CHAPTER 3

A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST EPISTEMOLOGY

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept ‘epistemology’ has been defined from different perspectives depending on the author’s orientation. Auerswald (1985, p. 1) defines epistemology as “a set of imminent rules used in thought by large groups of people to define reality” or, “thinking about thinking” and goes on to say that it is “the study or theory of the nature and grounds of knowledge”. Keeney (1983) argues that the term ‘epistemology’ indicates the basic premises underlying action and cognition. According to Benjamin (1983) no model of clinical intervention exists in a theoretical vacuum. Rather, the clinical intervention is embedded in an epistemology. The epistemology reflects the rules that individuals use for making sense out of their world (Hoffman, 1981). As Bateson (1977, p. 84) explains:

All descriptions are based on theories of how to make descriptions. You cannot claim to have no epistemology. Those who so claim have nothing but a bad epistemology. Every description is based upon, or contains implicitly, a theory of how to describe.
Denzin and Lincoln (2000, p. 157) state that

epistemology asks, how do I know the world? What is the relationship between the inquirer and the known? Every epistemology...implies an ethical – moral stance towards the world and the self of the researcher.

It is therefore important for researchers to be conscious of the frameworks they use, the assumptions on which they are based, and the possibility of logical inconsistency (Bateson, 1972). The importance of considering epistemology is enhanced when it is considered that the present dissertation constitutes an epistemological shift from previous theory on incestuous fathers.

This chapter will provide an epistemological journey, tracing the evolution of epistemology through from modernism, to first-order and second-order cybernetics, and then through to postmodernism. Fundamental concepts of postmodernism will be briefly discussed, followed by a look at the theoretical stances referred to as constructivism and social constructionism. Social constructionism was selected as the epistemological framework of this study. This chapter will, therefore, conclude with a description of how the social constructionist epistemology informed the researcher’s perceptions in defining the focus and aims of this study, in designing the method, and in describing the research participant.
2. MODERNISM

Until the end of the 19th century, traditional modernistic thinking was described as the dominant epistemology underpinning scientific theories (Rogers, 2000) and was based upon concepts such as objectivity, reductionism and linear causality. Psychology, as a relatively new discipline, which attempted to be viewed as a legitimate science, embraced these concepts during a significant part of its history.

The modernistic epistemology is also known as the objectivist epistemology or the Newtonian epistemology and holds mainly the following three core assumptions:

2.1 Reductionism

Reductionism implies a process whereby complex phenomena (e.g. incest) can best be understood by reducing phenomena in an atomistic way to their smallest and most fundamental parts (Gergen, 1999). It is assumed that once these parts are objectively analysed an understanding of the whole can be obtained through ascertaining the way in which these parts fit and function together (Becvar & Becvar, 2003).

2.2 Linear causality

Intrinsic to this process of reductionism is linear causality. This assumption implies that a researcher should be able to solve a problem only if the
researcher is able to answer the question, ‘Why?’ (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). However in order to answer the question, ‘Why?’ the researcher often needs to trace the sequences of cause and effect events in history. The researcher will then have a better understanding of particular outcomes in the present. Thus, linear causality is assumed to bind the parts of a complex phenomenon together. This results in a simplistic cause-effect view of individuals and events in which behaviour is objectively studied.

2.3 Neutral objectivity

It is through the assumptions discussed above that the social scientist is furnished with knowledge that is an accurate representation of objective reality (Stancombe & White, 1998). Thus, by using logical and objective (empirical) methods of science, a reality, a truth, an objective world, independent of our thinking, can be discovered (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). Modernism thereby suggests and encourages a quest for ‘the truth’ or ‘reality’. This “reality and the theories about reality are seen as either/or, black or white, right or wrong explanations” (Becvar & Becvar, 2003, p. 4). Furthermore, the process of discovering an objective and absolute reality is not believed to be influenced by the observer (Meyer, Moore & Viljoen, 1997).

The application of these modernist assumptions to the study of human beings lends credence to a view of people as reactive and passive organisms, determined by their environment in an almost unidirectional way (Gergen, 1999). As can be seen in the previous chapter, existing literature and research
on incestuous fathers are largely based on the modernist approach, with psychopathology drawing strongly on the categorisation and treatment of conditions within the individual. Furthermore, it is also largely based on the modernistic approach that incestuous fathers can be assessed through psychotherapies that call on the therapist to wear the coat of the scientist and to thus become someone who is objective, in control and in the know, in other words, becoming an expert. According to the Modernist perspective, the incestuous fathers’ narratives of their emotional experiences regarding their incestuous behaviour would ultimately be distorted and questionable. Their narratives would, therefore, be considered to be of little value in understanding their emotional experiences and far less favourable than the empirically based accounts of the trained scientist (Epstein, 1995).

However, during the last decade a growing body of psychological research acknowledged the general inadequacy of modernism in the study of human beings (Hoffman, 1985). As a result, cybernetic thinking, which arose in the midst of this criticism, lodged against the assumptions of the modernist epistemology.

3. CYBERNETIC EPISTEMOLOGY

During the 1940’s, Norbert Wiener, lay claim to the term ‘cybernetics’. He developed a theory that focused on the interaction and communication between systems in terms of principles that regulate the dissemination of information
(Meyer, Moore & Viljoen, 1997). According to Becvar and Becvar, (2003, p. 64) cybernetics refers to the epistemology in which “units of interconnectedness are being seen as parts of larger wholes”.

According to Keeney (1983) cybernetics challenges the modernist approach and exposes its limitations. Cybernetic epistemology evolved from a first-order approach, through to second-order cybernetics. The postulated difference lies in the positioning of the observer of the system. The positioning of the observer influences the way that reality is punctuated and created by the observer. The discussion that follows includes a concise overview of both these strands of epistemology.

3.1 First-order cybernetics

At the level of first-order cybernetics, also referred to as general systems thinking or simple cybernetics, the researcher places her or himself outside of that which is being observed. The focus then is on the description of what is happening, rather than why it is happening (Becvar & Becvar, 2003).

First-order observations are said to be objective. From a first-order perspective, a system can be open or closed, depending on the extent to which it allows information to enter into it (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). An open system would allow more information to enter into it than a closed system, and thereby be more open to change or ‘outside’ influence. A first-order therapist would observe the family’s interactions as well as the family’s relationships with other
systems during the therapy process from the ‘outside’. This approach, therefore, excludes the idea of interaction between the observer and what is being observed within a larger context. However, it became apparent that “the observer becomes part of, or a participant in, that which is observed” (Becvar & Becvar, 2003, p. 78). Therefore, the observer can no longer be considered as objective.

Thus, second-order cybernetics was born out of the need to include the observer within the system that is being observed.

3.2 Second-order cybernetics

Although the first-order approach retains its usefulness in specific circumstances (Atkinson & Heath, 1990), second-order cybernetics, also referred to as cybernetics of cybernetics or the ecosystemic perspective, moves beyond this limited punctuation (Keeney, 1983). Second-order cybernetics no longer only views systems in the context of interactional relationships, but also views them at a higher level of abstraction that includes the observer in that which is observed (Von Foerster, 1974). The growing awareness of the therapist’s influence on his or her observations provided the impetus for the development of the second-order cybernetics (Hoffman, 1981).

However, second-order cybernetics is based on both/and rather than the dualistic either/or principles (Auerswald, 1985). That is, a therapist can observe family interaction from a first-order stance as well as from a second-order
perspective. Thus, one is not expected to be either a first or second-order therapist, instead, one can, or according to Keeney (1982) one should, utilise both points of view, because without the other, the view is incomplete. That is, each perspective complements the other.

The connectedness between observer and observed is hence sacred from a second-order approach and the implications thereof have substantial ramifications for the conceptualisation of human interaction (Keeney, 1982). It is this aspect that represents the fundamental shift between first and second-order cybernetics. Second-order cybernetics is an approach that encompasses the principles of post-modernism. These principles of postmodernism will be discussed accordingly.

4. POSTMODERNISM

Postmodernism, which is described by Leary (1994, p. 435) as the “leitmotif of the latter part of the 20th century”, is not a perspective that lends itself particularly well to accurate, clearly articulated theoretical definition. Described as "not having a single statement or a single spokesperson" (Troyer, 1993, p. 120) it has been posited that it is “a stance that one takes toward a theory and a way of looking at theory, rather than a theory itself” (Leary, 1994, p. 435).

Postmodernism has been described as the move away from the homogeneity, singularity, predictability and objectivist principles so highly valued by
modernism (Gitlin, 1990), towards a social consciousness of multiple belief systems and multiple perspectives (Gonzalez, Biever & Gardner, 1994). Therefore, postmodernists dispute the belief of a universal and objective knowledge (Lynch, cited in Rapmund, 2000). Knowledge, or what we believe, is instead seen as an expression of the language, values and beliefs of the particular communities and contexts in which we exist.

Postmodernism is based on the premise that no one true reality exists and it rejects the belief of an absolute truth (Becvar & Becvar, 2003). It asserts that people inhabit different ‘realities’ that are socially constituted and therefore may vary quite dramatically across cultures, time and context (Gonzalez et al., 1994). Doan (cited in Rapmund, 2000) states that the message of postmodernism seems to be that we should be wary of any account that claims to offer the sole interpretation or explanation, as many alternative accounts, descriptions, or meanings, may be probable. Doan (cited in Rapmund, 2000) also argues that some stories or realities are disrespectful of religion, race, ethnicity or gender. Thus, from a postmodern perspective, all realities or stories do not have equal validity.

According to Becvar and Becvar (2003) postmodernists embrace the idea of a self, constructed in relationships. A postmodern view describes multiple selves that are socially constructed in the context of the increasingly varied and constantly changing relationships. More specifically, this philosophy involves a movement from the inside of the psyche to the text of the world. It involves the
death of the subject, or de-selfing and the movement is towards a relational self. Man is embedded in a specific cultural and historical situation, with a focus on the self in a network of relations and on the interrelationship of a local context on a linguistic and social construction of reality. The self in postmodern theory is thus regarded in terms of an ongoing process as continually constructed and reconstructed in particular relationships over time (Gonzalez et al., 1994).

Practical knowledge that is socially useful is emphasised as this benefits community psychology.

   No longer are we able to think of the outcomes of empirical research as representing the ‘real world’; rather, we must consider the subjectivity of the researcher and the likelihood that research may produce only partial images that are more or less useful (Longini, cited in Becvar & Becvar, 2003, p. 94).

Therefore, in a postmodern philosophy, a qualitative research approach is used, the belief in an objective world is rejected and nothing is value free.

The postmodern philosophy concentrates on the social and linguistic construction of a perspectival reality. According to Becvar and Becvar (2003) the role of language has moved to center stage in postmodernism. Postmodernists view language as the means by which individuals come to know and simultaneously construct their world. Conversation is also seen as the ultimate context within which knowledge can be understood.
According to Becvar and Becvar (2003) knowledge is relative to framework and facts are replaced by perspectives. Knowledge is, therefore, open, perspectival and ambiguous and cannot be fully known.

Postmodernists use the term deconstruction in the sense of the deconstruction of established notions. According to Becvar and Becvar (2003) established notions are deconstructed by delineating the ideologies, assumptions and values on which they rest. The established notions are not only deconstructed just for deconstruction’s sake, but in order to reconstruct them in a meaningful way.

Various theoretical stances reflect a postmodern epistemology and can be grouped under terms such as ‘constructivism’ and ‘social constructionism’. These two theoretical stances share the notion of multiple realities that is based on the effort to move away from the limitations of modernism. Some researchers use constructivism as an umbrella term for both constructivism and social constructionism (McLeod, 1996). However, there seem to be important underlying differences between these two theoretical stances, which will be discussed briefly.

5. CONSTRUCTIVISM

Constructivism refers to the process by which reality is created by the observer. The observer creates reality, by giving meaning to what is observed (Jonassen,
1991; Von Foerster, 1984; Von Glasersfeld, 1988; Watzlawick, 1984). In other words, reality is constructed through a person’s active experience of it. We can never have objective access to the world, since the world in an objective sense cannot be known.

Furthermore, from a constructivist point of view, any one person’s interpretation or construction is as ‘true’ as any other person’s interpretation or construction, as long as it works within a particular context (Dickerson & Zimmerman, 1996; Doan, cited in Rapmund, 2000). This point of constructivism implies that all stories or interpretations that ‘work’ are equally valid and that no single ‘truth’ or interpretation exists (Dickerson & Zimmerman, 1996; Doan, cited in Rapmund, 2000). The constructivist view consequently contrasts with postmodernism regarding the belief that interpretations have equal validity, but corresponds with postmodernism with regards to the belief in the existence of many possible ‘truths’. Thus, from a constructivist position, it is difficult for an observer to criticise a client’s story. For example, an incestuous father could argue that his incestuous behaviour has had a significant ‘use’ in the development of his daughter’s maturity. From a constructivist position this argument of the incestuous father would be seen as equally valid to the argument of his daughter that the incestuous behaviour of her father has had a negative influence on her development of maturity.

In addition constructivism excludes the effects of a dominant social reality that influences the creation of meaning (Held, 1990). Therefore, it needed to be
expanded to include the role that the social and cultural context plays in the manner that a person perceives or makes sense of his or her world. This led to the development of the postmodern theoretical stance known as social constructionism.

6. SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

Social constructionism can be described as part of the movement in postmodernism in that it attempts to “replace the objectivist ideal with a broad tradition of ongoing criticism in which all productions of the human mind are concerned” (Hoffman, 1990, p. 1) and is inextricably linked to postmodernism as a set of lenses that enforces an awareness of the way in which we perceive and experience the world (Hoffman, 1990). In essence, social constructionism is

the claim and viewpoint that the content of our consciousness,
and the mode of relating we have to other, is taught by our culture
and society; all the metaphysical quantities we take for granted
are learned from others around us (Owen, 1992, p. 386).

The discussion that follows includes a concise overview of the assumptions underlying social constructionist thought.

From a social constructionist perspective, language is more than just a way of connecting people. People ‘exist’ in language. Consequently the focus is not
on the individual person but rather on the social interaction in which language is generated, sustained, and abandoned (Gergen & Gergen, 1991). Furthermore, Berger and Luckman (cited in Speed, 1991, p. 400) state that people socially construct reality by their use of agreed and shared meaning communicated through language. Thus, our beliefs about the world are social inventions.

Anderson and Goolishian (1988) concur that from the social constructionist perspective there are no ‘real’ external entities that can be accurately mapped or apprehended. We are thereby forced to resign our cherished position as ‘knowers’ and our assumptions that there are ‘facts’ that we can come to know. These ‘facts’, along with other ideas and assumptions, are social constructions, artefact of socially mediated discourse. However, this does not mean that anything goes (Gergen, 1985). Knowledge and systems are inherently dependent upon communities of shared intelligibility and vice versa. They are, therefore, governed to a large degree by normative rules that are historically and culturally situated. As a result, social constructionists do not claim to provide the ‘truth’.

Gergen (1999) claims that in numerous instances, the criteria, which are invoked to identify ‘behaviours’, ‘events’ or ‘entities’, are largely circumscribed by culture, history and social context. Therefore, a social constructionist perspective, as opposed to a constructivist perspective, “locates meaning in an understanding of how ideas and attitudes are developed over time within a
social, community context” (Dickerson & Zimmerman, 1996, p. 80). Hoffman (1991, p. 5) states that

all knowledge 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

Anderson and Goolishian (cited in Hart, 1995, p. 184), add that “[w]e live with each other in a world of conversational narrative, and we understand ourselves and each other through changing stories and self descriptions”.

Social constructionists are especially interested in the normative narratives, or grand narratives, which are formed by and in turn influence people, and against which people measure themselves. According to Doan (cited in Rapmund, 2000), grand narratives are supported by the weight of numbers, tradition, and firmly entrenched power structures. White and Epston (cited in Speed, 1991, p.400), agree that, “the particular meanings we impose on behaviour are dictated and organised by whatever ‘dominating analogies or interpretive frameworks’ are currently available”.

Social constructionists dispute narratives that tend to dictate single accounts of reality postulating that they form the context for the development of problems (Dickerson & Zimmerman, 1996). They argue that people’s personal stories are often marginalised, subjugated and denied in favour of the dominant belief system that tends to pathologise those who do not meet its expectations (Doan,
cited in Rapmund, 2000). As a result, people often begin to think about themselves and their relationships in ways that are consistent with problem-saturated stories.

Coale (1994) is of the opinion that clients (or research participants) usually discuss the dominant discourses of their lives with therapists (or researchers). However, the nondominant stories that clients tell may contain possibilities that could facilitate change. She thus advises therapists to not only focus on the dominant stories of the clients. Furthermore, she proposes that the problematic realities, represented by these discourses, can be ‘deconstructed’ and new realities can be ‘reconstructed’ or co-constructed by a therapist (or researcher) and a client (or research participant) to elicit new meaning. According to Doan (cited in Rapmund, 2000) this co-construction of new realities also assists in externalising the problem as opposed to looking for it inside the person. Therefore, it allows the person to escape the domination of oppressive domains of knowledge. Social constructionists view relationships between people as either conforming to or lacking a fit with the idealised roles or ways of relating to others (Owen, 1992). Social constructionists, therefore, focus on knowledge as power, believing that “cultural specifications” exert a real influence on people’s lives (Dickerson & Zimmerman, 1996, p. 80) and takes a stand on the subjugating effect of discourses.

Although social constructionists acknowledge that more than one reality or account of reality exists, they agree with postmodernists in asserting that all
stories are not equally valid. According to Doan (cited in Rapmund, 2000) some stories are not respectful of gender, ethnicity, race, or religion. Social constructionists also concur with postmodernists in cautioning against the power of singular accounts that tends to further silence and marginalise those whose stories fail to fit. Social constructionists prefer stories based on a person’s lived experience rather than on expert knowledge.

Social constructionists are interested in accounts that honour and respect the community of voices inherent in each individual and how these accounts can be respected within a particular system (Doan, cited in Rapmund, 2000). Furthermore, it is interested in helping families whose stories are in collision and individuals whose stories have gone wrong or no longer work. It also acknowledges the links between stories (Parry, cited Rapmund, 2000), and that one story cannot go ahead at the expense of others without having a negative influence on relationships. The aim is to deconstruct stories that dominate others and when these are examined, alternative choices become available (Dickerson & Zimmerman, 1996). Social constructionists acknowledge the social nature of human life, while at the same time it encourages individuals to tell their own stories.

These underlying assumptions of social constructionism form the epistemological basis for the present study. Thus, it informed the researcher’s perceptions in defining the focus and aims of this study, in designing the method, and in describing the research participant.
7. SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM AND THE PRESENT STUDY

The inclusion and emphasis of multiple realities and personal stories makes social constructionism relevant as theory and context wherein this study was done. This does not necessarily imply that social constructionism is a better theory than the other existing theories, but rather that it is a more appropriate theory in terms of this specific study.

As can be seen in the previous chapter, most of the research on incestuous fathers has been coherent with the modernist epistemology whereby the researcher, from his or her objective vantage point, has been considered to be in the best position to describe the problem. Within social constructionism, these views are challenged and the focus turns to the incestuous fathers themselves who are now considered as being in the best position to describe their emotional experiences regarding their incestuous behaviour. Of importance are how they perceive their experiences, and not whether their reports accurately reflect ‘reality’. The notion of accuracy would in essence be judgmental. Thus, a social constructionist epistemology challenges the ways in which incestuous fathers have been delineated and it opens up new possibilities for new meanings and perspectives to be explored. This epistemology also provides the researcher with a set of lenses that enforces an awareness of her social, cultural and religious context as well as the way in which she perceives and experiences the incestuous fathers.
A social constructionist framework therefore, enables the researcher, to remain flexible and open regarding the emotional experiences of both the incestuous fathers and the researcher. The researcher does not need to feel intimidated or overwhelmed by expert ‘knowledge’ that she seemingly does not have. She can simply bring herself, her experiences and past learning, and enter into dialogue with the incestuous fathers, remaining aware of her social and cultural context as well as the personal ‘biases’ she might have. In the light of social constructionism, the research attempted to gain an understanding of the emotional experiences of the incestuous fathers regarding their incestuous behaviour.

The purpose of this research was not to gather facts, but rather to initiate dialogue, interest and understanding. Furthermore, social constructionists acknowledge the equal engagement of research participant and researcher as co-creators of a shared reality. The researcher believes that by creating a space of understanding and by being respectful and curious as a co-participant in the meaning-generating process, she can explore the emotions that these incestuous fathers have experienced regarding their incestuous behaviour.

Social constructionist thinking also underlies the researcher’s belief in the possibilities for difference and change. As quoted earlier, it is within the “common dance” (Hoffman, 1991, p. 5) or space where dialogue happens between us, that we develop and grow within ourselves. Social constructionism exemplifies a collaborative and respectful framework, in which the researcher
co-constructed alternative emotional experiences of incestuous fathers that opened opportunities for change and growth. The researcher's aims included offering the incestuous fathers a context in which they could express and explore the emotions that they experienced regarding their incestuous behaviour.

Realising that this research could be controversial in nature, the researcher would like to emphasise the following. Within a social constructionist framework, the stories and perspectives of incestuous fathers are not necessarily seen as equally valid as those of their children and the objective of the research is not to approve of the sexual contact between fathers and their children.

From a social constructionist stance, the researcher does not claim that her understanding of the emotional experiences of incestuous fathers regarding their incestuous behaviour is the ultimate ‘truth’. The conclusions that the researcher has made are merely the understanding that she has reached after a journey of exploring the phenomenon of incest.

8. CONCLUSION

This chapter has concerned itself with an elucidation of epistemology. The movement away from the modernist perspective can be described as a slow and gradual process. First-order cybernetics made the first attempt to discard
the scientific concepts of reductionism, linear causality and neutral objectivity. However, first-order cybernetics still regarded the observer as objective and able to take a position outside of the system. Second-order cybernetics made a more deliberate attempt to reject the concept of objectivity. The focus shifted to the autonomy of systems and the creation of multiple realities.

Postmodernism concurred with the move away from the homogeneity, singularity, predictability and objectivist principles so highly valued by modernism. The postmodern epistemology moved towards a social consciousness of multiple belief systems and multiple perspectives. The roots of social constructionism were founded in the larger postmodern epistemology. Social constructionists seem fundamentally interested in personal stories whilst having the awareness that dominant stories in the larger society may dominate those individual experiences. Furthermore, social constructionists shares the belief with constructivists that more than one reality or account of reality exists. However, social constructionists hold the postmodern premise that all accounts of reality do not hold equal validity.

The social constructionist stance forms the epistemological backbone of this research. It is of immense importance for this specific research, as it guided and informed the manner in which this research was approached, conducted and interpreted. However, the brief explanation of the concepts in this chapter should be regarded as the researcher’s individual punctuation of this perspective and not as the only way of describing it. The views of the researcher are just one probable construction of ‘reality’ and will facilitate
further dialogue with the reader. Nevertheless, readers will no doubt consider the ideas of the researcher and create new ideas in his or her own process of co-construction. This chapter has set the stage for the link between theory and method.

In the next chapter, the design and methodology of this research will be outlined. The qualitative research approach as well as the researcher's method, process and intention in discovering the emotional experiences of incestuous fathers regarding their incestuous behaviour will be delineated accordingly.