

## Chapter 6

# RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

***“Everybody has the skills required to do interpretive research,  
to do it well one needs to turn these into specialised research skills”***

Terre Blanche and Kelly (1999, p. 126)

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of qualitative / interpretive research in general and hermeneutics in particular as it is applied in this study. The goals of the study will be set, the research setting will be defined, the qualitative / interpretive research approach will be highlighted, reliability and validity in qualitative research will be outlined and hermeneutics, as the method of analysing data and determining meaning, will be described in detail. The second part of this chapter will focus on the rationale for selecting the interpretive approach, the role of the researcher will be described, reliability and validity with reference to this study will be outlined, sampling and selection will be formulated, the interview method as primary data collection method will be described and the application of the hermeneutic method to analyse data, will be outlined.

## THE GOALS OF THE STUDY

The primary goal of this study is to gain an overview of how the peer helpers, as research participants, monitored their growth and development over a period of peer helper involvement by managing their portfolio development processes. An auxiliary aim of this study is to yield data that would be valuable to project leaders considering implementing such as portfolio development programme, as well as to generate constructive feedback and new

insights that would lead to the further development of the existing programme at Unisa.

## **RESEARCH SETTING**

The University of South Africa (Unisa), one of 13 mega distance education institutions in the world, has merged with the Technikon of South Africa (TSA) and with Vista University Distance Education College (VUDEC) under the existing name of the University of South Africa (Unisa) as from 1 January 2004.

Students mostly study from home, although a proportion of students come to one of the campuses or service centres across South Africa on a daily basis. The medium of instruction is either English or Afrikaans, with the majority of students studying in English. A large proportion of the students studying in English are, however, second language users.

Unisa, as a merged institution, offers degrees and diplomas in agriculture, natural resources and environmental sciences; economic and management sciences; human sciences; law; and science, engineering and technology. The academic staff are predominantly white (54%) English/Afrikaans speakers (Unisa Planning Office Statistics, 2005) but there has been a shift towards staff representing the student population by 2006.

The student population is heterogenous with regard to language, race, gender, age, disability, religion and socio-economic status. The merger has increased the total student population registered for formal courses, to approximately 154 000 students (Unisa Planning Office Statistics, 2005). These students are located around the world with the majority (143 488) in South Africa; 8 348 students in the rest of Africa; 338 in America; 502 in Asia; 1 579 in Europe; and 167 in Oceania (Unisa Planning Office Statistics, 2005). A total of nine counsellors render a service to the population of 154 000 students.

Peer helping programmes are run under the auspices of the Bureau for Counselling, Career and Academic Development (BCCAC) at the main campus in Pretoria, the regional

campuses in Cape Town, Durban and Polokwane, as well as at the Learning Centre in Johannesburg. The researcher is the National Coordinator of the peer help programme at Unisa as well as the project leader for the peer help group at the main campus in Pretoria. The counsellors at the regional centres and at the Johannesburg Learning Centre act as the project leaders for the peer helper programmes on their campuses. A detailed description of the research setting as well as the extent of the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer model can be found in Chapter 4 of this study.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: QUALITATIVE / INTERPRETIVE RESEARCH**

According to Terre Blanche and Kelly (1999, p. 123) interpretive methods of research are methods "... that try to describe and interpret people's feelings and experiences in human terms rather than through quantification and measurement". Qualitative research typically uses words rather than numbers to report findings; makes use of empathy to observe participants; interprets results in specific contexts; may, in the process, strive to empower participants, and "... accommodate nonlinear (technically chaotic) causal processes" (Stiles, 1993, p. 593). Morrow and Smith (2000, p. 200) state that "[t]he power of a qualitative presentation lies in the words of the participants and the analysis of the researcher".

Qualitative researchers attempt to understand a phenomenon by identifying specific qualities or categories. Data is gathered through detailed observations of people's actions; through listening to their descriptions of experiences; and by examining artifacts that have been produced. Such 'nonnumerical data' (Morrow & Smith, 2000, p. 200) is used to draw inferences and to compile accurate verbal and visual records. The typical format for results are through "... words, descriptions, theoretical or conceptual frameworks, pictures, and diagrams rather than formal models and statistics" (Morrow & Smith, 2000, p. 200).

A qualitative / interpretive approach, according to Terre Blanche and Kelly (1999) is, characterised by: (1) a specific **ontology**, which is based on the assumption that the

subjective experiences of individuals are valid and should receive significant attention; (2) an **epistemology**, which is based on the assumption that the experiences of others can be understood through listening to and interacting with them; and (3) a **methodology**, based on the assumption that specific qualitative methods and techniques are best suited to these types of research tasks.

According to Morrow and Smith (2000, p. 199) “[q]ualitative research is grounded in a variety of theories of research” and a number of qualitative approaches are available namely: “interpretive research”, “naturalistic research”, “fieldwork”, “participant observation”, “ethnography”, and “anthropological research”. Other approaches are “idiographic studies”; “ethnomethodology”; “grounded theory”; “protocol analysis”; “discourse analysis”; “conversational analysis”; “constructivist approaches”; “humanistic approaches”; “phenomenology”; “hermeneutic investigation”; and “case studies” (Stiles, 1993, p. 594).

### **Characteristics of qualitative research**

A number of defining characteristics of qualitative research have been found in the literature consulted for this study namely:

- **Qualitative research “... focuses on particular units of study, in and for themselves, as wholes”** (Morrow & Smith, 2000, p. 200). The researcher studies one individual, a group/s of individuals or institutions and “... produces knowledge claims” about these research participants only. This is called “idiographic research” which is in contrast to “nomothetic research” which aims at producing claims about large groups of individuals” (Morrow & Smith, 2000, p. 200).
- **The researcher is “... the primary instrument for both collecting and analysing data”** (Terre Blanche & Kelly, 1999, p. 126) and the role of the researcher is active and participatory (Rapmund, 1996). Specialised listening and interpreting skills need to be developed to conduct qualitative research, namely learning to listen actively, to

observe accurately, to question effectively and to interpret the results consistently and comprehensively (Kelly, 1999b; Terre Blanche & Kelly, 1999). The researcher should become part of the context of the research in such a way that the natural setting is not disturbed. To do this, the researcher should approach and enter the context with care and sensitivity, and openly and empathically relate to the research participants. (Terre Blanche & Kelly, 1999). The researcher, as “... **primary data collection instrument**” (Rapmund, 1996, p. 104) can be biased and should acknowledge such bias. “Subjectivity is considered inevitable and indeed the only way, through *verstehen* or interpretive understanding, that one person can understand the actions of another” (Dilthey, cited in Morrow & Smith, 2000, p. 201). The “... expectations, biases, assumptions and feelings” (p. 201) that the researcher has about the research process can be highlighted by a number of activities such as (1) keeping a “self-reflective journal” or conducting a “self-interview” (Polkinghorne, cited in Morrow & Smith, 2000, p. 201) during the data collection phase; or (2) making use of “peer reviewers” or a “research team” (p. 201) to validate the researcher’s interpretation of the data. These activities highlight how the researcher’s subjectivity has influenced the research process and also shares the “lens” through which the research has been conducted (Morrow & Smith, 2000, p. 201). According to Kelly (1999c, p. 412) researchers should also acknowledge that they are not “... entirely indifferent to the outcomes of the research” and that they bring a “pre-understanding” to the process.

- **Empathy is used in qualitative research as an observation strategy.** The experiences, thoughts and feelings of the research participants are explored in such a way that the researcher gains an understanding of the inner worlds of the participants. This “... (imperfect) understanding” (Stiles, 1993, p. 595) forms the data which the researcher can use to draw conclusions about the experiences and the behaviour of the participants. Such empathic understanding enables the researcher to draw on (1) his/her own experience and self-knowledge (Atwood & Stolorow, cited in Stiles, 1993), (2) “... intersubjective meanings shared within a society” (Taylor, cited in Stiles, 1993, p. 595), and (3) the speech and the behaviour of the participants

- (Stiles, 1993).
- Qualitative research is also characterised by its aim namely to **understand the participants' behaviour within a specific context**. According to Terre Blanche and Kelly (1999, p. 125) “[v]erstehen” or “empathic reliving” is the method to be used to understand texts within their context. Through this understanding specific theoretical constructs can be developed which “... may serve as principles or models that will contribute to the knowledge base about the phenomenon under investigation” (Morrow & Smith, 2000, p. 200). These principles cannot be generalised but are related to a specific context which can, however, be transferred to similar contexts (Morrow & Smith, 2000). The context itself includes not only the cultural and personal histories of both the researcher and the participants, but also the setting in which the observations are made (Stiles, 1993). Stiles (1993) continued to add that **the meaning of experiences and actions are cumulative**. Anything being said in the interview consists of meanings of what has already been said previously (Paget, cited in Stiles, 1993). According to Terre Blanche and Kelly (1999) the aim is therefore to determine, not only the intended meaning of what was shared, but also the personal and societal contexts (Bleicher, cited in Terre Blanche & Kelly, 1999) in which the person is sharing his/her experience.
  - Qualitative research **consists of both inductive and deductive processes**. Induction refers to the process where the researcher uses a number of specific observations with the aim to reconstruct “... more general but speculative hypotheses” (Durrheim, 1999, p. 40). Deduction, on the other hand, refers to the process where the researcher draws “... conclusions about particulars from knowledge of the general” (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999, p. 4). Although “inductive logic” (Morrow & Smith, 2000, p. 201), where the researcher allows for the unfolding of specific categories of meaning, is facilitated by qualitative research, “[t]he researcher cycles between the *inductive* process of immersion in the field and discovery of categories and themes, and the *deductive* process of testing those themes and categories against existing and newly collected data” (Morrow & Smith, 2000, p. 201). Qualitative research

therefore “... involves an *abductive* process (Behrens & Smith, cited in Morrow & Smith, 2000, p. 201) that loops as often and as long as needed to bring the analysis to a coherent conclusion” (Morrow & Smith, 2000, p. 201). According to Erickson (cited in Morrow & Smith, 2000, p. 201) “[i]nduction and deduction work in dialogue”.

- **“Qualitative research accommodates nonlinear causality”** (Stiles, 1993, p. 597). “Nonlinear systems, in which elements feed back to influence their own subsequent behavior, often behave unpredictably, or *chaotically*” (Gleick; Prigogine & Stengers, cited in Stiles, 1993, p. 597). This feedback is not restricted to the individual him-/herself. It also feeds back to influence the personal experiences and behaviour of others. This can lead to new thoughts and actions which cannot be predicted.
- Qualitative research **bridges the “... conventional distance”** (Morrow & Smith, 2000, p. 201) between the researcher and the participants which is critical in understanding the participants’ actions within a specific context. The researcher should, therefore, aim to enter the life world of the participants and maintain both a spatial and psychological closeness to enable him/her to allow the participants to disclose the meanings that they attach to their experiences. (Morrow & Smith, 2000).
- **Empowerment is often advocated as a research goal** in qualitative research. According to Stiles (1993, p. 598) the “... empowerment or emancipation or enhancement of participants as a legitimate or even central purpose of research” is often advocated by qualitative researchers. This highlights the importance of engaging participants in the process of formulating interpretations.
- **The aim of the research project is stated upfront before the project commences** (Rapmund, 1996). Open-ended questions are asked with the specific aim to get answers to the “what” rather than the “why”(p.103). ‘What’ questions aim to gather data about which the individual has direct knowledge. “Why” questions, on the other hand, could generate general theories and justifications (Stiles, 1993).
- **Qualitative research designs are “... informed by theory”** (Rapmund, 1996, p. 103). The researcher is guided by a specific epistemology which provides a “... specific lens for looking at the world” (p. 103).

- **“Qualitative research is also characterised by its emergent design”** (Eisner; Glaser & Strauss; Smith, cited in Morrow & Smith, 2000, p. 201). Although the researcher has indicated how he/she intends to conduct the research in the initial proposal document, the original research design can, and is often adapted as the research process progresses.
- A variety of **sampling and selection methods** are feasible in qualitative research. Small samples, fitting the research aims are, however, often deliberately selected (Rapmund, 1996). The focus is on looking “... intensively at a few cases which highlight individual differences and context” (Rapmund, 1996, p. 104). A variety of selection methods can be used such as comprehensive selection; confirming and disconfirming cases; convenience selection; critical case sampling; extreme-case selection; maximum variation sampling; quota selection; reputational-case selection; theoretical sampling; typical-case selection; and unique-case selection (Goetz & LeCompte, cited in Rapmund, 1996; Kelly, 1999a).
- **Data collection is conducted by using both “... interactive and noninteractive” methods** and is “... usually visual or verbal rather than statistical” (Rapmund, 1996, p. 104). The aim of qualitative research is to collect the data and to study it in its “... natural setting” (Terre Blanche & Kelly, 1999, p. 127). A variety of methods can be used to collect data such as by means of interviews, observations, document analysis, field notes, video tapes, and audio tapes (Rapmund, 1996). Participant observation and interviewing are the two most popular data collection strategies (Terre Blanche & Kelly, 1999).
- **Qualitative researchers use a number of field methods to collect data.** According to Morrow and Smith (2000) the life world of the participants is entered by the researcher with the aim of gaining first hand experience, over time, of what the participants do, say or produce, and how they categorise their daily experiences. ‘*Emic* categories’ emerge from the participants being studied. According to Pike (cited in Kelly, 1999c, pp. 404 - 405) the term ‘emic’ refers to “... understanding from within a cultural system, one that provides insight into indigenous phenomena, and in

which meaning derives from understanding phenomena in their own terms". 'Etic' categories", on the other hand, are based on theory which has been used by the researcher to understand phenomena (Morrow & Smith, 2000, p 200; Pike, cited in Kelly, 1999c, pp. 404 - 405). "Derived etics result from attempts to pull together knowledge from both etic and emic approaches" (Pike, cited in Kelly, 1999c, pp. 404 - 405).

- **Qualitative research is characterised by the "[p]olydimensionality of experience"** (Stiles, 1993, p. 596). This means that many dimensions are needed to describe experience fully. A description, therefore, consists of different terms, each forming a different dimension. "Qualitative research, using language, draws on a vast lexicon of dimensions to represent its observations" (p. 596).
- **Data analysis** can be conducted in various ways in order to distinguish specific patterns. Elaborate coding systems can be used in some cases (Rapmund, 1996). Data analysis is time and labour intensive and "[p]atterns emerge from, rather than being imposed on, data" (Rapmund, 1996, p. 104). The processes of data collection and analysis gradually flow into each other - in the beginning of the research process the focus is more on data collection with less analysis, and at the end, mainly on analysis, less on collection (Terre Blanche and Kelly, 1999).
- **Results, in qualitative research, are expressed in words** rather than numerically with the specific aim of re-creating the reality being studied (Rapmund, 1996; Stiles, 1993). Such results, interpretations and theories are tentative and cannot be generalised. Researchers "... express varying degrees of confidence regarding their formulations' consistency and scope, but they are not surprised by exceptions" (Stiles, 1993, p. 598).

### **Reliability in qualitative research**

Reliability in qualitative research refers to "... the trustworthiness of observations or data" (Stiles, 1993, p. 601) and are attained by the following strategies:



**Table 14: Summary of strategies to ensure reliability in qualitative research**

<b>“Disclosure of orientation”</b>	This refers to the process whereby the researcher discloses his/her “... expectations for the study, preconceptions, values and orientation” (Stiles, 1993, p. 602) as well as “... theoretical allegiance” (Rapmund, 1996, p. 105).
<b>“Explication of social and cultural context”</b>	This refers to the process where the context of the research is shared explicitly in such a manner that the viewpoints, values, background and the circumstances under which the data has been gathered become clear (Stiles, 1993).
<b>“Description of internal processes of investigation”</b>	This refers to the development of the researcher’s “progressive subjectivity” as it develops during the research and data analysis process (Guba & Lincoln, cited in Stiles, 1993, p. 603). The effect of this subjectivity should be stated, difficulties experienced should be described and surprises should be listed in order to highlight the subjective interpretations within a specific context.
<b>“Engagement with the material”</b>	This refers to the need for the researcher to establish a relationship of trust with the participants of the study so that understanding of the context from the perspective of the participants can be developed. Stiles (1993, p. 604) termed this as “... immersion in the material” and may include “... prolonged engagement, persistent observation within the period of engagement, discussion of preliminary interpretations with other investigators, actively seeking disconfirming data, and repeatedly checking participants’ reactions to interpretations” (Guba & Lincoln, cited in Stiles, 1993, p. 604). Engagement with the material is also facilitated by extensive cataloguing of data; highlighting prominent themes; checking and rechecking extracts from original text; and repeated interviews with participants to check and monitor emerging themes and interpretations (Stiles, 1993). These processes are necessary to gain an in-depth understanding of the participant’s perspective and lead to a drastic deviation from a “structured interview protocol” (Mishler, cited in Stiles, 1993, p. 605).
<b>“Iteration”</b>	This refers to “... [c]ycling between interpretation and observation” - thus the “dialogue between theories or interpretations and the participants or text” (Rapmund, 1996, p. 105). By allowing the researcher to express what he/she understands from what has been shared by the participants, the participants are given an opportunity to adjust and clarify the meaning of these observations. Audio and video tapes can be used for this purpose (Stiles, 1993).

<b>“Ask “What”, not “why”</b>	Best practice, according to Stiles (1993, p. 606) involves asking “... participants questions that they can answer”. The focus should be on ‘what’ questions to elicit answers focussing on what the participant has direct knowledge of. Responses to ‘why’ questions, which can also be taken into account, focus on the individual’s interpretation of an experience which can be based on “... half-baked theories or post hoc justifications for what clients think or do” (p. 607).
<b>“Grounding of interpretations”</b>	This refers to the process whereby the researcher links his/her interpretations with “... more concrete observations” (Stiles, 1993, p. 605) - thus by linking the emerging themes with examples of the original text (Rapmund, 1996).

Stiles (1993, pp. 602 - 606)

### Validity in qualitative research

Validity, according to Stiles (1993, p. 607) “... concerns whether an interpretation is internally consistent, useful, robust, generalizable, or fruitful”. According to Stiles (1993) the following types of validity or “bases for trusting interpretations” (p.607) are relevant in qualitative research.

**Table 15: Summary of types of validity in qualitative research**

<b>“Coherence”</b>	This refers to the quality of the interpretation of the data (Stiles, 1993). The interpretation should form a whole without any loose ends. If not, the analysis process is not complete and is therefore not valid. “Coherence includes internal consistency, comprehensiveness of the elements to be interpreted and the relations between elements, and usefulness in encompassing new elements as they come into view” (Stiles, 1993, p. 608).
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<b>“Triangulation”</b>	According to Terre Blanche and Kelly (1999, p. 128) triangulation helps researchers to “... ‘home in’ on a correct understanding of a phenomenon by approaching it from several different angles” - thus data is gathered by means of a variety of sources, methods, theories, and interpretations (Stiles, 1993). According to Guba and Lincoln (cited in Stiles, 1993, p. 608) triangulation is viewed as “fairness” where the interpretation is fair as it acknowledges other sources through which experiences are shared. The use of limited sources in gathering data can lead to “misinterpretation” which can be a danger in qualitative research (Stiles, 1993, p. 608).
<b>“Uncovering; self-evidence”</b>	This refers to the process of evaluating interpretations and considering whether the researcher’s questions or concerns have been answered (Stiles, 1993).
<b>“Testimonial validity”</b>	This refers to the process of checking with the participants whether the researcher’s interpretation is accurate, and if not, to continue negotiating with the participant/s until consensus is reached (Stiles, 1993). Not all studies can claim testimonial validity, especially if research is conducted on data after a long period of time has lapsed. Accurate agreement of what was said in a recent interview can also be problematic as participants may want to cover up what was exposed during the first interview (Stiles, 1993).
<b>“Catalytic validity”</b>	“A catalytically valid interpretation produces change or growth in the people whose experiences are being described” (Stiles, 1993, p. 611). This refers to the extent to which the research process itself empowers, focuses and “energizes participants” (p. 611).
<b>“Consensus among researchers; replication”</b>	“Consensus among researchers”, or “peer debriefing” (Stiles, 1993, p. 612) refers to the process of checking and cross checking interpretations with other researchers or research teams. This provides readers with a guarantee that the raw data has been analysed by other researchers and that they have agreed to the interpretation thereof. Consensus can also be built into the research methodology by using research teams that alternately read transcripts, and develop and discuss interpretations. Consensus can then be claimed “... within a small but highly informed community” (p. 612). Alternatively, researchers can use a panel “... of knowledgeable peers who could consider the evidence ... and find for or against the interpretations’ coherence of self-evidence” (p. 612).

<p><b>“Reflexive validity”</b></p>	<p>This refers to how the researcher’s thinking is influenced by the data analysis process. According to Stiles (1993, p. 612) “[t]he underlying notion is that interpretation is in a dialectical relationship with observation”. Interpretations therefore change as the researcher reads and rereads his/her initial observations. This could, however, lead to the emergence of new problems (Potter &amp; Wetherell, cited in Stiles, 1993).</p>
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Stiles (1993, pp. 607 - 613)

### THE HERMENEUTIC METHOD

Hermeneutics as a discipline, was initially applied in the interpretation of ancient Biblical texts (Rapmund, 1996) and has been named after Hermes, “... the messenger who changed the message to suit the audience” (Stiles, 1993, p. 599). Modern hermeneutics as it is known today, has been developed by “Heidegger (1962) and Gadamer (1975, 1976) as a general philosophy of human understanding and interpretation” (Rapmund, 1996, pp. 119 - 120). The aim of hermeneutics is to determine meaning, to develop understanding (Wilson & Hutchinson, cited in Rapmund, 2000) and to clarify what is not yet understood (Rapmund, 2000). The hermeneutic approach is therefore “... coherent with an interpretive approach (Rapmund, 2000, p. 140).

The manner in which people experience their world and make sense of it is influenced by their “... social, cultural and historical context” (Rapmund, 1996, p. 120). To reach understanding of a phenomenon two perspectives should be combined namely (1) the phenomenon being studied such as an ancient text, a life history, or a specific event or experience; and (2) the life, culture and “... historical point of time” of the researcher (Rowan & Reason, cited in Rapmund, 1996, p. 120).

Hermeneutics is based on a number of assumptions (Addison, cited in Rapmund, 2000) namely that:

- individuals attach meaning to experiences in their lives and this meaning should be explored if others want to understand their behaviour.
- meaning is expressed in a variety of ways, not only verbally.
- the process of giving meaning is informed by the "... immediate context, social structures, personal histories, shared practices, and language" (Addison, cited in Rapmund, 2000, p. 140).
- The meaning of experiences is not static. It is continually being negotiated, and changes or develops over time (Rapmund, 2000, p. 140).
- "The process of interpretation enables a person to make sense of his or her world" (Rapmund, 2000, p. 140). As the values of the researcher influence the interpretation process it creates a subjective reality, which is in line with this approach "... which does not adhere to the belief in an objective reality" (Rapmund, 2000, p. 140).

During the interpretation of text using the hermeneutic cycle, "... the meaning of the parts should be considered in relation to the meaning of the whole, which itself can only be understood in respect of its constituent parts". This can be visualised "... as a circular movement between part and whole" (Kelly, 1999c, p. 406).

Although hermeneutics does not have a standard set of techniques (Addison, cited in Rapmund, 2000, p. 140), Terre Blanche and Kelly (1999, pp. 141 - 144) and (Kelly, 1999c, p. 408) have described a generic process, incorporating both "... experience-near and distanced" methods for data analysis (Kelly, 1999c, p. 408):

### **"Familiarisation and immersion"**

This step refers to the process whereby the researcher familiarises him-/herself with and immerses him-/herself in the data by rereading the text a few times over, making notes and summaries. The researcher is, at this stage, "... working with the texts, rather than the lived experience" (Rapmund, 2000, p. 141). The aim is to know the data well enough to remember what is contained in it, know where specific quotations occur in the text and be familiar with the language and metaphor usage of each participant (Kelly, 1999c). According to Rapmund (2000, p. 141) the researcher "... needs to immerse herself in the world created by the text so

that she can make sense of that world". Although this stage is still part of the beginning stage of empathic understanding, it is moving towards "...a more distanced understanding" (Kelly, 1999c, p. 409).

### **"Inducing themes"**

This refers to the process of identifying specific principles, themes or general rules underlying the data. Kelly (1999c, p. 409) refers to this process as "unpacking". It starts with listing themes, drawing mind maps and branching notes of all themes that come to mind as the researcher studies the text. It shows connections between themes, sub-themes, sub-categories and clusters of information. This stage is therefore moving towards looking at material "from the outside" (Kelly, 1999c, p. 410) but is still based on what the participants have shared. Such data analysis involves a cycling between a number of dimensions namely "strange and familiar"; "description and interpretation"; "foreground and background"; and "part and whole" (Terre Blanche & Kelly, 1999, p. 140).

### **"Coding"**

This refers to the process to "... break down a body of data (text domain) into labelled, meaningful pieces, with the view to later clustering the 'bits' of coded material together under the code heading and further analysing them both as a cluster and in relation to other clusters" (Terre Blanche & Kelly, 1999, p. 143). This is done by using aids such as coloured pens, highlighters, and photocopies. The process of identifying themes and coding of data normally fuse into one another as themes change during the coding process and as the researcher's understanding of the themes and connection to other themes deepen. Kelly (1999c), who terms this phase "association" (p. 410), cautioned that researchers should not focus on merely getting information that they are looking for, but also to focus on data that does not fit in the identified themes. Themes or categories should be changed to accommodate these "square pegs" (Kelly, 1999c, p. 411).



### **“Elaboration”**

This refers to the process of obtaining finer subtleties of meaning, finding the connection between meanings, identifying commonalities and differences, and paying attention to both generalities and uniqueness, which were not captured in the original coding system (Kelly, 1999c). This often requires the researcher to revise the initial coding process to develop a more comprehensive analysis of the data. The process of “... coding, elaborating and recoding” should continue until no further new insights are generated (Terre Blanche & Kelly, 1999, p. 144). “By being careful to let both movements of the hermeneutic circle (particular to general and general to particular) have an influence, we are most likely to arrive at an interpretation that accounts both for contexts and *across* contexts” (Kelly, 1999c, p. 413).

### **“Interpretation and checking”**

This refers to the written report of the phenomenon being investigated. The report presents the analysed themes as sub-headings. Although research projects normally lead to new questions, all research projects will at some stage reach a point of conclusion. Kelly (1999b) provides a number of pointers to indicate that this point has been reached namely when:

- new thoughts are not contributing to a deeper understanding that has already been developed.
- all questions that have been asked at the beginning of the research have been answered in the “interpretive account” (p. 423).
- the interpretation matches the data that has been collected.
- a large number of fundamental questions have been asked around the interpretation without generating doubt.
- “... new material and new questions seem to add to the account rather than break it down” (p. 423).
- the interpretation has been shared with a number of peers, mentors and the supervisor and the interpretation has provided answers to their questions.

This point is also called “**saturation**” or “**exhaustion**”, referring to the point that is reached when the data has been interpreted by the researcher, to such an extent, that it has resulted in a data rich account of the experiences. According to Kelly (1999b, p. 422) the researcher should then be able to claim that he/she had exhausted the interpretation of the data and has reached a point where he/she has “... a satisfactory sense of what is going on”.

### **“Integration: The final report”**

According to Kelly (1999c, p. 415), there should be a balance between the particular and the general in the final report. The challenge at this stage is to draw the individual themes together into the final general report which is the “... researcher’s retelling of what research participants told her or him” (p. 415). The reconstruction of the experiences shared by the respondents is written in the third person containing both the actual words of the respondents; the notes made by the researcher and the interpretations (Kelly, 1999c).

### **Final reflection**

Qualitative researchers should determine, not only if they have reached saturation point, but also if what is done “... is good enough” (Kelly, 1999c, p. 423). Standards of good research are based on appropriate ethical foundations, reliable data collection and analysis methods. “Hermeneutic consciousness remains incomplete as long as it does not include a reflection upon the limits of hermeneutic understanding” (Habermas, cited in Kelly, 1999c, p. 424). To reflect on the research, Kelly (1999c, pp. 423 - 427) suggested that a number of aspects need attention namely:

- the development of a “... critical process of reflection on the interpretive process and the effects that this has on the emerging interpretive account” (Kelly, 1999c, p. 424). Habermas (cited in Kelly, 1999b, p. 424) referred to this as a “dialogue” during the process of “participatory research” between, not only researcher and participant, but

also between researcher and text.

- the development of an audit trail to record in detail what has been done during the data collection and analysis process.
- the use of an “analytic diary” and “a reflexive journal” (p. 427) to record what and why specific steps were taken, to record concerns, impressions, and experiences throughout the research process.

## **THE RESEARCH APPROACH**

This section provides the rationale for selecting an interpretive, qualitative approach for this study. The role of the researcher, reliability and validity with reference to this study, sampling and selection, data collection and the interview method will be discussed. Finally the process of data analysis, using hermeneutics as a methodology to interpret the data, will be highlighted.

### **Rationale for selecting an interpretive, qualitative approach**

According to Rapmund (1996, p. 101) “[q]uantitative research methodology is consistent with the Cartesian-Newtonian epistemology” and is based on the premises that (1) a reality exists “out there” that needs to be discovered, and (2) researchers must be objective and free from “observer bias” to be able to arrive at the truth. Quantitative research is furthermore concerned with “... objectivity, measurement and outcome” (Wassenaar, cited in Rapmund, 1996, p. 101) thus giving rise to the belief that a person can only conduct research if there is a specific experimental design with a phenomenon to be measured.

According to Hathaway (cited in Schulze, 2003, p.8) critical aspects in human behaviour are systematically overlooked by “... empirical-analytical research” approaches - to such an extent that the approach is often viewed as being “... dehumanizing”. Aspects such as an individual’s behaviour within a specific setting, the interest in the individual, and the historical context are

often overlooked. According to Cohen and Manion (cited in Schulze, 2003) such studies have concentrated on the "... repetitive and predictable aspects of human behaviour" (p. 8) - thus restricting knowledge of human functioning.

The postmodernist shift "... from notions of rationality and *objective* truth to notions of significance and meaning"(Callahan & Elliott, cited in Rapmund, 2000, p. 125) required a different approach to the experiential or empirical-analytical research approaches. The qualitative research approach which emerged as part of "... an 'interpretive turn' in social science epistemology" (Rabinow & Sullivan, cited in Kelly, 1999c, p.398) is therefore viewed as more applicable to understanding human experience. Kelly (1999c) stated that this "interpretive turn" referred to a diversion towards understanding human behaviour within the context of human experience. The underlying rationale is that human experience cannot be understood "... without understanding the social, linguistic and historical features which give it shape" (p. 398). This has led to qualitative research being accepted as a legitimate approach to the study of social sciences (Kelly, 1999c).

Interpretative research is therefore the research approach of choice for this study. The study is concerned with the way in which peer helpers, within the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme, use their individual portfolios to monitor their growth and development. According to Kelly (1999c, p. 399) the approach will include both "insider" - "first person" perspectives ("... empathic, context-bound research") as well as "outsider" - "third person" perspectives ("... social constructionist orientations"). Kelly (1999c), furthermore, emphasised that certain aspects in the research will only become apparent by looking at it from the outside, irrespective of how thorough our understanding of the "first person" perspective is. As transcripts are being read and analysed, new questions and concerns come to mind, which allow the researcher to approach the text in new ways, looking for new meaning. This "distancing" is therefore a creative way to disclose meaning (Kelly, 1999c, p. 400).

### **Role of the researcher**

In line with qualitative/interpretive research the researcher becomes the primary instrument in the process of collecting and analysing data (Terre Blanche & Kelly, 1999). The researcher and the participants play an active role in the research process and each bring to the research contexts his or her own "... unique purposes, expectations, backgrounds, outlooks, and personality organisation" (Bopp & Weeks, cited in Rapmund, 1996, p. 110). The nature of the relationship between the researcher and the participant is determined by the interaction between these two parties at a specific time and in a specific context. This can influence both parties to such an extent that close relationships and trust can develop over time (Rapmund, 1996).

The purpose of the research project should be clearly stated at the beginning of the research process. In this study, the researcher informed the participants that she was conducting research to explore the experiences of peer helpers with the development of their individual portfolios. The researcher emphasised that portfolios are used within the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme to allow, not only the project leaders to monitor the growth and development of the peer helpers, but also to allow peer helpers themselves, to compile their own career portfolios which provide evidence of their development and growth. The researcher emphasised that research needed to be conducted to gain insight into the peer helpers' own accounts of the use of their portfolios for this purpose. The study, therefore provided the opportunity for peer helpers to share their experiences and insights which have been developed during the portfolio development process. The participants were informed that they had first hand knowledge about the development process and had significant contributions to make, both on a national and an international level, to the body of knowledge about the use of portfolios to monitor peer helpers' growth and development.

The researcher described her role to the participants at the commencement of the study. She explained that her interest in the use of portfolios started as a direct result of project leaders

at the participating campuses observing that (1) some peer helpers became passive after the core and fundamental training, and (2) that others did not take responsibility for continued learning. In an attempt to monitor the self-efficacy and self-directedness of the peer helpers, portfolio development was introduced. From the literature study it became evident that portfolios allow for the monitoring of growth over time and the researcher was intent on establishing whether the participants managed the portfolio development process to such a degree that individual growth and development is reflected in the portfolios.

In line with the interviews with the research participants, the researcher conducted an extensive literature research on the subject of peer helping and portfolio development which contributed to her understanding of these concepts.

- **Personal background of the researcher**

The researcher is a Caucasian female, married and has two children. She has chosen a career in psychology and is presently a senior counsellor at the Bureau for Counselling, Career and Academic Development at Unisa. She is furthermore the National Coordinator of the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme and the project leader for the Pretoria (Main Campus) region. She does not assume that her experiences with and expectations of portfolios are necessarily shared by all the participants in her research. The encounter with each participant was a cross-cultural encounter and each brought to the interview his/her own cultural context and unique experience related to portfolio development.

The researcher, furthermore, acknowledged her subjectivity in this research project. She kept “self-reflective notes” (Polkinghorne, cited in Morrow & Smith, 2000) throughout the research process. She also involved other project leaders to act as peer reviewers in an attempt to highlight such subjectivity (Morrow & Smith, 2000, p. 201). The researcher also acknowledged that, in her capacity as the national coordinator of peer helping at Unisa as well as the project leader for the Pretoria (Main Campus) region, she brings a prior knowledge, experience and

involvement in peer helping and in portfolio development - thus a pre-understanding of these issues, to this study. She is therefore not indifferent to the outcomes of this study.

### **Reliability with reference to this study**

Reliability in this study was achieved as follows: The researcher (1) disclosed her orientation with regard to her expectation of the study; (2) explicitly defined the social and cultural context of the research and the circumstances under which the data was gathered; (3) described her internal processes during the research and interpretation of data with reference to any difficulties and surprises that she encountered, and highlighted the emerging themes that evolved; (4) actively engaged with both the research participants and the different types of data (the portfolio itself, the individual artifacts and the biographical information) to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants' perspective; (5) cycled between interpretation and observation to achieve "iteration" (Stiles, 1993). The researcher managed to dialogue with the material and described how her observations changed as she listened to the tape recordings, read the transcripts, and conceptualised and reconceptualised her interpretations; (6) grounded interpretations by linking abstract interpretations to particular observations and excerpts from the original text; and finally (7) asked open-ended questions to allow the participants to tell their stories and share information that they have direct knowledge of.

### **Validity with reference to this study**

Validity in this study was achieved as follows: The researcher (1) achieved triangulation by gathering data from multiple sources namely through interviews, by observing the portfolio itself and by discussing the artifacts in the portfolio with each participant; (2) presented coherent interpretations of the experiences of the four participants; (3) obtained "catalytic validity" (Stiles, 1993) from the research participants who will hopefully be empowered and energised by the encounter; (4) achieved "replication" (Stiles, 1993) by establishing consensus amongst the researcher and project leaders who participated in peer reviewing

and debriefing to cross check interpretations; and finally (5) achieved “reflexive validity” (Stiles, 1993) by applying the hermeneutic cycle to her observations and the reviewing of such initial observations.

### **Sampling and selection**

A variety of sampling and selection methods are viable in qualitative research. Researchers, however, purposely select small samples which fit the aims of the research (Rapmund, 1996). Research participants are selected for a number of reasons namely because they (1) have personal experience of the topic being researched; (2) are able to provide data rich descriptions of their experiences; and (3) are able “... to articulate their experiences and be willing to give complete and sensitive accounts” (Wilson & Hutchinson, cited in Rapmund, 1996, p. 115). The aim according to Rapmund (1996), is therefore to intensively study a few cases which highlight individual differences.

The sampling applied in this study was a “**stratified purposeful sampling**” method (Morrow & Smith, 2000, p. 208). This method allowed the researcher to sample “... above-average, average (typical) and below-average cases” (p. 208). The criteria for selection of participants was, therefore, to select four peer helpers, at least one from each of the three different regional campuses, who performed either above average, average and below average in the portfolio evaluation conducted in 2003. Interviews were conducted with seven participants (three in Pretoria; two in Cape Town; and three in Durban). Four participants were selected based on how they, not only matched one of the three categories mentioned, but also on the data provided in the interview.

**Table 16: Summary of the sample population**

<b>Research participant</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Region</b>	<b>Marks obtained for the portfolio (2003 evaluation)</b>
Nandi (pseudonym)	F	African	Pretoria	80 - 100%
Bongi (pseudonym)	F	African	Western Cape	80 - 100%
Boitumelo (pseudonym)	F	African	Kwa-zulu Natal	50 - 59%
Tebogo (pseudonym)	M	African	Pretoria	40 - 49%

As the peer helpers on each of the Unisa campuses function in close knit groups and know each other well, the names of the peer helpers who participated in this study have been changed to protect their identity. In several instances details of the participant's involvement in the peer help programme and experiences with portfolio development have also been omitted to ensure privacy.

The researcher approached the participants at the main campus in Pretoria to determine whether they would be willing to participate. The participants in the Kwa-zulu Natal and Western Cape campuses were approached via the regional project leaders to ascertain their willingness to participate. The research participants were requested to complete a written consent form to agree to participate in the research and gave permission to the researcher that the interviews and discussions around the portfolios, can be recorded.

### **Data collection**

Interviewing was the data collection strategy of choice as it is a natural way of interacting with people, which in this study, were the research participants. The aim with the interview was to explore the experiences of peer helpers with regard to their portfolio development processes. The co-constructed experiences of the participants were then captured and retold through the lens of the researcher (Rapmund, 1996).

- **The setting**

The aim of qualitative research is to collect the data and to study it in its "... natural setting" (Terre Blanche & Kelly, 1999, p. 127). The researcher, therefore, travelled to the different regions where the research participants render a service as peer helpers. The aim was to conduct the interview in familiar settings where the participants would feel most relaxed.

The interview with Nandi and Tebogo took place in the peer help office at the main campus in Pretoria, while the interviews with Bongi and Boitumelo took place in examination rooms at their respective regional campuses, as the peer help offices in their regions were being occupied. During the interview with Nandi and Tebogo the researcher and the individual participants sat opposite each other at a large table, with the tape recording machine equidistantly placed between them. The size of the table allowed for enough space for the researcher's notepad, the tape recorder and the portfolio to be studied.

The interview with Bongi was conducted in an examination room at the regional campus and the researcher and Bongi sat at right angles of a work space that was constructed by putting three examination tables together. The sound quality of the recording had to be checked as the air conditioner in the room was noisy and disturbing.

The interview with Boitumelo was scheduled to take place in a small boardroom, but the researcher was informed that the venue had been double booked, which resulted in a scurry to find another suitable setting. This resulted in feelings of anxiousness on the part of the researcher as there were a number of interviews to be conducted in a short period of time. The interview eventually took place in a relaxed manner in a conference room where the desk space comfortably allowed for the tape recorder, researcher's notepad and for the perusal of Boitumelo's portfolio.

- **The interview itself**

Rapmund (1996, p. 116) referred to Kerlinger's definition of an interview as being "... a face-to-face interpersonal situation" that takes place between one person (the interviewer) who asks another person (the interviewee) questions with the specific aim of obtaining information related to the research problem. Rapmund (1996) stated that this implied that there was an inequality between these two parties.

Although the interview process in this study was adapted to be more in line with a conversation between the researcher and the individual participant, the current relationship between these two parties namely that of project leader and peer helper (in the Pretoria region), and national coordinator and peer helpers (in the Kwa zulu-Natal and Western Cape regions), has been taken into account in the data collection and data analysis stages. The researcher allowed for time to establish rapport with the participants, allowed them to become comfortable in the interview situation, and created the space for them to present their portfolios. Despite this, one participant, who has met the researcher on a previous occasion during peer helper evaluations, spoke very fast. It seemed as if the participant felt compelled to sell herself in the interview. The other participant, who met the researcher for the first time, described herself as an extrovert, yet spoke very softly and had to be reminded repeatedly to speak up to allow the researcher to gain an understanding of her story.

The questioning in the interviews conducted in this study was open-ended and preference was given to 'what' questions to elicit answers focussing on what the participant had direct knowledge of, would be easier to answer, and would, therefore, facilitate the process of telling their stories (Rapmund, 1996). These questions were preferable to "why" questions that could lead to "... half-baked theories or post hoc justifications for what clients think or do" (Stiles, 1993, p. 607).

The interview process in this study commenced with the collation of personal data via the

completion of the *Personal Data and Consent Form* at the beginning of the interview. *The Personal Data and Consent Form* was adapted from the form compiled by Rapmund (1996). The interviews were unstructured and focussed on the participants' experiences with portfolio development, conversations around the structure and artifacts in the individual portfolios and information provided on the Personal Data and Consent Form (see Appendix C). The interviews were recorded and prior permission for this was received from the research participants. The interview commenced with the following open ended question:

*"Tell me about your experience with portfolio development in the peer help programme".*

Other questions focussed on determining the peer helpers' initial feelings about the process; goals and values attached to the process; perceived benefits; highlights and low points; and the exploration of the rationale for the selection of artifacts included in the portfolio.

### **Data analysis**

Data analysis in qualitative research is the process whereby the mass of collected data is ordered and structured in such a way that meaning is extracted (Rapmund, 1996). It is a time and labour intensive process and allows for patterns to emerge from the data. Marshall and Rossman (cited in Rapmund, 1996, p. 119) described this process as "... a messy, ambiguous, time-consuming, creative, and fascinating process".

- **The hermeneutic method**

Hermeneutics was chosen as the method to analyse the data in this study and the following steps were carried out:

**Step 1:** The transcription of a taped interview took place.

**Step 2:** The researcher then listened to the tape recording attentively again to verify

the correctness of the transcribed interview. Once she was satisfied, she reread the transcription a few times to familiarise herself with the data while making notes in the margin of the units of meaning that were identified. At this stage the analysis focussed on the content level, moving towards interpretation (Rapmund, 1996).

**Step 3:** The original transcript was then reread a few times with the specific aim to induce themes and identify categories underlying the data. Once this was done, similar themes and sub-themes were clustered together under a theme heading, and then analysed again as a whole theme and in relation to the other themes. The theme headings were also labelled, as far as possible, in such a way that they linked with the words that the participant used in his/her story. The researcher also highlighted excerpts in the text that she felt illustrated a specific theme or category so that she could use this in her recounting of the story. The researcher reread the transcript again, checking not only the identified themes and sub-themes, but also corroborating these themes and sub-themes with the topic of the study. As the researcher also formed part of the story that the participant told, this could not be excluded from the transcribed account. The researcher, therefore, reread the original transcript again to look for themes of what was found to be helpful, and what was less helpful during the interview, as well as to check the identified themes again, to make necessary changes.

**Step 4:** The researcher then wrote her story of the participant's story by focussing on the recurring themes as identified in the story. Steps 1 - 4 were then repeated, individually, for each of the other three interviews. Once the first story was written, the researcher requested her study leader to listen to the original interview and audit the researcher's recount of the participant's story, adding to the validity of the process and resulting in replication and consensus amongst researchers. This process was repeated by the researcher by requesting three other Unisa peer help project leaders to each read through one of the remaining three transcribed interviews and the researcher's account of the participant's story. This process allowed the researcher to establish replication and consensus in all four stories.

**Step 5:** The next step was for the researcher to write a story of the participants' stories.

The recurring themes from all four stories were recounted and common themes were identified. This recount contained both the actual words of the respondents and the interpretations by the researcher (Kelly, 1999c).

**Step 6:** This was followed by a comparative analysis between the common themes relating to the portfolio management process as well as the literature study on peer helping and portfolio development.

**Step 7:** The concluding chapter was then written which evaluated the study and made recommendations for future research.

## CONCLUSION

The focus of this research is to understand the “intersubjective world” (Rapmund, 1996, p.124) of the peer helpers, as research participants, with regard to their experiences with portfolio development. The study attempts to show how peer helpers, on the one hand, have adapted to the process of portfolio development and, on the other hand, have used this tool to record individual growth and development that has taken place during their involvement in the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme. It furthermore aims to highlight similarities and individual differences in adapting to and managing this process, and to describe both the successes that were reached and the struggles that were encountered.

To achieve this, an interpretive, qualitative approach for this study was selected. The researcher, as the primary instrument in the research process, conducted a stratified purposeful sampling method and held in-depth interviews with seven participants, from which four were selected for this research. The selection was based on their (1) ability to provide rich accounts of their experiences with developing their portfolios; (2) meeting the criteria for selection namely those who performed either above average, average and below average in their portfolio evaluations; and (3) representing one of the three Unisa regions participating in this research. Data analysis was conducted by means of the hermeneutic method, focussing on a circular movement between the interpretation of the different parts of the data and whole

text.

Although the descriptions contained in this study hold true for the participants involved in this research, the study does not aim to provide the 'absolute truth' about portfolio development and its uses in similar programmes. Many more descriptions should be generated to gain an overview of the usefulness of portfolios to monitor growth and development. It is, however, hoped that the findings generated by this research will highlight how the peer helpers, as research participants, have used this tool to monitor their growth and development, and in the process have compiled a career tool that encourages them to become self-directed, independent learners. It is furthermore hoped that the data that will be yielded in this study will contribute to a deeper understanding of portfolio development *per se* and its application within not only the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme but in peer helper programmes in general.