect with the children intuitively (cf. ch.1). My mothering voice was something I could depend on at that time - a voice that enabled me to feel some degree of safety. Of course, my biases and assumptions regarding mothering were also very restrictive and limiting at times, in that I needed to make things ‘better for the children’. My beliefs about ‘better for the children’ included, for example, that they needed to be more hygienic and clean physically. In retrospect, this need was much more about how difficult it was for me initially to interact physically with people I saw as unkempt. However, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 198) to explore meanings co-constructed in research, it is necessary to use ‘tacit knowledge at full strength and in most explicit fashion. Anything else dulls the instrument and reduces the value of the inquiry’. A further discussion of shifts in my tacit knowledge follow in chapter 5.

As human instruments, qualitative researchers can also respond to feedback. They can adapt and simultaneously collect information about multiple factors, at multiple levels. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe how the human as instrument has the ability to process data immediately, and thus formulate new hypotheses that can be tested within the same context where they were created. In using the human as instrument, unexpected responses can be explored further by giving richer descriptions in the co-construction of meanings.

Working from this perspective I could remain open and flexible in the process, and feel free to approach each session with few expectations and much curiosity. I could then respond to whatever happened in the session in whichever way seemed fitting and appropriate at that particular time. By using myself as an important instrument of my research, a context of spontaneity, flexibility, adaptability, and diversity was created in which richer meanings could emerge.

An-Maree as co-therapist/researcher. A very important aspect of my research project was that I worked with a co-therapist, An-Maree Nel. As An-Maree and I worked together throughout the two years of clinical training, her presence impacted greatly on this research project. All aspects of the research, including the problem definition, sampling, methodology used, as well as the collection and analysis of data, were influenced by her presence. Due to practical constraints in writing this thesis, I do not always explicitly mention An-Maree. The assumption is made that you, the reader, acknowledge her presence as an integral part of the context of this research. In order for you to do this I now provide some background information regarding An-Maree's relation to specific aspects of the project, as well some key aspects of her role.

Problem definition. As An-Maree and I were placed together by the university to gain practical experience in community work as co-therapists in this particular village, it was inevitable that we would impact on each other's work. I think that the attempt to understand how the little children of this village managed to survive such extreme circumstances with such spontaneity and enthusiasm touched An-Maree and I in different ways. We both knew

personal struggles for **voice** and recognition in various contexts of our lives. Weingarten's (2000, p. 392) definition of **voice** includes, 'I saw voice not as an individual's achievement of self-knowledge but, rather, a possibility that depends on the willingness of the listeners that make up the person's community. In this view, voice is contingent on who listens with what attention and attunement. Voice depends on witnessing'. An-Maree and I both knew the importance of the type of witnessing that Weingarten (2000) describes. Based on this, we were both attracted by the possibility of creating a space for young children to practice different ways of being, without restrictive judgment and criticism, that is, a space where caring witnessing could occur. On a self-reflective level, the children, by their very nature, offered An-Maree and I a space where we too could experience a sense of freedom from harsh judgment and criticism. They could be our witnesses, too.

Both An-Maree and I were also curious about these children's realities. Cecchin (1987) describes how it is from a position of not knowing that an attitude of curiosity is fostered. By being curious about people's specifically unique answers, we, as therapists, can encourage them to develop these answers more fully. This is the 'process of expanding and saying the "unsaid" – the development, through dialogue, of new themes and narratives and, actually, the creation of new histories' (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988, p. 380). It was from this position, over a period of time, that my research problem was defined, and re-defined in various ways, within a context in which An-Maree played an integral part.

Sampling. The way in which the children seemed to join us randomly in the street each Wednesday morning was affected by An-Maree's presence, firstly, in terms of the size

of the sample. On a practical level, as two adults we were able to supervise more young children walking in a group in the street, than if I had been on my own.

Owing to each child's individual personality and needs, there were also naturally those who were especially connected with An-Maree, and who probably would not have continued to be part of the sample if she had not been there. I think specifically that An-Maree's intuitive ability to 'know' the hurt and lonely child enabled many of the abused children to find a safe and gentle space with her.

Methodology used. I believe that An-Maree influenced the type of play used in my research, in the sense that she related very well with children in a more physically passive and peaceful manner than I did. I tend to be very active physically, enjoying all the loud, physical activities, and body movements. An-Maree's strength was evident in her ability to relate through song, storytelling and art.

As we were working with very young children, it would also have been very difficult to make effective use of pair- and trio-groupings without the assistance of another adult. In this respect, I was able to broaden the scope of my research by using a wider variety of alternatives, both with regard to specific group work, as well as specific methods of play.

Collection and analysis of data. An-Maree's presence in terms of the collection and analysis of the data was invaluable with regard to the legitimization of the research (see also 'Special criteria for trustworthiness' at the end of this chapter). Atkinson et al. (1991) argue that in qualitative research where the researcher is a human instrument of the research, no matter what methods may be used, trustworthiness cannot be established. They argue that

'knowledge' is legitimized only through the judgement of an entire community of stakeholders. They argue also, that in the absence of certainty, knowledge becomes an ethical matter, where the judgment of each stakeholder must count. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe the process of triangulation whereby multiple investigators verify the information presented by another. This can be done by comparing the 'same' information as presented by different sources, for example, individual process notes.

An-Maree's roles included that of both a stakeholder and multiple investigator. She and I spent much time reflecting on what we had each individually perceived during a session. We both also made recordings of our experiences in the form of journal entries and process notes, which were checked and compared, and then further discussed with each other, as well as with supervisors in various theoretical and practical training contexts.

Data collection and analysis

According to Moon et al (1990) typical data collection techniques in qualitative studies include participant and non-participant observation, as well as interviewing and document analysis. Usually the data is recorded using handwritten field notes and video and audio recordings. The data is also usually collected over a long period of time. I recorded each session using process notes and journal entries. Video recordings were also made on occasion.

Data analysis is inductive and recursive, generally occurring throughout the data collection phase of the research, rather than at the end of it. Unlike quantitative research where the aim is to prove or disprove a given hypothesis, the goal of this type of analysis is to generate rich descriptions of phenomena and discover theory (Moon et al, 1990). Generative methods thus involve looking closely at data in order to discern pattern, such that constructs and concepts

emerge from the analysis of the observed data rather than being imposed a priori. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe this type of research design as an emergent design, where the interpretation of data is idiographic in nature. Idiographic interpretations respect and depend heavily on local particulars for their validity, including particular investigator-participant interaction, contextual factors involved, the local mutually interacting factors influencing one another and the local values (including the values of the investigator). Total immersion in the context is thus required to legitimate the claim that even partial understanding has been achieved, and that understanding can apply only to that context from which it was derived.

Although I had initial ideas about what I wanted to investigate, it was inconceivable to know enough ahead of the time to devise a design that could adequately include the multiple realities that were to be encountered. I could not have known the patterns that existed among the people in the village prior to my investigation, nor could I have foreseen the mutual shapings that would unfold as I intervened in the context. An emergent design thus accommodates flow and change in accordance with contextual mutual interactions, mutual shapings and feedback spirals.

The use of qualitative methods of play as therapeutic tools. It is especially when working with children that a therapist must be very adept at shifting modalities, and being creative in entering the child's world through symbolic talk, play and activity. Children tend to find comfort in talking or playing *around* an issue rather than addressing it directly (Pfeifer, 1992).

Our initial entry into the representational worlds of these young children was through both song and dance. An-Maree and I connected with these two artistic forms of expression as part of our own personal stories. The expressive use of song and dance soon became part of the

ritual of each meeting. At the beginning of each session, we would form a circle, sing and move rhythmically together.

Pesso (1969) describes how the formation of a circle in a group usually emphasizes a sense of unity and security. Together with this experience of support, however, he says that there may also be the experience of loss of individuality and freedom of the group members. It was thus important for the children in the group to be involved in many other different activities as well, where expression of their uniqueness and individual traits was encouraged, and the meanings further explored within the context of the group.

The specific type of play that followed this introductory ritual varied in each session. We included dramatic role-playing, storytelling, art, sculpting and different games, as varying ways of exploring what was emotionally significant to these children at this particular time in their lives, and their meanings around such matters.

All the types of play used thus related to the main aim of the research. Secondary aims were also addressed. These are elucidated in the following discussion.

Dramatic role-playing. The type of play where the children assumed various roles in the expression of a dramatic sequence was commonly used in the group. Hughes (1991) gives two fundamental explanations for both the social and therapeutic benefits of this type of dramatic play. Firstly, within the context of a group, by definition, some type of group co-operation among members is required. Hughes (1991, p. 198) says that ‘sociodramatic play is *organized make-believe in a social setting, with a set of rules to ensure co-operation on the part of the players*’.

Secondly, dramatic play allows children to experiment with a variety of roles. By doing this, children are not only afforded the opportunity to determine the appropriateness of their particular way of relating in a role toward others, but also seem to develop a better understanding of other people's roles.

For my research, the use of drama within the group became an important vehicle for exploring the children's experiences within their wider social context. The type of enactment that occurred was improvised. According to Sawyer in Sawyer (1997) this meant that no conversations were scripted in advance, but instead they were spontaneously enacted, resulting in conversational stage dialogues that were very true to life. In other words, the children's acts on stage reflected their everyday life realities. Silverstein in Sawyer (1997) claims that culture is created and reproduced through these types of improvised encounters in everyday life. Thus by focusing on the type of language usage, the tones in which the children spoke, their non-verbal expressions, as well as their specific actions which they perceived as fitting with a particular role, valuable information regarding their everyday interactions within their wider community could be elicited. For example, in exploring the relationships between the children and their mothers, I focused on the children's enactment of authority figures, as well as their spontaneous, dramatic responses to these figures. I used personal notes, journal entries and transcripts of video recordings.

Different perspectives of everyday social situations were richly explored by encouraging the children to assume various kinds of roles. They were able to try out new roles within a relatively safe setting, and then rehearse these roles while experiencing feedback from others within the group. This was not only used to facilitate the development of a wider repertoire of social skills, but also enabled each individual child to experiment with possible alternative ways of

being in solving specific personal problems. For example, many of these children had learnt that the use of four-letter words and aggressive physical lashing out at others were the only ways to express dissatisfaction and anger. It was through role-playing, and related dramatic processes, such as the use of make-up, masks, fantasy costumes and props, that they began to discourage each other from this type of behaviour. For example, one of the older, physically taller and more aggressive children, liked to put on the grizzly bear's mask. He could then snarl, lash out with his paws, and scare the other children.

One day one of the other children decided that she had had enough of the growling bear, and offered the 'bear' the monkey mask. As the boy behind the bear mask was perceived by the others as not being afraid of anything, he was obliged to respond by covering his face with the monkey mask. From behind the mask of a monkey, the 'bear' could show a side of himself that was much cuter, friendlier and more likeable. He experienced difference in not needing to be the 'bear', especially with the very positive, acknowledging feedback he received from the others. A group of monkeys joined in the fun.

Jenkyns (1996) describes how role-playing often offers the safety needed for people to explore the parts of themselves that might otherwise be too risky to express. The taking on of roles seems to allow participants to create an apparent 'not-me' boundary for themselves, which then seems to enable the expression of the often hidden or masked 'me' aspects of who they also are. The saying of the unsaid parts of themselves thus becomes possible (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988). Containment, holding and consequent experiences of safety are also provided by the temporary structuring of the world in theatrical form. Related to this, Jenkyns (1996) emphasizes the importance of the creation of a clearly defined **enactment** space.

In our group, we were very fortunate to be working in a hall that had a real stage. Whenever any role-playing took place, the children were able to enter their own theatrical world by stepping up onto the stage. Obviously if any role became too threatening, leaving children feeling too vulnerable at any time, they would have the freedom to de-role simply by climbing down from the stage. The safety boundaries created by en-roling and de-roling were further exaggerated by the use of theatrical costumes, make-up and masks.

Another aspect of role-playing with the children in this way was the existence of an audience. Members of the audience became witnesses to the role-playing experiences of their fellow group members. Although White's work (1995) describes a different type of therapeutic context, he does reflect on the significance of outsider-witnesses as integral to the therapeutic experience in terms of acknowledging and authenticating the stories of others. Jenkyns (1996) explains, too, how a person does not become detached by virtue of being a member of the audience, but instead that one is involved in one's own role of bearing witness by responding and at times being deeply touched by the actions of those on stage. Alternative stories and new meanings that emerge, need to be dramatized, and put into circulation (Freedman & Combs, 1996). For example, in our group, pamphlets regarding the dramatic performances were sent home with the children as invitations for the family members to be part of the audience. In so doing they would also necessarily become witnesses and members of the community that could help spread the news of difference regarding the children's personal stories (Novy in Cattanach, 2002). The creation of a typical theatrical milieu, almost like that of film-making, was further emphasized at times by a member of the audience actually photographing and / or video-taping the dramatic sequence. These video-taped sequences also served as a useful form of data.

Storytelling. Once upon a time ... And the air immediately becomes filled with a sense of anticipation and playfulness. Children, particularly very young ones who are not yet developmentally capable of operational or abstract cognitive processes (Piaget in Mussen, Conger, Kagan & Huston, 1984) intuitively seem to know better than all of us that storytelling comes straight from the heart. Divinyi (1995, p. 37) tells us how clients often need to 'hear with the heart first', making the use of storytelling an invaluable therapeutic tool. Both the storyteller and listeners are involved in the heartfelt creation and unfolding of pictures in the mind. Both are part of the weaving together of many different textures and fibres, as the fabric of each new tale is created. This fabric becomes the safe, holding space where relevant themes can be elicited and then slowly unravelled.

Within our group we used storytelling in various ways. Firstly, as described by Williams (1995), stories can be used metaphorically, especially with young children, to accentuate a particular point. There was usually some kind of message that revealed itself through the content of the story. The message/s that I selected to accentuate in a particular session were always based on concerns that had emerged previously within the group. For example, one girl in the group was physically very big for her age. She was both extremely tall and overweight. Her physical movements looked unco-ordinated and awkward. Some of the group members had begun to tease her, saying she was like a giant. This resulted in her not wanting to take part in many of the activities. Her physical appearance not only made her feel different from the other children, but she was now also being treated differently, and her negative self-meanings were perpetuated by her exclusion from the group.

In the following session, I told the story of a beautiful, little kitten that got stuck up a tree. The kitten was so afraid, but none of the children were able to help, as they were all too short.

Luckily, a giant lived in their town, and although the children were sometimes afraid of the giant, they knew that only the giant would be tall enough to help the poor kitty. So they asked the giant to help. Of course, he was only too pleased to be asked by the children whom he had secretly wanted to play with for a long time. He carefully helped the kitten down, and after that, the children realized what a kind, special giant he was, and how fortunate they were to have him as a friend.

Morgan in Morgan (1999) describes how the use of a narrative approach assumes that the therapist working with young children does not have to come up with specific ideas about what to do. Her role, instead, includes looking out for unique outcomes, or exceptions [as defined by White (1995)] to their dominant stories, which can be used as doorways to explore alternative possibilities. These alternative stories are entered into with a spirit of inquiry and curiosity. I remained aware, therefore, of not only giving my meanings to the metaphors used, but also leaving space for the children's own experiential interpretations. For example, after hearing the story described above, the children had a wider range of possibilities for perceiving and interacting with a 'giant'.

I also used storytelling as a way of connecting and sharing, both within the group itself, as well as with the children's family members at home. Williams (1995) describes how we are often reminded of our own stories when listening to the story of another. She says that by sending clients home with questions based on a new curiosity about their own family stories and heritage, a **confirmed existence** can emerge. On a content level, therefore, in many instances the stories that the children heard about from their families as legacies affirmed their sense of belonging in terms of a particular family and culture. While on a process level, the sharing of stories enabled the children to communicate with their family members in a different, possibly less threatening

way. It is important to note that extreme substance-abuse, violence and physical abuse was part of everyday home life for many of these children. By telling stories, therefore, they could approach their family members in ways that were not perceived as accusatory, thus eliciting much less defensive responses, especially from authority figures.

Many times when I felt the need to seek richer descriptions of an issue brought to me by the children, I used a progressive type of storytelling. Each child was given the opportunity to add onto what had previously been said. In the frame and format of a story, the children seemed to experience a greater sense of safety, and were able to express themselves more freely. Divinyi (1995) reminds us of the freedom in telling stories. The freedom to be expansive, creative, and simply to have a lot of fun.

Art. Another form of play used that inherently brought a sense of individuality and freedom to each individual in the group, was that of **art**. We painted, we drew, we ‘cut-and-stuck’ and we coloured in. ‘There is no must in art because art is free’ (Wassily Kandinsky in Cameron, 1992). Williams (1995) describes how children have an amazing ability to colour outside the lines, to draw all over the pages, to simply *run free*. It is within this magic of art that children often give expression to their moods, inner conflicts and overall self-images (Brems in Hughes, 1991). Bromfield (1992) tells how a picture often says what a child cannot, and so expands the communicative repertoire shared by the child and the therapist.

The art sessions were useful, too, on a practical level, in that I was free to move among the children, and consequently interact with individuals on a more one-to-one basis. I could explore individual needs and struggles, as well as facilitate each child’s uniqueness as the artistic form embodied reflections of the child’s personal self and life experiences.

..... ‘A painting is never finished – it simply stops in interesting places.’

Paul Gardner in Cameron (1992)

Sculpting. Sculpting was used in two ways in our group. Firstly, we created sculptures made from clay and play dough, and secondly, we used our bodies as instruments to co-create human sculptures. In other words, the children were encouraged to use their bodies to form a picture that related to a particular issue or theme that was relevant to them. In this way, the body and mind engaged together in discovery (Jones, 1996).

For me, the common factor in both of these techniques was the stimulation of tactile sensations in the exploration and creation of meanings relating to the aims of this research. The children were encouraged to *touch* the clay and to *feel* their creation. In using their bodies to form a living picture, the children could also physically *touch* each other, and *feel* the effects of being spatially placed close to or distant from each other.

Hunter and Struve (1998, p. 107) state that using touch in therapy can enhance the process in many ways. They describe how it can be used ‘ to provide real or symbolic contact; to provide nurturance; to facilitate access to, exploration of, and resolution of emotional experiences; to provide containment; and to restore touch as a significant and healthy dimension in relationships’. In the context of this village some children did not experience any kind of nurturing touch, and so for these children who were victims of severe neglect and physical abuse, simply introducing the *idea* that touch could be a positive experience, was of value to them (Hunter& Struve, 1998).

The created forms were also external representations or objects. White (1995) describes how often by externalizing that which is problematic, it becomes possible for a person to

experience an identity that is distinct or separate from the problem. By assuming that the externally created forms or sculptures within our group were in many instances representations of specific problems, I gathered valuable research data. Therapeutically, contexts were also created in which the children were able to perceive a sense of separateness from their problems, and consequently relate to their problems differently.

Games. One of the most useful methods that I used to gain informative data concerning specific cultural discourses within the community, was game-playing. Hughes (1995) discusses how children's play can give invaluable information regarding the values of the culture that they live in. Although game-playing is a true cultural universal, it seems culturally specific in the particular types of games played, as well as the particular way in which they are played.

In the community where I worked, many games of physical skill were played. According to Hughes (1995) games of this nature are generally played in cultures where survival correlates closely with the possession of specific motor skills. From a very young age, the children of this community spent much of their time in the streets. They needed to be physically strong to cope with the walking, rough play and fighting that was so much part of their existence.

Part of these children's existence, too, involved living with a high degree of individual, social and circumstantial uncertainty. They knew about risk-taking behaviour for which the consequences remained completely unpredictable. Therefore they enthusiastically joined in games of chance, where external factors beyond their control contributed to the outcome.

I seldom played games that were dependent on strategic, cognitive skill, as most of the children were still developmentally too young. However, we encouraged simple games (e.g. Memory) amongst some of the five-year-olds who had become less self-centered, facilitating both

competition and co-operation (Erikson, 1963). Sometimes I also encouraged varying sub-group, game-playing competitions, as it is precisely through the process of group competition that children can also learn to foster co-operation and loyalty (Hughes, 1995).

Therefore, in many different ways, they were given opportunities to experience and rehearse different interpersonal skills and new ways of relating. Games were, therefore, very useful in terms of the sub-aims of the research project.

Special criteria for trustworthiness

Atkinson, Heath and Chenail (1991) describe how reservations are often expressed about the validity and reliability of qualitative research results, as qualitative methods are viewed as subjective, uncontrolled and not reliable. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized. Unlike conventional scientific research paradigms, where a real world is assumed to exist 'out there', Atkinson et al (1991) believe that at any time there may be various equally accurate ways of describing events in the social world, depending on who describes them. They describe how the act of observation necessarily influences the observed phenomenon, as people see the phenomenon through their own lenses, which are based on personal assumptions and experience. It is necessary, therefore, in order to gain some understanding of the observed, to examine how the observer participates in the observed (Keeney, 1983).

In order for researchers to 'know', they must first make a distinction (Keeney, 1983), and the act of making a distinction suggests choice or preference, intent, and ethical base. Instead of being preoccupied with studying the properties of the observed, the research includes studying the properties of the observer and their mutual impact on each other. This paradigmatic change replaces a concern with objectivity, with a concern with *responsibility*. Researchers have an

ethical responsibility to remain self-referential, that is, critical and aware of the intentions that underlie their habits of punctuating the world, in the construction and maintenance of their particular experiential universe (Keeney, 1983). There is also an ethical demand for researchers to communicate the assumptions and rules used to punctuate events in a clear way so that readers may draw their own conclusions.

According to Atkinson et al (1991) the researcher cannot, therefore, gain privileged access to ‘what really happens’ in the social world simply by applying a specific method of observation. Instead they believe that the *legitimization of knowledge* requires the judgment of an entire community of observers and is most appropriately a democratic process in which all stakeholders have equal input. Researchers do nevertheless have a responsibility to be reasonable in their claims, to present the best possible evidence to support their insights, to be responsive to challenges, and to be open and honest with others about their rules of punctuation.

In positivistic research, trustworthiness may be described in terms of the validity, reliability and objectivity of the research design. In fitting with a naturalistic epistemology, Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed that new terminology be used. They proposed the replacement of internal validity with credibility, external validity with transferability, reliability with dependability and objectivity with confirmability.

The above criteria may be attributed to authenticity criteria in new paradigm research, which includes fairness, process of identifying, presenting, clarifying and honouring in a balanced way the multiple constructions and value positions that are bound to exist in a given context. The assumptions of naïve realism and the existence of an absolute truth need to be replaced with the assumption of the existence of multiple constructed realities.

To demonstrate that the research is *credible*, the investigator needs to represent the multiple constructions in ways that are credible to the constructors of the original multiple realities. Three activities, namely, prolonged engagement in the context, persistent observation, and triangulation, increase the probability of credible findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Prolonged engagement refers to spending enough time within the context to learn about the culture, test for misinformation and distortions, and build trust. My research extended over two years, in which I was able to immerse myself in the context, and become part of a developing process where trust and rapport could emerge.

‘If the purpose of prolonged engagement is to render the inquirer open to the multiple influences – the mutual shapers and contextual factors – that impinge upon the phenomenon being studied, the purpose of persistent observation is to identify those characteristics and elements in the situation that are most relevant to the problem or issue being pursued and focusing on them in detail. If prolonged engagement provides scope, persistent observation provides depth’ (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 304). Therefore, I needed to engage in a continuous, detailed exploration of those factors that seemed significant, and to recognise when those factors that originally may have seemed unimportant could become significant in terms of the research hypotheses.

With regard to triangulation, different methods of data collection, such as one-to-one interviewing with the children, various types of play, and observation were used to add credibility. An-Maree and I working together as multiple investigators provided further possibilities for sharing and verifying informative data. Because my research project was based within the context of a Child Welfare Organization, the personal views and experiences of relevant social workers were also included. This data was accumulated through personal interviews, participant-

observation in monthly Child Welfare meetings, as well as the sharing and meta-reflection of therapeutic contexts with social workers.

During the course of my research, sharing my experiences and struggles with fellow peers and supervisors in both individual and group contexts also enabled me to reflect on my own biases and personal meanings that influenced the research. This type of debriefing session offers the inquirer the opportunity to consider the next steps, and to question and reflect on these as the design emerges (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Member checks, where the inquirer's constructions are compared with the constructions of those from whom the data was originally collected, were used as a judgment of overall credibility. When it appeared that new themes were emerging, these were tested and retested in following sessions by richly exploring them through the use of many different types of stimuli and methods of play.

Naturalistic research assumes that research is time and context bound. As the investigator, my responsibility with regard to *transferability* was, therefore, to provide sufficient descriptive data so that comparisons of contextual similarity would be possible if someone sought to apply similar research elsewhere. One way in which I ensured a thick description of time and context was by engaging in purposeful sampling, as well as thickly describing the research experience through my theoretically substantiated lenses.

With regard to the establishment of overall **credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability**, my journal containing descriptions of what happened over the two years was used to give a variety of informative data. This included daily process notes, personal reflections, as well as reasons for the use of specific methods, as the design (including new working hypotheses) emerged.

Summary

The design and methodology used in this research was based on the assumptions of naturalistic research. This implies that the inquirer is not the expert who gains valid and reliable information, but instead that all participants in the research (including the investigators), engage equally in the co-creation of shared realities. This becomes the ethical requirement that connects with the fundamental theme of legitimization through developing locally constructed understandings, and through negotiation between persons in dialogue (McNamee & Gergen, 1992).

In light of what has been discussed in this chapter with relation to the research aims, which included the search for meanings, and the co-creation of contexts where different behavioural possibilities could be explored, the naturalistic design and methodology was useful. The following chapter includes some stories of my experiences in the village and in the playgroup, which are then used for further reflection on specific research goals.

CHAPTER 4

VIGNETTES OF MY JOURNEY

This chapter is presented through storytelling. I provide “snapshots” of my journey in a selection of vignettes from my journal, to help you, the reader, to understand my experiences in the village, and the way that meanings were co-created. I intend to use these stories as the backdrop (experiential information) on which I will comment and reflect further with regard to my research goals. As I am limited to the written word, and am not able to dramatize or sculpt with you (as I did with the children) I am hoping that through storytelling I can paint a *living* picture of my experiences, from which you too can co-create meanings.

April 1998

Alan, already physically bigger than most of the other children, was very aggressive today. He arrived filled with anger. He pushed past me, kept shoving the younger children around and continuously used fowl language. No matter what An-Maree and I said to him, he continued to behave rudely.

This behaviour escalated in the session today. Alan became angrier; the other children became angrier; An-Maree and I became angrier. What was this all about? And then Alan kicked me. A hard, deliberate kick on my leg. My initial response of shock and indignation only seemed to fuel his bad boy image, and he nonchalantly shrugged off the kick while four-letter filth spilled from his young lips.

Probably because I just didn't know what else to do, I encouraged him to kick me again, except that this time he was not allowed to make contact. Yes, he looked at me as if I was mad, and then he kicked. Again, and again, and again. But, there was no touching involved. I was not

getting hurt, and he was able to express his anger physically and overtly, but in a way that was acceptable to both of us.

Our new karate champion continued kicking until he was out of breath. He fell down. I said that there was no time to rest. Instead, we needed to do push-ups, sit-ups, and jumping jacks. After all, karate champions needed to train hard! The other children joined in and the physical activity was experienced as a shared form of fun.

I held Alan's hand at the end of the session, and gently rested his hand on the place on my leg where he had kicked me. The physical touch was powerful. For me, we were connected by it in a way that felt healing and safe, not hurtful and abusive. I wondered about Alan's experience of this session ... He was simply looking deep into my eyes and smiling.

May 1998

Today was really trying for me in the village. On arrival, I had children all over me. They pushed their way into my car, pulling at all the levers, and pressing all the buttons. I felt helpless as these children invaded my private property. I kept saying 'Hou op!' (Stop that!) or 'Wees versigtig met die goed. Dit gaan breek!' (Be careful with the things. They are going to break!)

After a lengthy struggle I managed to get the children into the hall. Suddenly my bag was opened and children grabbed at whatever they could. An-Maree even had her water bottle opened and sipped by one of the children. It felt as if we had definitely been framed as the two kind ladies who came once a week and gave and gave and gave. At that moment I simply didn't want to keep giving anymore!

Fortunately, An-Maree and I, as co-facilitators, are also there to meta-comment and reflect with each other when necessary. We discussed how we knew that we wanted to give of ourselves,

but that to do so in a way that was acceptable to us we obviously needed to draw clearer personal boundaries. We decided that the two of us would sit on chairs while the children sat around us on the floor. Never before had we physically drawn such a clear distinction in terms of *us*, as the adult authority figures, and *them*, as the children. We continued by telling a story about the big adult elephants and the little younger ones in the jungle. The content of the story matched the process that was playing out at that moment between *them* and *us*. The children were encouraged to add to the story if they wanted to, but we became much stricter in terms of not tolerating any rude interruptions and comments while others were speaking. We also began to insist on the use of ‘please’, ‘thank-you’ and ‘excuse me’ when necessary.

Today I felt more like a teacher than a therapist. Was I punitive, or was I really drawing the same clear boundaries that would be part of any useful therapeutic context? It felt like a very fine line that I needed to walk or work on. It was comforting when I noticed that the adult elephant in our story also seemed to be having a real struggle walking carefully among the younger ones!

July 1998

Today was not the first time that An-Maree and I decided to play ball games with the children. Even as an adult, the child in me comes alive at the sight of colourful, bouncing beach balls. FUN! Today was going to be a fun day! And it was, for a while.

It was amazing to see how each child chose where they needed to be, and what they needed to do with the balls. The competitive children carefully sought out the ‘strong’ team. The leaders wanted everyone to play exactly what they wanted to play. And then there were also, as

always, some little ones who stood on one side. The observers, watching, like An-Maree and myself, what would happen next.

The games that started off as gentle throw-and-catch, soon became blatant physical attacks as one ball was thrown with force at the other children. And so I witnessed the bullying, the victimizing, the potential future soccer stars in the making, and other children simply having their type of fun with the balls.

At the end of the session we walked home with the children as usual. Except that today the balls were part of this weekly ending ritual. It was only when we packed the balls away that An-Maree and I noticed that one was missing. We went from house to house, asking each child who had been present, and many of their relatives, whether they had seen our ball.

I began to wonder about ‘stealing’. I would frame the taking of somebody else’s possessions as ‘stealing’. Maybe it was different here. Maybe this was the only way that these children knew how to get a wonderful toy like a bright, bouncing beach ball.

The following week. Once again, the usual group of children gathered together. An-Maree and I had already decided that we would mention that our ball had gone missing. Our intention was not to foster any type of guilt, or to seek out any so-called bad guys within our group. We did, however, feel that we needed to make the children aware that we felt both angered and saddened by what had happened. We also wanted to say that we understood that everybody behaves in certain ways for different reasons and that it would take courage to admit to having taken our ball. Typically, from a group of young children, there was very little verbal feedback, but instead, just large, wide-eyed stares ... I stared back, feeling stuck and uncertain.

It was only later on in the session, when Deon arrived, that the process shifted. I was surprised that Deon arrived so late, wondering where he had been when we fetched the children earlier. I moved toward him to greet him, and the other children moved away. They seemed to huddle together, clearly excluding Deon. I couldn't understand their apparent non-verbal aggression and rejection. The dance continued; still no words, until Byron, a very loyal and proud member of the group shouted out, 'Hy het juffrou se bal gesteel' (He stole teacher's ball).

Deon's increasing defensiveness was evident as he began to kick, hit and swear at the other children, accusing them of lying. An-Maree and I intervened by stressing that in this group aggressive, physical attacks were not tolerated, reiterating also how difficult it might be to admit to having taken the ball for whatever reason. We stayed gentle, yet clear, in what we said. Deon began to cry. The children's frame of 'cry baby' was in direct contrast to our frame of being brave enough to show tears to say how hurt one feels inside.

The atmosphere remained tense and concerning to me, when Deon quietly and sadly left the context on his own. However, he returned shortly afterwards with a different look in his eyes. I thought it looked like pride. Deon began to play again, and at the end of the session, on counting the balls, we noted that our missing ball had been replaced.

I left the children today feeling good about myself and the work that I was doing.

August 1998

It has been a few weeks since Angel joined our group. The first time I saw her she was sitting with her mom who was speaking to some of the social workers. I was informed later about the tragic incident that had taken place in the graveyard behind the building in which we worked. Apparently, around midday the previous day everyone had heard a gunshot. When they rushed to

the graveyard they found that Angel's father had just taken his life. Everyone was shocked by the vivid reality of the harshness of his life in the face of his horrific and tragic death.

Angel's mother was left without a husband, without a father for her children and without any money to maintain her family. She was filled with rage, and ridden with guilt for feeling that way. She was lost and alone, and Angel seemingly took responsibility for her. She would not leave her mom for a second, hanging onto her mom's dress, as if she was hanging onto her life. Angel's mom told me that Angel had stopped talking since her father's death.

I invited Angel and her mother to join our group the following week, with the idea of creating a space where Angel could be a child again among the other children, and also where her mom could possibly find a different space for grieving.

They arrived the following week and Angel timidly, but with much interest, watched the other children. It was interesting how, in this context, Angel's mom managed to leave Angel. Somehow it was acceptable, as Angel did not feel the need to cling to her mother or protect her. I have watched over the past few weeks how Angel has slowly begun to come alive again. I have seen her cry when other children mention their fathers. I have seen her laugh at the simple things that happen in our group. But today I witnessed our own special 'Barbie Girl'.

Today, as we began to sing our usual repertoire of songs from 'Twinkle, Twinkle' to 'Old Mac Donald', Angel not only once again found her speaking voice, but also began to sing one of the latest songs on the hit parade, 'I'm a Barbie Girl'. She was alive again. She sang from deep within about whom she was. The movements of her body reflecting her unique mood and spirit. Many other little Barbie girls joined in with Angel, all acknowledging her important presence in our group. She had found her voice, and hopefully also, a safe enough place to begin to heal.

September 1998

This was a strange day in the village. I arrived and, as usual, placed my suitcase in the boot of my car, always aware of the very real possibility of theft. However, someone watched me today. Watched me place my bag in the boot, and watched me disappear into the building that I have become so connected to.

I was suddenly called away from the children; the police had been summoned. My car had been broken into, my suitcase grabbed, and my cell phone was gone. Eye-witnesses recognized the suspect as a teenage boy who lived further down the street. The police took his name from the social workers, and I was informed that I would soon be needed to testify in court. I was shocked, angry, scared and sad.

My mind was spinning as I drove home today. I had so many questions, and very few answers. Why would a child need to steal? What did it mean? What was I going to do? Did I really want to be part of a process of prosecuting a child? Again I am aware of the shock at what happened. I feel angry because I have been victimized by someone (especially one of the children) in this community that I have begun to love and trust. My own anger and resentment, as well as my future involvement in the legal proceedings regarding this child scare me. And I am saddened by the obvious anger and hurt expressed by the extreme behaviour of one of the children of this poverty-stricken village.

November 1998 : Going to court

An-Maree agreed to go with me to the court today. We did not know what to expect. When we arrived we were ordered to sit in a long corridor among many other strangers. Every person connected by the cold, tense context, but each one distanced by his or her own personal story. We

sat in silence for what seemed eternity. My eyes were fixed on the linear words painted black on white:

Do not steal, you will be punished

Crime does not pay

Justice will prevail

Black or white; right or wrong; truth or lies. I began to respond physically by feeling nauseous. I became increasingly apprehensive at the apparent rigidity of the context, as I listened to the stern footsteps of the legal experts as they walked with force and determination up and down the corridors. No interruptions. No time to waste. And yet all the strangers waited unendingly.

And then I heard a different sound. Thank goodness! A baby had begun to cry. A voice of difference. I looked at the mother. Her eyes were sad. She seemed tired. I noticed, too, the teenage boy sitting next to her. The connection became clear. This was the child and his family that I was going to have to testify against in this horrible place. I was overcome by my own need to speak to one of the experts. I needed to explain that this was a much more complex story about a family, rather than simply about a legal case where a boy needed to be punished for stealing a cell phone. Suddenly I didn't care about my car's smashed window, or the fact that he had probably sold my phone to pay for drugs. I needed to hear more about him. I wanted to try to understand why.

I asked to speak to the prosecutor. I called the mother and her son. We stood huddled together, talking. It felt different. For me, it felt much better. Each person was able to speak. The charges were dropped and it was decided that I would speak to the boy and the other members of his family again the next time I visit the village.

December 1998

As these little children seem born to perform, it made sense that we had decided to hold an end of year concert and party. It also seemed a wonderful way to invite mothers, aunts and grannies to join with us in the hall, without making them feel pressured, vulnerable or exposed. Instead, they would be able to witness the special ways in which their children were expressing aspects of themselves in different ways.

For me personally, the preparation for the concert was very frustrating at times. I have danced since as far back as I can remember, and been on stage many times. For me, performances were preceded by rehearsals. A rehearsal being where every single detail was considered and reconsidered, until 'perfection' (according to whoever was choreographing the production) was reached.

For the first time I could actually begin to acknowledge that choreography is actually a co-created process, based on personal assumptions, feedback and individual expression in response to contextual factors. I could give ideas to the children, but the way in which they responded was determined by their personal life stories. Some children smiled, others didn't. Some sang at the top of their voices, others whispered, and some refused to make a sound. Our concert thus unfolded in its own unique way.

There was music, dance, laughter and, most of all, connection. Connection was not about us all lifting our right hands at exactly the same time, but instead, about being able to be part of an experience of sharing.

For me, it was important to see how the family members also shared with us today. A wide range of mixed emotions appeared to be evoked. I keep hearing the words of one of the mothers after the concert. She said, 'I feel so proud of my son. I didn't know he could be so

good. Look so good. I also noticed how he hugs you so much. He is not a child who hugs people. You must tell me how you get him to do that'. I felt my heart both lift and sink simultaneously, reflecting, I believe, the feelings of a very caring mother at that moment.

April 1999

Every time we pass Byron's house, we speak to his mother who comes to the gate to connect with the happenings of the day. A friendly woman in her early thirties, she is easy to speak to and seemed happy to invite us into her home. Byron, his mom Elsa and his stepfather live together in an approximately 25 m backroom, which also doubles as a little tuck shop from which Elsa sells chips, ice-cream and sweeties to the local community.

On entering the home I was struck by how warm and friendly the atmosphere was, despite what seemed like really harsh living circumstances. The delicious smell of 'pap' filled the room as Elsa busily continued to stir it while she spoke about her life.

She told us that she was born in the village and spent most of her childhood days playing in the streets when she was not attending school. Her vivid descriptions of the kind of verbal, emotional and physical abuse that she had survived, left both An-Maree and I feeling scared of the intensity of abuse that, according to Elsa, many people in this community endure on a daily basis. Gangs, alcohol, dagga, rape and murder were words that she repeatedly used as she told us her story.

It was important feedback for us when Elsa assured us that telling her story was a new experience for her. She said that in this community one quickly learns to keep quiet. Anything spoken to anybody else seems to become food for 'skinner' (rumours). The vultures snap it up and the consequence of people knowing is the high probability of further serious abuse and

violence. And so, as a woman and mother, Elsa learnt that to survive one has to keep quiet about personal affairs. She looked sad at that moment, apparently resigned to pain that has to stay inside.

Why then was she speaking to us? She quickly replied that although she wouldn't want her neighbours to know that the white ladies from the Child Welfare came to visit her, she saw us as strangers who brought hope of helping her child to escape this community's traps, which she herself could not escape. Her helplessness as a mother in the face of the need for children to become members of gangs to survive, yet ironically putting their lives at extreme risk, became very apparent. She was scared for her child. She wanted him to be able to leave. People like An-Maree and I seemed to hold some kind of key to the escape route.

I now felt really sad as I thought about how a mother's responsibility seemed to include, in this case, any possible way of ensuring that her child become associated with the Child Welfare system. That was the protection! The motherly instinct! I cringed inside as I acknowledged the harsh sense that Elsa's truth was beginning to make.

June 1999

We simply requested that the children tell, or show us more about their homes. One little boy sat down and began to act as if he was smoking. The connection in the group was immediate. It was as if all the children knew about this. They smoked, they drank, they staggered all over, and they fell down. Some of them pretended to be in a physical fight. The four-lettered language began to flow. And they smoked some more. On questioning what they were doing, we heard 'zol', 'dagga', 'bier'. The depicting of substance-abuse continued as Rochelle, an imaginative and

energetic little leader, started to make siren sounds. Children scattered! Roles shifted as a few more policeman suddenly appeared.

It was fascinating to watch, and experience how some of us, including An-Maree and I, were roughly arrested and creatively thrown behind the bars of the security gate leading into the hall. What now?

The smoking continued. The shouting grew louder. Some children fell down. The atmosphere was alive with energy so intense and passionate as these little three- to five-year-olds acted out their own familiar realities.

August 1999

I remember the first few weeks of last year when we took photographs of each of the children. These photos had been stuck up in the hall, and the children had proudly showed them off to the adults who congregated there on Sundays for their church service. They had been able to identify themselves both as individuals and as a part of our group. Through the past two years new photos had been taken; different poses, different moods, but always with the same purpose. A sense of identity! A sense of belonging! A sense of worthy self-esteem!

During today's session the children were encouraged to dip their hands and feet in paint and to leave their unique prints on posters that they were making about themselves. These posters already included art from previous sessions. The art ranged from individual stars, each one shining in its own special way, to colourful South African flags, where we had encouraged a sense of belonging even in a very large system, such as our country.

An-Maree and I moved around in the group today, working on a one-to-one basis much of the time. I spent time with a lively girl who liked to call herself 'Blommetjie' (little flower).

She was busily cutting all the famous film and pop stars out of a magazine and sticking them onto her poster. She enthusiastically and passionately informed me that she was going to become like that. A beautiful dream for a child who two years ago had been shy, scared and unsure. And here she was now, talkative, dramatic and expressive. She was creating a poster filled with colour, beauty and hope. A real blooming flower!

Although filled with warmth, I felt a prickle of sadness as I realized that our two years are coming to an end. I am going to miss these children deeply, as well as this context, and the valuable lessons of life that we continue to learn together.

In the next chapter I use these ‘snapshots’ of my journey as experiential information on which to reflect regarding the aims of this research as discussed in chapter 1. The chapter begins with a short theoretical discussion regarding data analysis in terms of looking at themes as categories of reconstructed meaning. I then present my reflections in a format that enables you, the reader, to share in my punctuations and understandings regarding the process of meaning attribution and meaning change during this research project.

A discussion of the children’s meanings as I punctuated them on my entry into the context of the village and community follows. My experience of the relatedness of the children’s meanings about life to the meanings about gang life that were prevalent in this community, is the reason why I focus on the similarities between these two meaning structures.

The elucidation of perturbations that occurred as part of the choreography of a therapeutic context follows, with a discussion of the way in which these perturbations occurred in drawing of certain distinctions about relating in particular ways. This then unfolds into a further discussion about the co-evolution of new meanings that emerged for the children in interaction within our group.

In accordance with an underlying ecosystemic epistemology and the use of social constructionistic lenses, I present a discussion of the evolution of my meanings and tacit knowledge. I attempt to link my meanings on entry into the context, with co-created meanings that developed for me in interaction with the children and the community context.

A final meta-level description concludes the chapter. This description includes the attribution of meaning in relation to specific themes that I have punctuated as the important meta-level, reconstructed meaning categories of this research.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION OF THE DATA

Looking at themes as reconstructed meaning categories

As, working from a naturalistic paradigm, data are the constructions offered by the research collaborators in interaction with the inquirer, then the process of analysing the data becomes a reconstruction of these constructions into meaningful wholes. This process is not a reduction of the data, but instead, an induction from the data, since the goal is to reconstruct the categories used by the participants and the inquirer to conceptualise their own experiences and world views (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Goetz and Le Compte (1981, p.57) describe the process of analytic induction as follows, 'This strategy involves scanning the data for categories of phenomena and for relationships among such categories, developing working typologies and hypotheses upon an examination of initial cases, then modifying and refining them on the basis of subsequent cases ... negative instances, or phenomena that do not fit the initial function, are consciously sought to expand, adapt, or restrict the original construct'.

Within each session with the children, certain ideas, concepts, and related behaviours would unfold in the context. Recurring ideas and ways of being would be checked with the children, by both An-Maree and I intentionally including these ideas in subsequent sessions and then noting the feedback. For example, when we felt that the children were bringing more and more ideas about the effects of alcohol-abuse, we initiated the creation of a sculpt where the adults were intoxicated. We let some of the children sculpt the adults, and the rest sculpt themselves in this type of scenario. The process that followed was carefully recorded, talked about with the children, and reflected on by the two of us. These units of information that we

gathered would then serve as the basis for defining the necessary reconstructed meaning categories described above (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Glaser and Strauss (1967) also emphasize the importance of the investigators reconstructing categories based on what feels right to them, that is, using their intuitive, tacit knowledge and theoretical lenses in the reconstruction of categories. In the case of this research social constructionistic lenses were used. They add that researchers will probably notice that two kinds of categories become evident. Firstly, those that they probably constructed tacitly themselves, and secondly, the categories that emerge as those used by the participants. These would include their local language and terms describing their cultural norms and practices. It is interesting to note that Glaser and Strauss speak of how concepts (categories) abstracted from the participants tend to be labels in use for actual processes and behaviours, while the concepts (categories) constructed by the investigator tend to be the explanations.

In chapter 1 the research question posed was the exploration of meanings that the children of this village attributed to their lives, and how the context of our group offered new and different co-evolved possibilities. A discussion of the evolution of these meanings now follows.

Evolution of the children's meanings

Initial perceptions. As described earlier in this chapter, the meaning categories that are abstracted from what the participants bring tend to be familiarly and culturally-used labels that describe actual circumstantial processes and behaviours in the contexts of their lives (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

It was obvious right from the first day in the village that many young children were playing unattended in the streets. Any child would walk with me on request, neither

seeming to need to ask for permission from any adult, nor needing to tell anybody where she or he was going. Their meanings seemed to include that nobody would be concerned about their whereabouts, expecting children to look after the children. They were told early in the mornings to 'gaan speel buite' (go and play outside). The adults seemed to expect their children to go through the same as they had gone through as children, that is to have to fend (and fight) for oneself. Therefore, for these children, meanings included the belief *that life is tough, and one needs to learn to be tough to survive.*

Home environments in many cases seemed to be experienced only as the places where children might get something to eat when they were feeling hungry, and a roof over their heads to sleep at night. This was a result of poverty stricken circumstances. Family homes did not appear to be experienced by the children as places of safe and secure emotional holding. On the contrary, many of the children appeared to be neglected. They consequently *grabbed at every opportunity outside their home environment* where they might feel wanted, receive attention, and experience a sense of belonging.

The high levels of substance and physical abuse within the home environments exacerbated the children's perceived emotional experiences of not really being wanted and not belonging. Even more apparent than the physical absence of adults due to socio-economic conditions, was the emotional absence of the adults, as they hid their emotions behind masks of alcohol and dagga abuse, as well as violent, physical aggression (refer to the sculpting session in ch. 4 vignette: June 1999). The typical family interaction patterns carried messages of disrespect. The meanings learnt by the children thus included a belief that *they were not important* enough to spend time with in terms of teaching and sharing. Evidence of physical abuse further perpetuated the psychological meanings *of being worthless and 'good-for-nothing'*. Thus the meaning that

was portrayed to the children in terms of this type of family life included what seemed to be a *disrespectful lack of consideration for others*.

They also accepted that it was *appropriate to hide personal emotional distress* behind various kinds of masks. The ‘perpetrators’ of abuse within the family hid behind alcohol, dagga, and violence, while the ‘victims’ within the family hid behind their masks of silence. (E.g., as discussed in ch. 4 vignette: April 1999, Elsa, a ‘victim’, told me how, in the fearful face of further abuse, one soon learnt to keep quiet in this community.) The parents and children alike are part of a cycle of interchangeable roles within the family system, where the ‘perpetrator’ is also the ‘victim’ and vice versa.

The meanings described above became particularly apparent as our research group began to form. For me, the meanings of the children underlying the formation of the group, as well as their meanings underlying some of the significant processes that played out within the group context, were in many ways isomorphic to the meanings underlying the formation of group life on the streets. Yalom (1975) states that the group often becomes a miniature social microcosm of the wider social community context from which the members derive meaning, and in which specific patterns of behavioural interactions occur. It was interesting how the children initially brought with them to our group both tacit and experiential knowledge about the meanings of life in gangs in this community context. It is important to note that the children in the research group were pre-schoolers who were still too young to be actual gang members themselves. However, as gangsterism seemed to be so much a part of the nature of growing up in this particular community context, the children acquired meanings through tacit connection and shared life experiences with other members of groups or gangs, such as older siblings and friends.

Meanings acquired about life in a group / gang. Historically, the apartheid legislation in South Africa greatly contributed to the growth of gangsterism in 'coloured' urban communities. Research conducted by the National Institute for Crime Prevention and the Rehabilitation of Offenders (NICRO) and the Social Justice Resource Project (SJRJ) (1990) describes how the introduction of the Group Areas Act, the pass laws, the migrant labour system and the job reservation laws, all impacted on gang formation. This official web of authority and control severely disturbed the extended family network and the social, economic, and emotional support that it previously offered. The extended family could no longer offer a sense of security and belonging, as more and more adults, both men and women, sought jobs to survive. As the adults needed to travel far to work, the children were often left on their own to fend for themselves much of the time.

This breakdown of both the core family and the extended family, which previously provided familiar care-givers, role models and a support network, resulted in the children seeking out other contexts of support and belonging. Surrounded by the consequences of poverty, as well as the feelings of not belonging and often not being wanted, the children gravitated toward the local groups, the gangs. It was in these contexts that they could act out these feelings in their own personal struggles for acceptance and recognition.

The research by NICRO and SJRP (1990, p. 5) further hypothesized that someone who joins a gang is not necessarily simply 'a lazy good-for-nothing who is always on the look-out for trouble', but possibly, 'a lonely youth, hoping to find self-respect and a sense of belonging'.

Children need ritualistic pathways to become socially and emotionally active in the formation of their identities (Pinnock, 1997). When cultural circumstances do not provide children with these, they become active in other ways. Complicated and extreme circumstances

that include poverty, racism, broken homes and drugs seem to add to the life-or-death quality that is apparent among people in such communities. Extreme aggressive impulses are accompanied by very few restraints in a culture deeply hurt by the effects of apartheid. Pinnock (1997) speaks of how, within this volatile context, a search for self-respect seems to take on larger than life proportions. Thus in desperate attempts at gaining recognition and a sense of self-worth, peer admiration becomes increasingly necessary as it is the only form of affirmation available. Children's meanings thus include that the *peer group offers the support not found elsewhere..*

The process of ganging takes place in the streets. Being accepted into the gang, however, goes hand-in-hand with overtly aligning oneself to the group. This process of alignment, which is assumed to correlate with peer support and acceptance, necessitates the assimilation and displaying of overt signs of gang disposition (Pinnock, 1997). A concurrent process of differentiation of self also occurs as, through this gang-like disposition, individuals 'speak' of their very personal need for belonging and a sense of self-worth. Congruent with previously discussed meanings learnt in the home environment with regard to masking emotional needs, children readily accept the notion of taking on or masking oneself with a specific persona to be accepted and affirmed within the gang. These children thus know the meanings of *performance in life* at many levels. Pinnock tells how this necessarily adopted form or disposition (expected masked performance) includes levels that manifest in both language and action.

The research by NICRO and SJRP (1990) describes how gangs, commonly known as 'corner kids', are playgroups formed in the streets. The children's meanings that *the family does not necessarily offer support, security, and a sense of belonging* seem to lead them to search for various forms of 'family' in contexts other than the home environment. The playgroups on the streets appear to replace the family, and also offer the children a form of entertainment and

protection from loneliness. It made sense, therefore, that the children in the community, without much hesitation, enthusiastically attached themselves to the group that we were forming in their streets since this fitted with culturally construed meanings.

Often these young children on the streets are used by the older youth to perform certain tasks related to gang activity. They are then usually rewarded with cigarettes or dagga (NICRO & SJRP, 1990). This assumption of some kind of physical reward was initially also evident in our group in the children's strong demands for sweets, ice-cream, cold drinks and anything else that I had. Their meanings seemed to include that *association with a group necessitated some kind of physical reward as part of the assumed support offered* within the group context.

Pinnock (1997) describes how 'turf' is a powerful way of bonding within gangs. Often specific territories 'belonging' to a particular gang cover no more than a few streets. However, it is within these very clearly defined spaces that gangs become recognized and differentiated from the surrounding community context. Territoriality seems to include assumptions of ownership and belonging. The voice of gang membership, therefore, includes 'I belong to the gang that owns this area'.

This issue of territoriality was obvious within our group. For example, there were some mornings when it was raining and I attempted to get the children into the hall more quickly. Although the hall was also included as part of their territory, they insisted on ritualistically walking down all the relevant streets to collect the other children. However, on the occasions that I attempted to enter different streets with them, for example, to play in a different piece of open veld, many of them became apprehensive and agitated. The feeling of stepping into foreign territory was noticeable and unnerving.

Being a child in this village seemed to include meanings that *territorial dominance and collective power is seen to be synonymous with personal voice, even though this 'voice' is subject to external circumstances*. If a child is part of a group in his or her own street, she or he experiences protection within the group context, feels powerful, and has a belief in the excessive power and control over others. However, if the same child dares to step into the wrong territory, she or he is in danger and feels helpless. Meanings thus include that *specific internal qualities of the individual child are unimportant* and are not affirmed, and so the child never really learns to validate himself or herself. Even though the child has often entered the context of the gang in a search for self-worth, feelings of low self-esteem are unfortunately usually perpetuated within these contexts.

A few further similarities with regard to the initial formation of our group, and its relation to gang-like behaviour follow as added examples portraying some of the previously mentioned, underlying meanings of these children.

NICRO and SJRP (1990) research tells how on joining a gang, each member receives a tattoo identifying the gang to which she or he belongs. Some gangs have their own salute, own motto, and own manner of dress. These are the various ways that members are easily identifiable within the community. In our group, it is interesting to note how I took a photograph of each child at the beginning of the two years (see ch. 4 vignette: August 1999), so identifying with the children's belief in the need for overt signs and symbols of group membership and belonging. These individual photographs, each with the child's name, were pasted together on one of the walls of the hall. Each time a new child joined the group, his or her photograph was added to the group. On reflection, it was these photographs that were experienced by the children as

important symbolic representations of each one's ritualised entrance into our group, emphasizing again their meanings about *needing to search for a place of personal belonging and validation*.

One of the most distinctive features of gang disposition is that of language (Pinnock, 1997). Each gang can be identified by a particular style of expression, both verbally and non-verbally. Particular sayings, often based on cynical views of how these young people perceive themselves, such as, 'Born to lose' (Pinnock, 1997, p. 35) are spoken as rituals, denoting apparent connection between gang members. The type of words used in these rituals emphasize, once again, the children's underlying meanings regarding their *perceptions of themselves as useless and incapable of being somebody, or doing something worthwhile*.

It was clear on formation of our group that there was an accepted way of speaking to one another among the children of this community. They initially spoke abruptly, with harsh, aggressive tones. Even though many of the children were only three years old, their vocabulary consisted of many (to me) vulgar swear words. They showed very little inhibition or concern about the constant use of this type of language.

I personally experienced this type of language as abusive and disrespectful. For me, the children's meanings that seemed to include an accepted *disrespect for others, even in the context of relationships of apparent connection* were made very clear in the way that they spoke both to each other and to me.

As previously mentioned, the children's meanings as italicised above included the initial perceptions that I had of these children's meaning structures. The following discussion focuses on drawing distinctions as perturbations in the choreography of a psychotherapeutic playgroup in which new co-created meanings could also unfold.

The drawing of distinctions. Yalom (1975) emphasizes the importance of the facilitator's role in designing a group culture that will be optimally therapeutic. The particular way in which the facilitator draws distinctions and intervenes as co-choreographer of the group process, therefore, has an important impact on the therapeutic benefit of the group context for all those involved. Over time, clear distinctions were drawn by the facilitator/researcher as perturbations that were introduced in response to the meeting of different realities, and often-conflicting underlying meaning systems within the context of our group. In accordance with my ecosystemic epistemology, these distinctions were arbitrary punctuations of difference, introduced as part of a recursively linked feedback cycle (Keeney, 1979).

The meeting of different meanings. This discussion is presented in such a way as to elucidate the different meanings within the meeting space of our group. The *children's meanings* are given (as the researcher understood them within their community context) around an issue or way of interacting. They are then followed by the *researcher's meanings*. Finally, each *distinction* introduced in response to the meeting of these different realities is presented. Before continuing, the reader should realize that although this discussion is presented in what could appear to be a very linear way in an attempt at clarity, it is my hope that the complexity and richness of the interweaving of different meanings are not significantly compromised.

(a) Children's meanings – Initially it was as if the children accepted the wider social discourse that ladies from the Child Welfare were usually involved in some kind of physical action. That is, they were seen either to remove children physically from their home environments, or they offered physical assistance in the form of food and clothing. The children's meanings seemed to

include that, if being with me meant the possibility of getting something for nothing, then they needed to take whatever they could get.

Therapist / Researcher's meanings – It was important that the group did not become either a place that children were 'removed' to, or an 'escape' route from difficult circumstances; but rather a place where they could experience and learn something new, exciting and different. The researcher's meanings included the creation of a therapeutically beneficial group. It was a concern that the group might easily be framed by the community members as a type of crèche, with the researcher as the local baby-sitter or child-minder.

Distinction – The boundaries of the group were consequently defined as all children having to be three years old and above and not yet in a formal school setting. In this age group, children are developmentally ready to enter into peer group processes as part of their psychological growth (Koplow, 1996). Therapeutically, therefore, nurturing their developing meanings of themselves.

(b) Children's meanings – The children seemed to believe that being part of a group was something that they should aspire to. This was apparently linked to meanings in the community regarding gang membership (cf. the earlier discussion under the heading: Meanings of life in a group/gang and cf. the discussion of social constructionistic principles). Every Wednesday morning there was an abundance of children in the streets eagerly awaiting the opportunity of being part of the group.

Therapist / Researcher's meanings – It was a concern that if the sample became too large, the therapeutic benefit of the group context would be limited, as there were only two adults to supervise the group. Yalom (1975) states that as a group increases in size, the more probable it

becomes that only the more forceful and aggressive members are able to express their ideas. It was important to the researcher that each child would be able to express himself or herself in some significantly personal way in the group. This links to the importance of being able to express one's personal and individual voice in life, as described in chapter 3.

Distinction – The limit was set that no more than 20 children could be part of the group in a single session. In this age group the exploration of the sense of self in relation to others is particularly apparent and needs to be fostered in a context where self-expression is possible (Ferber in Koplow, 1996). The number of children was limited so that not only the assertive children were afforded self-expression.

(c) Children's meanings – Children's meanings included a disrespect for other people and their possessions. It seemed that in many cases the children were not particularly perturbed by the social implications of taking goods that were not their personal property (see ch. 4 vignettes: July 1998, where Deon took one of the beach balls, and September 1998, where my cellular telephone was stolen). Their behaviour seemed to be based on for instance, the meaning that in the fight for life one takes whatever one can, whenever one can. Their fear of any possible negative consequences of their risk-taking behaviour at a future date was seemingly much less influential than their need to survive difficult socio-economic living conditions at the present moment.

Therapist / Researcher's meanings – It was important to value and show respect toward others and the things that belong to them. Goods were seen to have both sentimental and monetary value, and should therefore be looked after carefully. It was unacceptable to take, and / or to destroy property that had personal significance to somebody else. It was of therapeutic benefit for the children to experience difference in terms of showing respect and consideration for

other people and their personal possessions. It was also important that each child learnt to take pride in and responsibility for their own personal things. It is with respect and consideration that a context of safety is created for the pre-school child to feel validated by the positive reflections of others. The related increase in the child's sense of self-worth enables the child to take more responsibility (Ferber in Koplow, 1996).

Distinction – Respect was shown in not taking anything that belonged to somebody else without first getting permission from the person to whom it belonged.

(d) Children's meanings – The children seemed unconcerned about their physical appearance and level of personal hygiene. Their meanings around their relationships with their own bodies as expressed in everyday rituals of cleansing seemed to speak of harsh attitudes toward themselves. It appeared as if these children did not know about the experience of simple, gentle care for their little bodies. Instead, in many cases, their bodies were the painful evidence of abuse and hurt and perceived of as not being worthy of sensitive and respectful nurturing.

Therapist / Researcher's meanings – It was important to stay connected with one's own body as part of expressing who one is in life. Especially when working with young children, the body and related non-verbal communication as expressed in many forms of play is important. 'Play is the expressive medium of the child, just as words are the medium of the adult. Children generally do not possess the vocabulary, the symbolism, the concepts, or the cognitive structures to express what it is that distresses them' (Lovinger, 1998, p. 41).

Distinction – In learning to show respect for their own bodies, a ritual was introduced in the group where everybody would wash their hands after using the bathroom, or after any activity where their hands became dirtied. According to Hunter and Struve (1998) a common expression

for showing comfort and concern is through the compassionate touching of another's hands. The researcher assumed that through learning to touch their own hands in a compassionately cleansing way, the children could experience a difference in relationship with their own bodies.

(e) Children's meanings – Related to many of their experiences of physical and sexual abuse, these children's meanings seemed to include not only disrespect for their own bodies (as discussed above) but also for everybody else's. All conflict and dissatisfaction in relationship with others was 'managed' with either physical or verbal abuse, or both. An example of this is illustrated in chapter 4 vignette: April 1998 where Alan shoved the younger children around, kicked me, and insisted on using filthy language.

Therapist / Researcher's meanings – This type of behaviour was experienced as abusive and disrespectful, and a perturbation of difference was introduced that would prevent the perpetuating of this type of abusive way of interacting with others. As previously mentioned, it was therapeutically important to foster a context based on respect for others within which self validation could be experienced.

Distinction – It was, therefore, unacceptable to display physical violence, and/or verbal abuse toward others in the context of the group.

(f) Children's meanings – The children's meanings around disrespect, including a clear lack of consideration for others was repeatedly encountered in the group. For example, the children would seldom use any kind of simple good manners, and would continuously interrupt others while speaking. This frequently resulted in a sense of chaos and disorder within the context, as the children's meanings around desperately needing to fight for personal time and attention,

recognition and affirmation, played out in the context. Each child so desperately needed to be heard that she or he would ‘force’ his or her voice into the context by interrupting others.

Therapist / Researcher’s meanings – Based on the researcher’s meaning system, which included an intolerance of what seemed like rudeness, and consequently the disqualifying of others’ voices, it was assumed that good manners would facilitate the experience of a more considerate, tolerant and holding context for all concerned wherein affirmation might be obtained from each other and not only the therapist / researcher.

Distinction – It was through learning not to interrupt others that a context of witnessing was created (White, 1995) where the children could simultaneously experience listening to others and being listened to.

In conclusion, all the distinctions (as described above), together with many other interventions that were introduced through play in response to the meeting of different meaning systems, became part of the process of the co-evolution of new meanings within our group.

The co-evolution of new meanings. Throughout this dissertation I have given practical examples of the use of different methods of play in the co-creation of a context where the children’s stories and their related meanings could emerge and evolve in interaction with others in the group.

I now revisit various examples, and endeavour to capture the essence of some of these new, co-evolved meanings.

The grizzly bear and monkey masks – A dramatic role-play. As mentioned in chapter 3, the child who wore the grizzly bear mask was demonstrating a meaning accepted by many children in the community, namely, that one has to be tough, aggressive and abusive toward others to survive. However, within the safe and holding space of our group, another usually timid, softly-spoken child was able to find the courage to confront this aggressive type behaviour by challenging the ‘powerful’ bear to try out something new: the monkey mask. The grizzly bear could thus show some tenderness, share his sense of humour, and delight both himself and those around him with a different side of himself: his ‘monkey’ side. Both these children could begin to explore a new meaning, which included that life is about learning to find the balance between our different and often, divided sense of self (Cooper, 1993).

The story of the giant and the scared kitten. Storytelling was often used metaphorically in the group in the possibility of creating new meanings. In chapter 3, I refer to the child in our group who had been labelled as giant-like by the other children. Their meanings around excluding from a group context anybody who did not conform to a shared physical disposition (refer to the discussion earlier in this chapter: initial perceptions), became overt in their exclusion of the ‘giant-like’ child. However, the content of the story accentuated the necessity and importance of physical differences in certain situations. The kitten could only be saved by someone who was very tall (and at times physically very awkward and overwhelming to others). The children were able to broaden their meanings with regard to the ‘giant’ in our group through their own interpretations of the story. She was no longer perceived as a strange, unwanted outsider; but instead was accepted as a person who possessed the unique quality of tallness, which made her special and important to others, in her own individual way. New meanings around

acknowledging the privilege of witnessing individual differences in people's life stories could thus begin to unfold (White, 1995).

The angry dance of a karate champion. In chapter 4 vignette: April 1998 Alan demonstrated his physically and verbally abusive ways of interrelating with others. His behaviour was evidence of an underlying meaning system of showing disrespect toward others in an attempt at increasing one's own sense of self-worth. I altered the frame of what was perceived as an abusive kick to one of practising a new and very specialized karate technique, whereby physical contact with the opponent's body was disallowed during this ritual expression of anger. 'To reframe, then, means to change the conceptual and / or emotional setting or viewpoint in relation to which a situation is experienced and to place it in another frame which fits the "facts" of the same concrete situation equally well or even better, and thereby changes its entire meaning' (Watzlawick, Weakland & Fisch, 1974, p. 95).

I had validated Alan's needing to kick and related meaning of showing anger in the only way he knew how, but also expressed my need for him to respect my person by not physically hurting me. This facilitated a new meaning that balanced the need for the complementarity of both stability and change (Keeney & Ross, 1985).

The story of big, adult elephants and smaller, young ones. According to White (1984), restraining patterns of reliance on others in the family context are often linked to a sense of entitlement that is out of step with social and emotional responsibility. Patterns of reliance, based on imbalances of perceived status and entitlement are characteristic of dominant-submissive relationships where physical, sexual and substance abuse often serve to maintain the pattern. These children knew of

abusive relationships within the home environments where dysfunctional patterns of interaction occurred. Their meaning systems included beliefs of being entitled to take from others on whom they were reliant without accepting any social and emotional responsibility for the implications, such as the related abuse and hurt involved.

They grabbed at whatever they could, unconcerned about how their behaviour might have both physically and emotionally impacted on me. I responded by taking both physical and emotional responsibility for myself by drawing very clear boundaries between the adults and the children. As described in chapter 4 vignette: May 1998, I changed the seating structure in the hall (Minuchin, 1974). Together with this seating change and the use of the story about the elephants, a context was created where the children could experience a difference in meanings. Instead of the usual meaning being evident, namely, that a dominant, authority figure tends to abuse the usually submissive, child figure, a new meaning could begin to develop. This meaning could include that by drawing overt boundaries, authority figures are also able to create safe, secure and respectful spaces for children.

'Throw-and-catch' and the missing ball. Similarly to the above story, the vignette: July 1998 in chapter 4 describes an event that was based on the children's initial meanings of their being entitled to take whatever they could get. Both the adults and the children of the village were perturbed by the way in which An-Maree and I went from house to house inquiring about our missing ball. It was as if they assumed (based on their meanings regarding the old apartheid system, as well as their related experiences of extreme poverty), that An-Maree and I (being white-skinned ladies) probably would not have even noticed that a ball was missing. After all, we had so many others.

I made my meanings clear to the children by explaining to them in a non-blaming way that it was not the physical loss of the ball that was so disturbing to me. Instead I was saddened by the knowledge that someone had shown disrespect for me as an individual, as well as for our group as a whole by removing the ball from the context.

Deon's acknowledgement of his ability and need to assimilate these different meanings into his meaning structure was evidenced in his returning the ball. He could also begin to experience what was previously an unknown sense of pride in himself as a result of his own deliberate choice to behave differently from usual.

Angel's song of personal voice. In chapter 4 vignette: August 1998 the harsh circumstances in which these children survived is emphasized once again. A father had shot himself in a graveyard. This was the same graveyard where open graves served as a playground for the children in the vicinity. Life and death co-existed in extremely vivid ways for these children. So too did the meanings of needing to become mute in the face of emotional distress. These children knew that one of the places of relative safety in this extreme context was behind the mask of silence. From that quiet and withdrawn place, Angel could seemingly take responsibility for both her mother and herself in trying to cope during their desperate time of need.

However, Angel began to experience something different in our group. This was another type of place of safety and belonging. It was a safe place where silence was not her only option in living with the hurt. Within our group, feelings were often shared through singing songs. Angel could sing 'I'm a Barbie Girl' as an expression of part of herself. A new meaning, which included the possibility of using one's voice (in Angel's case, her singing voice) in expressing parts of oneself, including one's pain, was validated in the group.

New steps to an old judicial dance. As previously described in this chapter under the heading: Initial perceptions, many of the children of this village accepted the meaning that they were worthless and good-for-nothing. Spending most of their time in the streets, and being associated with gang-related behaviour, the children learned to accept the labels of 'being bad'. The shame of being a criminal offender and prosecuted in court for having stolen a cell phone, for example, (refer to ch. 4 vignette: November 1998) simply served to perpetuate the child's belief in the external reality of a harsh, judgmental, punishing world. It was in this world that children perceived themselves as useless.

Pinnock (1997) suggests that a different approach is necessary in working with juvenile offenders. He says that the child has to experience the beneficial difference between meanings that are based on focusing on the act itself and the problems the act has caused for the victim, and the commonly accepted meanings that are preoccupied with the stigmatisation of the badness of the young person. He says that we, therefore, need to accept the child and reject his or her behaviour.

The vignette: November 1998 illustrates my own attempt at introducing different meanings into the cold, judgmental context of a court of law. As a therapist it was important to me that this particular child accepted some kind of responsibility for his actions, but at the same time I questioned the usefulness of blaming and labelling this child as a thief. (This refers to the ecosystemic principle of the non-reification of behaviour.) The complexity of his personal story and the meanings of his behaviour in the context of his life seemed to be that which was important and relevant in relationship to me. It was in relationship that the meanings underlying 'theft' could be explored and new meanings could be sought.

Through changing the choreography of the courtroom dance, I believed that I could offer the child and his family some sense of hope as they witnessed the occurrence of something out of the ordinary. Instead of the child being punished as a juvenile offender, he could leave the context with something different. I would like to think that this included a confused, questioning mind, as the child was forced to confront and struggle with various perturbing meanings. These might have included that he was maybe not so bad after all; that maybe there was some meaningful value to life. It was from this perturbed state that new uplifting meanings could hopefully begin to unfold regarding his belief in the possibility of the existence of some worthwhile aspects of himself also. These same worthy aspects might then play an important part in any possible future decisions that he might make regarding the usefulness and consequences of any further stealing.

Living images of hope and connection: A stage of stars and a poster of prints. The vignette: December 1998 in chapter 4 illustrates how the meanings of these children included an understanding of performance as part of everyday life. As previously described in this chapter, these children knew about 'being on a stage' and presenting an outward disposition that was used to hide the intensity of their emotional experiences. Unfortunately, very often, according to Pinnock (1997), in the absence of hope of any different kind of existence, confusion can arise between the everyday 'performances' of life, and one's essential nature and related feelings. I believe, however, that in our group different meanings and ways of being could emerge because of an ever-present availability of subtle, but tangible nuances of hope.

Our end of the year concert was an example of a context where the existence of hope and the consequent evolution of different co-constructed meanings became evident. The children sang one of the songs that had become a weekly ritual of the group.

Twinkle, twinkle, little star
How I wonder what you are,
Up above the world so high
Like a diamond in the sky.
Twinkle, twinkle, little star
How I wonder what you are.

Over time, the ritual singing of this song had served to emphasize consistency, and to bring a degree of dependability and reliability to the group context. This particular song had impacted on the underlying meanings of the children at both a process and a content level. Singing it became significant in our group, in terms of overt alignment and connection with the group and its members, as well as the relevance of the meanings of the words themselves. Metaphorically, each child was framed as a star in our group. Meanings were introduced that linked each child with a twinkling diamond in the sky. These meanings included that they were all special, that they all shone in different ways, that they all carried with them some kind of unique beauty and light. Over time, and through the experience of care and consideration from others and myself in the context, these words were incorporated as part of the language of connection within our group. A consequence of the experience of this type of connection and sharing (as described in vignette: December 1998) seemed to include the possibility of sculpting oneself as a unique individual (and star) also, where the expression of personal movement and voice was appropriate, accepted and validated.

Another method of play often used in the expression and validation of individual uniqueness, as well as a meaningful sense of collective belonging was that of art. In chapter 4 vignette: August 1999 a specific art session is described during which the children were

encouraged to share with the group, prints of their unique little hands and feet. Through play sessions such as these, they developed new meanings, which included a sense of self-pride and, in many instances such as that of 'Blommetjie', also a sense of self-confidence. Her self-confidence was evident in not only her ability to express herself spontaneously in the present moment, but also the enthusiasm and passion that she expressed in her dreams for her future. She had broadened her repertoire of meanings to include the possibility of alternative stories (White, 1995) based on hope and belief in a future where dreams truly can be realized.

In keeping with an underlying ecosystemic epistemology and the theoretical underpinning of social-constructionistic lenses (as discussed in ch. 2), all of the above meanings of the children need to be considered in relation to the following discussion where the evolution of the investigator's meanings and tacit knowledge is presented.

Evolution of meanings and tacit knowledge of the investigator

Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe the importance of legitimizing the tacit (intuitive, felt) knowledge of the investigator, because tacit knowledge often mirrors the inherent value patterns of the investigator more accurately than knowledge that is expressible in language form.

As tacit knowledge cannot, by definition, be expressed in language, what follows is thus an attempt at finding words that at a meta-level best describe the feeling of the process of my evolving tacit knowledge over the course of the two-year research period. My intention in presenting this meta-commentary is that through the rich description of this process, information can be gathered with regard to related, evolving group dynamics that occurred in interaction with the children and their meaning systems. As described in chapter 1, two aspects of my tacit knowledge that were very apparent initially were that of **fear**, and of my **mothering voice**. I now

attempt to describe the link and developing relationship between the two aspects, which unfolded over time within the context of the village.

On my initial entry into the village, I was filled with **fear** of actual physical danger. Magona (1998, p. 3), the mother of a black man who murdered a white woman in a similar type of village, writes to the mother of the white woman after the murder, ‘Did she not feel awkward, a fish out of water, here? ... It was not safe for the likes of her ... Why did she not stay out?’ I had been brought up with similar meanings that seemed to warn me continuously of the dangerous nature of what I was doing in this particular context.

I had also brought with me a **fear** and / or performance anxiety regarding my training for my degree. I needed to accomplish a certain level of practical, therapeutic competence according to the university’s expectations to successfully pass the practical training module toward my degree. Initially I was very aware of this process of assessment. I entered the context, therefore, in many ways feeling extremely vulnerable, scared, ungrounded and insecure.

On reflection now, it seems as if complementary to this overwhelming **fear** and uncertainty was a **mothering voice** in me, which at the time felt strong, capable and confident. Watzlawick, Bavelas and Jackson (1967) use the term “complementary” to describe patterns of interaction between correlated factors where there is a potentially progressive state of affairs. They describe how this type of pattern often escalates, resulting in excessive behaviours. I think that within myself, the more intense my **fears** became, the more intuitively (and probably excessively) I responded with my **mothering voice** at that time.

As I had two young children of my own, whom I had stayed at home with before beginning my training, I felt competent and grounded in the presence of children. As a mother, I was extremely nurturing and protective. My assumptions at the time included that a good mother

brought a gentle, dependable and friendly presence to her children's lives. My tacit knowledge also included a need to be liked and accepted by my children, which necessarily spilled over into the village context as my being the gentle, kind lady who played with and was liked by the children. Initially, this way of being enabled me to connect and feel at ease with the children in what I experienced as very unfamiliar, anxiety-provoking circumstances. However, my seemingly rigid frames of gentle nurturing and care were limited and over time were pushed to become more fluid and fitting in relation to various systems. These included the children's meaning systems, as well as those of the wider social discourses of the community of which I had become a part.

As described in chapter 4 vignette: May 1998, my response to these meaning systems included a more authoritative stance in drawing more distinct boundaries between the adults and the children in the group. The children's meanings, as previously discussed, in taking whatever they could get, spoke of their constant fight for personal survival. In their poverty-stricken circumstances, they could not own anything. It was thus difficult for them to understand the concept of ownership of personal possessions as I understood it. My response to this difference between us included drawing very explicit distinctions (as discussed earlier in this chapter) regarding respect. 'We do not touch and / or take other people's possessions without asking first' was a much more formal way of interacting with children than I was accustomed to. However, I soon experienced how the initially protective mother in me also began to protect myself against a context that on occasion began to feel both personally intrusive and abusive.

My sense of needing to be dependable and to take responsibility for the children began to shift to my needing to take responsibility for myself within the context. My fear of being rejected

by the children and the community, as well as my fear of failure in terms of the university began to lessen as I explored some of these different emerging tones of my mothering voice.

Over time my confidence in presenting myself in different ways within the context grew, as I was affirmed by the children, and acknowledged by both the social workers and relatives of the children (see ch. 4 vignettes: December 1998 and April 1999). I no longer arrogantly felt that the children needed 'mothering' as I had initially understood it. My understandings had changed over time in interaction with the children's meaning systems. I began to understand that these children knew how to look after themselves in many ways. They knew how to form a gang to increase their strength in their fight for survival. They did not need me to wipe their noses, and disinfect all their little scratches. They had shown me that they could cope with much deeper life wounds. They did not necessarily need the protection of a 'mother' figure, as I had initially assumed. Therefore, I could also show the harsher sides of myself, the parts of myself that could fight for my own survival in relationship with others, particularly with children. The mothering voice in me had changed. Toward the second year of the research I began to care in a gentle way whilst also modelling the taking of responsibility. I could show concern by experiencing closeness through the drawing of clear and separate boundaries.

My own fears around being a mother, such as being rejected or not being good enough were now overt and useful parts of who I was essentially within the context. It was as if these children's meanings around adult 'care' figures and mothers did not include any specific level of expectation. The children seemed to take whatever they could get in terms of relationship too. When not presented with specific expectations from the children, I did not have to live up to any expected standard of being good enough. I could simply be. Toward the end of the research, that tacit knowledge of mine, which had started off as a limiting complementary relationship between

fear and mothering had evolved into a therapeutic complementarity (Keeney & Ross, 1985) where both the aspects of fear and mothering were experienced differently.

The implications of this for the group were that, in addressing these fears around mothering, I had been freed to be more spontaneous, to take more risks and ultimately, I believe, to be a part of a more therapeutic group context.

Themes as reconstructed meaning categories

As previously mentioned, it is in the final process of analyzing the data that a meta-level reflection occurs. Specific themes that emerged as reconstructed meaning categories of this meta-level reflection are now discussed. The way in which the researcher has punctuated these themes is arbitrary and based on shared experiential constructions of reality. In other words, various other punctuations of the themes might have been equally appropriate and valid in describing this particular community context (Keeney, 1983). However, the interactions over an extended period of time between theory, the researcher in the context, the presence and reflections of a co-therapist, playing with the children, and reflecting on the data, have finally led the researcher to construct the emerging themes as those of *respect*, *responsibility* and *hope*.

According to Ferber in Koplw (1996), although the formation of a person's self-concept is a process that spans a lifetime, it is during early childhood that the foundations of self are put into place. Lovinger (1998) also states that it is particularly between the ages of three and five years old that children begin to develop a separate sense of self. There is thus great potential during this time for growth in their sense of independence. They can also begin to learn to share with others, and to understand their rights. In asking the important developmental question of 'Who am I?' these children are seeking to find a place in their relationships with

family members and friends. An increased self-awareness in relationship with others can then also enable the development of an increased sense of self-responsibility (Lovinger, 1998).

Therapeutic group work that is sensitive to the developmental needs of this age group of children will therefore strive to foster greater self-awareness, self-expression, and self-esteem on the part of these children. The type of social feedback that the child receives will also necessarily influence his or her continuously developing image of self (Ferber in Koplow, 1996), and its related meanings.

In light of the above, therefore, it is fitting that the themes of *respect*, *responsibility* and *hope* have emerged as the final constructs in the exploration of the children's evolving meaning systems. It is in the co-creation and experience of relationships that are based on consistent *respect* for the child, that children can assimilate this worthy feedback of their fundamental value in the eyes of another, and consequently be encouraged to develop a more independent and confident sense of self. From this platform of self-worth, a healthy emergence of *self-responsibility* can begin to occur (Lovinger, 1998). Ultimately in beginning to believe in their essential worth as a human being, children can begin to believe in, and dream of a future. It is the emotion of *hope* that holds the promise of the child's future vision that is yet to be unveiled (Kast, 1991).

Respect. The Oxford Talking Dictionary (1998) describes respect with synonyms that include high regard, high opinion, admiration, appreciation, consideration, thoughtfulness, attentiveness, politeness, courtesy, and value. Research conducted by NICRO and SJRP (1990, p. 1) in describing reasons for gang membership, states 'They want respect', and yet, 'stripped of their individuality and self-respect, and armed with their knowledge of belonging to a group, the

enactment of violence and brutality becomes a frequent experience in their lives' (NICRO & SJRP, 1990, p. 5).

It appears as if, within the type of community context as described in this research, a system of perpetuating, redundant patterns of behaviour is enacted. That is, in a desperate search for self-respect and a sense of self-worth, patterns of disrespectful behaviour fuel an already existent low self-esteem. This becomes what Watzlawick, Weakland and Fisch (1974) term a more-of-the-same type of solution to existing problematic circumstances and ways of being.

In reference to chapter 4 vignettes, specific phrases that are indicative of this type of disrespectful behaviour include the following:

April 1998: 'He pushed past me, kept shoving the younger children around and continuously used fowl language ... he continued to behave rudely.'

May 1998: 'They pushed their way into my car, pulling at all the levers ... I felt helpless as these children invaded my private property.'

July 1998: 'And so I witnessed the bullying, the victimizing.'

September 1998: 'My car had been broken into, my suitcase grabbed, and my cell phone was gone.'

April 1999: 'Her vivid descriptions of the kind of verbal, emotional and physical abuse that she had survived, left both An-Maree and I feeling scared of the intensity of abuse.'

June 1999: 'They smoked, they drank, they staggered all over and they fell down. Some of them pretended to be in a physical fight ... The four-lettered language began to flow.'

'... An-Maree and I were roughly arrested and creatively thrown behind the bars of the security gate.'

These extracts illustrate how in many instances, both in the content and process of interacting with each other and with the researcher / therapist, through play, the children displayed various levels of disrespect. Wider social discourses, through which the children acquired their meanings, also seemed to include disrespectful ways of dealing with various situations.

The children were often witnesses to the adults in the community (their role models) physically and verbally abusing one another. They witnessed gang members assaulting and sometimes even murdering each other. They witnessed the difficulties with which an even wider social system, that is, the South African Police Service was forced to deal with crime. In most cases, according to research by NICRO and SJRP (1990), the police, especially in dealing with gangsterism, use violence as the only solution in fighting crime while also protecting themselves. Even the judicial system often reinforces these types of experiential meanings by imposing retributive sentences and punishment for offenders. Pinnock (1997) argues that sentencing that aims to teach harsh lessons or deter offenders in any way implies a form of coercion that further lowers the self-respect of the offender and increases a disrespect for the law.

It is as if the children were caught up in this web consisting of meanings derived from various sources, which included many abusive adults, gang members, the police and even the courts of law. It was as if *disrespect* was experienced as synonymous with some level of *survival* for all those who were connected with the context in some way.

In chapter 1 of this dissertation, I mentioned that, as researcher, I was fascinated by the level of joy these little children expressed in what seemed to be very harsh circumstances. In a context filled with daily fights for survival, life and death co-existed closely together. Life was lived with much energy and force. For gang members, life was usually lived at the very edge of

death. For the children, this extreme life force was always evident in their overwhelmingly bubbly expression of joy and hope.

Ironically, this expression of joy by the children in this context was very often treated with impatient, disrespectful intolerance by the adults in the community. However, this way of relating made sense in that, often, in taking responsibility for themselves and their children, the adults became preoccupied with issues linked with personal survival. *Disrespect*, as mentioned earlier, was apparently closely linked with assumptions about *survival*.

Kast (1991) emphasizes, however, that a lack of respect for a child's joy can kill it. She describes how children in high spirits, freely expressing themselves in some fantasy game, very often need to share this joy with the adults nearby. If the adults disregard or disrespect this type of spontaneous expression during fantasy play, the child's joy may very well be transformed into shame. These feelings of shame then contribute to the child experiencing a lowered sense of self-worth.

Within our group, significant difference was introduced by, for example, the use of simple good manners (see ch. 4 vignette: May 1998). Initially it seemed as if these children showed very little consideration for others. There was always a pushing and shoving for everything, whether it was something practical, like crayons, or something more abstract, such as attention. The introduction of verbal politeness seemed to soften the context. Within this gentler context, the researcher could more freely express appreciation of each child's unique joy and enthusiasm for life. This way of being then recursively fed back and brought difference for the children who could, for example, then also exchange some of their physical pushing and shoving for survival, for some gentler, more respectful forms of touch during play. Within these new, gentler and far less chaotic surroundings, a level of tolerance and empathy toward others could begin to develop.

This was possible as the context was experienced as safer and more nurturing of each child's unfolding experience of a more stable and integrated self-concept. According to Ferber in Koplow (1996) it is the therapist's consistent availability and caring responsiveness to the pre-school child that is a powerful intervention in and of itself in enabling the developing process of integrating a stable sense of self.

A few phrases from chapter 4 vignettes indicative of this type of respectful gentleness and responsiveness to the emotions, including the joy of discovery and creativity of the children are the following:

April 1998: '... and gently rested his hand on the place on my leg where he had kicked me.'

'He was simply looking deep into my eyes and smiling.'

July 1998: 'We stayed gentle, yet clear, in what we said.'

August 1998: 'She sang from deep within about whom she was. The movements of her body reflecting her unique mood and spirit. Many other little Barbie girls joined in with Angel, all acknowledging her important presence in our group.'

November 1998: 'We stood huddled together, talking. It felt different. For me, it felt much better.'

December 1998: 'Some sang at the top of their voices, others whispered, and some refused to make a sound. Our concert thus unfolded in its own unique way.'

'I feel so proud of my son. I didn't know he could be so good. Look so good. I also noticed how he hugs you so much.'

It would seem that the children had begun to understand that in showing patience and tolerance toward others, including the researcher / therapist, respectful dialogue was possible and social interaction was experienced as being more personally meaningful. This resulted in the

children feeling better about who they were, so increasing their individual sense of self-respect and self-worth, as well as increasing their experiences of being accepted, validated, and respected in the context of the group.

Responsibility. Very closely linked with the theme of respect and related aspect of self-worth, as described in the previous section, is the theme of *responsibility*. The Oxford Talking Dictionary (1998) describes taking responsibility for an action in terms of accountability. The responsible person will accordingly, therefore, be one who is reliable, dependable, trustworthy, competent, and / or conscientious.

Lerner (2001, p. 197) argues that for a person to accept responsibility, and be held accountable for their actions, they 'must have a platform of self-worth to stand on'. In reviewing the data of this research, various different platforms of self-worth can be seen to be associated with various different actions, and their underlying meanings, regarding the taking of responsibility in this particular community context.

A mother's platform of self-worth. In chapter 4 vignette: April 1999, Elsa's story describes what seemed like the desperate plight of a mother living in this village. Elsa's life story was filled with episodes of physical assault and sexual abuse, so perpetuating her negative sense of self. The only way that she had learnt to create a very small platform of self-worth for herself was by running a tuck shop from her home. It was from what appeared to be such an insignificant space that she, as a mother, could give her child and his friends some sweeties, ice-cream, and the kind of care that she knew how to give.

It was also from behind the small windows of her shop that her belief in her abilities to cope with life had begun to grow. She had taught herself over the years how to keep quiet about personal affairs in her lonely fight for survival. She had taught herself, as a concerned and fearful mother, the importance of connecting with strangers in taking responsibility for her child. Her meanings around being a responsible mother of a child in this village seemed to include doing whatever was necessary to enable the child to leave. If this meant that the child needed to leave her home to spend time in a playgroup with ladies from Child Welfare, or needed to leave the village as the result of a legal placement elsewhere, it was not what most concerned her. What did matter from her platform and through her lenses of reality was that for her child's protection and well-being, it was probably better if he found a way to leave the community setting.

The inherited meanings for the children with regard to the above process of a caring mother's taking of responsibility, included that one needed to leave to have any possibility of fulfilment and happiness in life. This was even evident in the way that very young children 'left' the home environment to enter the streets every morning. Distance was understood to be a necessary tool for the children, as its related meanings included learning to take responsibility for coping with the extreme circumstances in which they lived. Thus, in the context of a mother's love for and connectedness with her child's apparent needs within this particular community, she took the responsibility of creating the only sense of safety that she knew. This was probably the same sense of safety that her mother had previously created for her, and also the only sense of safety that she had experienced in relationship with other significant people in her life. This was the perpetuated pattern based on the meaning of needing to take responsibility for one's safety in relationship through the experiences of both physical and emotional distance.

The therapist / researcher's platform of self-worth. As discussed earlier in this chapter under the heading: Evolution of meanings and tacit knowledge of the investigator, specific attention was given to the therapist / researcher's evolving experience of taking responsibility in the context of the village. The two years began with my entering the context with the belief that I needed to take responsibility for these children by somehow saving them from such harsh and uncaring circumstances. I assumed that because their experiences of what I understood motherly love to be were minimal, they needed me to take responsibility for what I perceived to be missing in their lives.

Although these assumptions could be seen as being arrogant, Kaplan (1999) says that arrogance includes not only thinking too highly of oneself, but on the other side of the spectrum also thinking too lowly of oneself. (This understanding is in accordance with the underlying ecosystemic principle of complementarity as discussed in ch. 2). In the initial stages of this research project, as researcher, I was filled with fear and apprehension. This fear was indicative of my lowered sense of self-esteem in terms of possibly not being 'good enough' (as described earlier in this chapter) and not being able to cope sufficiently well within the village context. My fears of my own limitations were thus closely linked with my initial 'arrogant' constructions of the children's lives and their realities.

My way of initially taking responsibility by assuming the role of a gentle saviour was soon challenged by children's behaviour that I perceived as being both intrusive and abusive. However, the children were behaving in accordance with the developmentally egocentric nature of this age group (Piaget, 1955), as well as meanings they had acquired as a result of harsh socio-economic circumstances.

In working with children of this age group it is especially important that the therapist takes the responsibility of creating a context that includes the consistent acknowledgement of the children. Aleksyuk (1996) states that insufficient acknowledgement during childhood, whether in the form of physical, emotional, verbal and sexual abuse, or even in simply withholding praise, is strongly related to emotional problems in adulthood. In creating such a shared space of care and acknowledgement, I necessarily began to take responsibility for my own sense of self by asserting stronger personal boundaries. The therapeutic context was thereby changed to a place where the taking of responsibility was modelled and affirmed.

Within this safer, more therapeutic context, as researcher / therapist, I was able to express a fuller range of emotion, presenting more of which I essentially was to the children. This shared recognizing and witnessing of difference in ways of taking responsibility for the expression of oneself, enabled the children, too, to present more complete ranges of emotions and underlying meanings through play. As therapist I could then accept and reflect back in the construction of shared meanings, and consequently reassure the children of my consistency even in the face of any negative emotions.

The children were further reassured by my dependability and sense of responsibility in remaining available to them (Ferber in Koplow, 1996) throughout the two-year period of the research.

The children's platforms of self-worth. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the children in this particular context probably joined the research group in search of a sense of belonging to a peer group or gang in the streets. They were enthusiastic about a new context where they could play and interact with other children. It is the knowledge that young

children gain about others in interaction with them that informs their definition of themselves in comparison with the external world (Lewis & Brooks-Gunn, 1979). This knowledge enables pre-school children to define themselves as individuals with unique sets of attributes, such as gender, age, competencies and familiarity (Ferber in Koplow, 1996).

In the particular poverty-stricken and violent circumstances in which the children in the research group lived, the knowledge that they gained from others about themselves was very often negative and emphasized the children's inadequacies. The children were in many cases excessively challenged by experiences that were beyond their scope of comprehension and mastery, such as extreme trauma. According to Ferber in Koplow (1996) it is these children in particular who may develop a diminished sense of self, feeling powerless and overwhelmed by their circumstances.

From this position children are unable to foster a healthy sense of self-responsibility. Ferber in Koplow (1996) states that this can be seen in the way children play with others in precociously independent yet, at the same time, emotionally immature ways. For example, the child, Alan, mentioned in chapter 4 vignette: April 1998 always perceived himself to be the leader in any form of play. He believed that he was independent and competent enough to take charge of the others. However, his behaviour would easily escalate into kicking, shouting and swearing at the others if he was confronted in any way.

It was in the context of the therapeutic playgroup that Alan could hear 'meaningful noise' (Keeney & Ross, 1985). That is, he was presented with an idea (to practise his karate kicks) that simultaneously confirmed him as an individual, but did not reinforce the specific problem behaviour of violently kicking others when he was angry. **Reframing** is the conversational process described above where the therapist presents an idea aimed at providing a different

meaning about the problem (Hoffman, 1981). There was a significant difference for Alan regarding the type of feedback that he received from the therapist and his peers in response to ‘Alan, the boy who shouts and kicks,’ and ‘Alan, the karate champion’. The positive feedback received regarding ‘Alan, the karate champion’ served to reinforce his pride and belief in this newly discovered aspect of himself as he evaluated his own sense of worth through the eyes of others. He thus began to take responsibility for the expression of his anger.

Throughout the period of the research, similar opportunities were presented to these young children to gain confidence, and consequently take more responsibility for themselves as they reached out in further exploration of their personal meanings about life.

Hope. Within the healing context of therapy, especially with young children who have experienced trauma in their lives, the close link between respect, responsibility and hope is obvious. Stotland (1969) emphasizes the importance of the therapeutic context with regard to showing respect in interaction with the client, so increasing the client’s hopefulness in his or her ability to take responsibility for coping with everyday life. Weingarten (2000) states that in studies done with children, it is children with high levels of hope who are able to associate themselves with the positive events in their environments, and distance themselves from the negative ones. She says that for children, this ability correlates with coping and problem-solving in that it increases their feelings of competence and decreases their feelings of depression.

In co-creating healing and caring contexts, it is the responsibility of those who care to ‘do hope’ with others (Weingarten 2000, p. 402). She proposes, therefore, that hope is not just a feeling, but rather, something that people do in community with others. A translation of Bloch in Kast (1991) similarly states that hope enables people to actively throw themselves into the

process of becoming. He says that it is hope that reaches out and broadens the possibilities in life.

In the context of the research group, different methods of play were used in interacting with the children (refer to ch. 3: Research design and methodology). All these methods were used as stimuli to encourage the children to use their imagination during fantasy play. Bloch in Kast (1991) states that imagination is the way that people expand their vision. This leads to hopes and dreams for one's life. A context that nurtures the free expression of a child's imagination will also increase their creativity, and consequently enhance their belief in hope (Snyder, McDermott, Cook & Rapoff, 1997). Believing in, feeling and doing hope necessarily refer to the ever-widening possibilities and openness of the future. In the face of fear and anxiety, hope is what offers possible alternatives (Kast, 1991).

In accordance with an underlying ecosystemic perspective and social-constructionistic theory, the behaviours and related meanings of people are unpredictable and are part of a continuously evolving process in interaction with others (as discussed in ch. 2). The therapist can, therefore, never predict the outcome of any specific perturbation, but can only hope that any difference introduced is sufficiently congruent with the client's stable meaning structure to recursively feed back and inspire the client to hope for the possibility of change (Keeney & Ross, 1985). Hope is thus a shared meaning of therapy. A meaning that enjoys the freedom of letting unpredictable events unfold in their own time (Kast, 1991).

A meaning that enabled Angel to sing from deep within herself about who she was (cf. ch. 4 vignette: August 1998). A meaning that enabled Blommetjie to express passionately her dream of becoming a pop star (cf. ch. 4 vignette: August 1999). A meaning that connects with each person's soul.

Summary

In this chapter the researcher reflected on the data in an attempt at reconstructing the meanings of the children, and the shared meaning constructions between the collaborators and the researcher to form meaningful wholes or categories. This process included a description of the evolution of the children's meanings. The initial perceptions of these meanings were linked to related meanings underlying gang formation in the context of the village. Further discussion emphasized the meeting of different meaning systems and realities in the evolution of new, co-created meanings between the collaborators and the investigator. The evolution of the meanings and tacit knowledge of the investigator was necessarily also considered in accordance with second-order cybernetic theory where the observer is always part of that which is observed (Keeney, 1982).

In finally reflecting on this evolving process of shared meaning construction from a meta-perspective, three themes emerged as co-constructed meaning categories, namely, respect, responsibility and hope.

The following chapter presents an overview of the research. It considers whether working from an underlying ecosystemic epistemology and through social constructionistic theoretical lenses enabled the therapist / researcher to meaningfully address the research aims. Specific attention is also paid to the usefulness and value of this exploratory investigation into these children's lives and meaning systems. The continuation of this journey is highlighted by the recommendation of further therapeutic work with children of this age group living in similar contexts. Finally, as researcher, in accordance with the narrative and self-reflective nature of this dissertation, I comment on the story of my continuing journey.

CHAPTER 6

OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH

In this chapter a broad overview of the research is presented as the completion of a journey in the exploration of meanings. Underlying ecosystemic assumptions include the researcher as part of that which is observed (Keeney, 1982) and the drawing of distinctions arbitrarily, such that every place is a beginning and an end (Keeney, 1983). Such a distinction has necessarily also been drawn in my punctuating this chapter as representing the end of this journey.

Research aims

The aims of this research included an exploration of the meanings around being a child living in this particular village. I was interested in trying to understand how these children made sense of the place in which they lived. I questioned the developing meanings of these children concerning their futures. It was envisioned that the context of the playgroup could be used to facilitate the exploration and enhancement of each child's particular interpersonal ways of relating, as well as each child's specific skills of coping and surviving within this community. Therapeutic goals also included the fostering of a group context in which alternative social skills and possible ways of being could be explored and rehearsed.

In relationship with theory

The research was based on the theoretical underpinnings of an ecosystemic epistemology, social-constructionistic theory, and assumptions underlying narrative therapy. This theory formed the backdrop against which I, as the researcher, entered into the context of the research, participated in the research, and understood its outcomes.

Ecosystemic epistemology and social-constructionistic theoretical lenses.

Working in a context so different from that which I knew, I had to immerse myself within the specific context over an extended period of time to gain understanding of the lives of the people who lived there. This was necessary as the behaviour that occurred and its related meanings, were bound by the context of which they were a part (Bateson, 1972). Extensive descriptions of the context of this community village, as well as descriptions of the formation of the context of a group in which the children could interact through play over this two-year period have been presented.

The assumption of the principles of holism, circularity, and the relativity of ‘truth’ enabled the process of attempting to understand the meanings of the children’s behaviour by focusing on the interrelatedness and interdependence of all the relevant phenomena. In accordance with ecosystemic thinking, it was the specific type of behaviour as expressed during play that communicated meanings about the patterns of interactions in the children’s lives (Watzlawick, Bavelas & Jackson, 1967). However, those meanings that emerged were not static and fixed but, rather, in a constant state of flux and developing as part of the ever-changing interactions between all parts of the system (Jarnoski in O’ Connor & Lubin, 1984) during the process of the research.

As researcher, working from this perspective, I formed an integral part of this system. According to a second-order cybernetic approach, the researcher necessarily enters into the description of that which she observes in such a way that objectivity is not possible and that there is thus no such thing as a separate observed system (Von Foerster, 1981). She can also only perceive that which she describes through her own lenses of culture, family and language, such that the final meanings that emerge (as discussed in ch. 5) are not private and self-contained, but

rather, as previously described, representative of an entire “observer community” (Boscolo et al, 1987, p. 14).

This understanding of an assumed shared co-creation of meaning is in accordance with the researcher’s theoretical social-constructionistic lenses. Social constructionism is based on the assumptions that ideas, concepts and meanings arise from social interchange and are mediated through language (Hoffman, 1991). It is in the space between people that all knowledge, including knowledge of oneself, evolves (Hoffman). The creation of a therapeutic group context where the children could explore different behavioural possibilities in social interaction with both the therapist and peers, therefore nurtured the possibility for new co-evolved meanings to be constructed in the children’s development of an individual sense of self.

A narrative approach to therapy. According to White (1995) it is in the telling of stories, and in the process of interpretation, that meanings are derived. He emphasizes the importance of culture as story, where specific dominant stories exist within each culture. These stories tell of what it means to be a person of worth in that particular culture. Pre-school children seem to be especially vulnerable to the acquisition of the meanings underlying these dominant stories, as they developmentally model their own perceptions of self on the reflections of their perceptions of the stories of others.

Within the context of the research group, storying was used as a way of creating new possibilities for the children, as it is within alternative stories that people create different opportunities to explore new images of self (White, 1995). It was the safety of the therapeutic group context that also nurtured these newly created meanings of self through rehearsal and further exploration in relationship with others.

In light of the above discussion the usefulness of the theoretical background on which the research was based is apparent. As part of my own story, as researcher, I had an important role in co-creating a context where pre-school children could begin to tell and further explore their own personal stories and related meanings.

Naturalistic research design and qualitative methods of play

As this investigation was of an exploratory nature, seeking understanding of the continuing co-evolution of the children's meanings in a specific community context, it was appropriate that the research was based on a naturalistic design. Grounded theory emerges in the process of this type of research design (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This theory acknowledges the multiple realities and mutual shapings that occur in interaction between the investigator, other collaborators of the research, and specific contextual factors (Lincoln & Guba). Lincoln and Guba also describe how the underlying beliefs and value systems of all participants are made explicit within the context in which new constructions and meanings unfold.

Using specific methods of play as the therapeutic tools of this design, I accessed some of the important developing meaning structures of the pre-school children in this particular context. As described repeatedly throughout this dissertation, it is often through play that pre-school children experience sufficient safety to express the unsaid (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988) parts of themselves.

Research findings

Constructions offered by the collaborators in interaction with the inquirer and with each other within the context of the playgroup were reconstructed into meaningful categories or themes

through inductive data analysis. The major themes that emerged in the exploration of the children's meanings, and in the co-evolution of new meanings within the therapeutic group were those of *respect, responsibility* and *hope*.

The value of the research as an exploratory investigation

Final reflections on the process of research as described here, necessarily include questioning its usefulness and value. What was the value, therefore, of research aimed at the exploration of meanings and co-creation of a therapeutic context in which new meanings could unfold? What was the significance of reflecting on the data such that the reconstructed meaning categories of *respect, responsibility* and *hope* now emerge as 'knowledge' regarding the meaning construction of pre-school children in a therapeutic context? It is important to consider these questions based on the theoretical background described in this dissertation. That is, with this investigation being exploratory in nature, only the foundations have been laid for the further exploration of continuously evolving meanings in this regard.

However, for persons closely connected with the children of this specific community context, the research was especially significant. The meanings that the children of this community acquired with regard to living in poverty-stricken socio-economic circumstances, as well as with regard to living in a community where gangsterism was prevalent, became evident.

For the pre-school children of this particular context themselves, a playgroup was formed that afforded them the opportunity of experiencing therapeutic difference in relationship with their developing sense of self. The context of the group was choreographed in such a way that the children were not only affirmed by the therapist, but also validated by each other. The therapeutic benefit of the research was evident in the children beginning to show *respect* for

others. The positive feedback related to these respectful interactions served to foster feelings of increased self-worth for the children, which in turn served as a platform from which the children could begin to take *self-responsibility*. The experiences of these new ways of perceiving and expressing themselves thus nurtured a belief in the possibilities for their futures, so fostering an important feature of psychological well-being, that is, a sense of *hope* (Kast, 1991).

Future recommendations

The research findings, which include the themes of *respect*, *responsibility* and *hope*, and the therapeutic value of these three themes in the co-construction of these pre-school children's meanings are described in detail in chapter 5. However, as researcher, I strongly recommend that a further longitudinal study of these particular children be undertaken in assessing the long-term effects of having co-constructed these new meanings (including the themes of *respect*, *responsibility* and *hope*) within this particular context. It would be useful to witness the unfolding of the ongoing stories (White, 1995) of these children, and their changing meanings, as they enter future stages of their personal psychological development. Since the fight for survival in this particular context is so harsh, it would be of value for future researchers to investigate whether and how respect, responsibility and hope enhanced or detracted from the ways in which children survive in harsh contexts. It would also be useful to explore the effects of this research for these children in terms of their behaviour in various other contexts and relationships in their lives.

Any future application of similar research elsewhere should be possible as I endeavoured to remain ethically responsible with regard to the transferability of this research by providing sufficient data regarding its specific context.

In conclusion

A continuing journey of hope: a reflection by the author. In reaching the end of this dissertation I have, once again, become aware of my own story.

This story is about the voice of a child. It is also about the voice of a mother. The child's soft gentle voice always fighting for survival among the loudly judgmental and disqualifying voices of adults. The mother's soft gentle voice, ever-protective of this lonely, unheard child.

This story is also about freeing a child's spirit. It is the story of the freeing of a mother's spirit too. The child now plays joyfully, loudly expressing the words of her soul, while the mother dances, laughs and dances again as she moves with hope to the music of life.

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