CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY - APPROACHING PLAY, PLAYFULLY

This chapter explores in more detail what autoethnography entails, together with the applicable methodological considerations and options that are available to autoethnographers, and, specifically, those methodological routes I took in doing this research.

1. Research domain and design

When generating an appropriate research design, it is useful to be reminded of classic concepts of what research design entails. Mouton and Marais (1996) point out that research design involves the arrangement of conditions for data collection and analysis in such a way as to effectively address the research questions with economy of procedure. It can therefore be said that research design is about ensuring both effectiveness of research (best product) as well as the efficiency thereof (best way to get there). Research design is, according to this, about methodology. However, defining the best product or approach is difficult and complex in our constantly evolving paradigms of social and behavioural sciences.

1.1. Ontological assumptions

In keeping with orthodoxy, let us consider the abstract principles that underpin and guide this research by looking at ontology, epistemology and methodology and consider how they are evolving.

Ontology, as the reader will know, deals with our beliefs about the nature of reality or, in the case of social sciences research, the nature of human beings and human phenomena. Ontology comprises our philosophy of reality, i.e., our beliefs about the nature of what is. And as is evident from a number of authors (Chang, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Ellis, 2004) what exactly comprises an appropriate
ontology for behavioural and social sciences remains a hotly contested debate, as becomes clear in this chapter.

A popular way of thinking about ontology comprises a continuum from left to right (on a time-dimension for simplicity’s sake) (Ellis, 2004) On the left end, we find positivism. Positivism was popularised during the modernist era and remains the more common approach in behavioural sciences in South-Africa, as can be seen by surveying local journals in psychology and the management sciences. Positivism holds that reality is “out there,” waiting to be discovered by the rigorous researcher. If we then move from left to right on this continuum, we encounter different ideas of reality. We find ourselves moving into notions that reality is indeed out there, but is very difficult, if not impossible to discover. As Willis (2004) stated:

Research requiring ‘objectivity’ which is probably still the dominant public discourse surrounding ideas of research, has become associated with the positivist approach to research. Alternative approaches have sought to admit forms of human subjectivity into academic writing and to portray the personal as political and socially relevant. (p. 2)

If we move even further, we will start to feel the uncertainty from an encounter with more post-modern ideas of science that critiques these ideas and holds that, especially in the behavioural and social sciences, reality is created while it is being discovered. We see ideas such as constructivism, and further along, impressionism and interpretivism appearing on the continuum.

Some authors point out that post-modernism does not simply imply a replacement of modernism, but rather an extension, something that comes after modernism while modernism still holds a place in certain contexts. For example, Augustyn and Cillie (2008) suggest:

A post-modern approach does not deny the validity of traditional modes of inquiry but views them as only one way to generate knowledge. Practical reasoning, as used in consulting and managing, for example, can also serve the purpose of science. Thus, in a post-modern view, practice is no longer only the application of scientific finding; it is also the setting for knowledge development through practical reasoning. (p. 74)
Augustyn’s and Cillie’s work displays a greater move towards practical science which allows for “inside knowledge” in addition to “outside knowledge,” as esteemed in positivist empiricism.

Methodological decisions take their cue from these conceptions and it is therefore important to clearly articulate where this study falls. Not only that, but criteria to evaluate such research are also important, as Ellis (2004) points out: “rather than believing in the presence of an external, unconstructed truth, researchers to this end of the continuum embrace narrative truth, which means the story they depict becomes believable, lifelike, and possible” (p. 30). Such criteria will be discussed in more depth later in the chapter.

I follow a qualitative research approach while operating from an interpretivist paradigm and so hold that human subjectivity contributes to knowledge (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999) and that meanings and understandings are socially and experientially developed.

1.2. Epistemological assumptions

Following on ontology, i.e. how we think about the phenomenon being studied, epistemology can be defined as the relationship between the researcher and the known, i.e., how do we come to know about that phenomenon. Epistemology therefore directs our pursuit of knowledge in a fundamental way. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) suggest that an interpretivist ontology is accompanied by a subjectivist epistemology, where the people’s internal reality is of concern, as opposed to an external reality as held by positivism. Mouton and Marais (1996) link this paradigm to phenomenology. By this stance, we assume that we cannot separate ourselves from what we know. As Sparkes (2002) points out: “Knowledge is therefore not only historically and contextually bound, but is actually constructed through a process of reflexive mediation, where the world that is studied is actually created, in part, by the author's experience and the way the text is written” (p. 11).

1.3. Methodological assumptions

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) then further suggest that these paradigms are also accompanied by naturalist methodological beliefs. Whereas epistemology deals with
how the researcher relates to the knowledge, methodology encapsulates our understanding of how the researcher can best come to the knowledge. Naturalistic methodology holds that the optimal epistemological position is located where a natural occurrence of the phenomenon being studied is present. The aim is therefore to describe and interpret phenomenological experience in human terms rather than through quantification (Terre Blanche & Kelly, 1999). I therefore share the belief promoted by Denzin and Lincoln that, in relation to this research, it is fundamentally important for me to maintain attentive proximity to the phenomenon being studied.

Given both the nature of the study and my position in the study, I have chosen autoethnography as the qualitative research approach that corresponds to the ontological, epistemological and methodological beliefs mentioned above. To motivate these choices, I believe it useful to broadly contextualise this against developments within social science research over the last few decades, with specific reference to qualitative methods.

2. An overview of qualitative research

Qualitative research focuses on “qualities of entities and on processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 10). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) describe qualitative research as encompassing a “variety of empirical materials – case study; personal experience; introspection; life story; interviews; artefacts; cultural texts and productions; observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts – that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals’ lives” (p. 3). In distinguishing between quantitative research and qualitative research, they point to the following key differences: (a) qualitative methods deal differently with traditional positivist paradigms, (b) qualitative methods accept postmodern ideas and influences, (c) they capture individual points of view, (d) they incorporate constraints of everyday life, and (e) qualitative research secures rich descriptions of phenomenon.

It is obvious therefore that qualitative research often sharply deviates from quantitative research in its assumptions and philosophical points of departure. Aside from this rather broad description of qualitative research, it is also important to note that qualitative methods in themselves encompass a diversity of methods that have
developed and evolved significantly over the last few decades. In surveying the recent developments in research within the social sciences Sparkes (2002) remarks that, “depending on your perspective, a paradigm war, a revolution, or at least a major upheaval” (p. 2) has occurred. To understand some of the tensions, contradictions and hesitations within qualitative research, it is essential to have at least a rudimentary understanding of these developments.

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) point to the following eight historical “moments” that have fundamentally influenced how qualitative methodologies have been structured:

1. Traditional (1900-1950) – characterised by a strong yet naïve “positivist” paradigm.
2. Modernist or golden age (1950 - 1970) – characterised by an attempt to give qualitative approaches the same methodological rigour and acceptability as quantitative approaches.
5. Postmodern (1990 – 1995) – characterised by an abandonment of concepts like the aloof observer and “grand narratives” that provide objective truth.
7. Methodologically contested present (2000 – 2004) – due to the diversity of methods, this is a phase of confusion, competition and even “retrenchment” (p. 20) fanned by the success of a number of quantitative journals.
8. Fractured future (2005 -) – characterised by a “methodological backlash” (p. 3) regarding evidence-based social movement and a call for a stronger moral discourse within social sciences.
The *moments* referred to by Denzin and Lincoln should not be read as completely clinical and precise. Firstly, instead of distinct moments, Sparkes (2002) argues that they should rather be viewed as vectors that mutually influence one another. Secondly, the timeline given by Denzin and Lincoln differs in different countries as well in as different disciplines. Some of the later *moments* have still not significantly influenced industrial psychological research in South Africa (Augustyn & Cillie, 2008; Avraamides, 2007; Schurink, 2003). Denzin and Lincoln also argue that similar methods have meant different things within the different moments. Yet, there is a growing call for academia in South Africa to allow for greater diversity of inquiry and expression, as expressed by Pietersen (2005):

To the extent that I/O psychology embraces additional knowledge perspectives, theoretical frameworks, research strategies, methods and literatures beyond that which are currently in use (such as the ubiquitous self-administered questionnaire), and thus keep on renewing itself, it will continue to be and become even more relevant as an organisational science/discipline in South Africa. (p. 84)

3. **Building a case**

From the above, I want to highlight three observations which apply to my research on play and play-based methods. First, there is a clear move towards *intimacy of researcher and subject* where the aim is “to connect with people on the level of human meaning” (Wall, 2008, p. 10). Where in the past scientific research emphasised objectivity and distance, postmodern sensibilities allow for *subjectivity* and *closeness* as legitimate avenues of inquiry. In this light, researchers are seen to play an active role in interacting with what is being studied (Muchinsky, 2000). As McCorkel and Myers (2003) suggest:

…concerns about the situatedness of the knower, the context of discovery, and the relation of the knower to the subjects of her inquiry are demons at the door of positivist science. The production of (what has always been considered to be) ‘legitimate’ knowledge begins by slamming the door shut. (p. 200)

Qualitative approaches are increasingly opening these doors and account for the fact that the researcher is “thoroughly implicated in the phenomenon that he or she documents” (Atkinson, 2006, p. 402).
Secondly, there is a growing realisation that the *container* in which knowledge is presented is not neutral to the knowledge it contains (Sparkes, 2002). Richardson (2000) conveys a similar sentiment: “how we are expected to write affects what we can write about” (p. 931). Boyle and Parry (2007), for instance, mention that aesthetic style is a central feature of autoethnography and writers are encouraged to make ethnography “readable, evocative, engaging and personally meaningful” (cited in Ellis and Bochner, 2000 p. 761). We see this clearly in the adoption of post-experimental approaches where research is presented in art, poetry, choreography, and the like. Eisner (2001) notes this as something which artists have always known and researchers suspected: “That form matters, that content and form cannot be separated, that how one says something is part and parcel of what is being said …the form of representation one uses has something to do with the form of understanding one secures.” (p. 138).

This marks a deviation from a position that holds that knowledge can be objectively conveyed without changing that very knowledge. It is the same position that would maintain that emotional intensity, expressed quantitatively in a table with numbers, could convey the same knowledge as vivid descriptions in story-form. To perhaps present this idea more colourfully, imagine the leftover chicken, after standing for a day in the refrigerator in a cardboard container, sharing the distinct cardboard taste the following day. The container was not neutral to the meal. This gave rise to a variety of experimental approaches to representing research, collectively called creative analytical practises (CAP). One particular approach used in this study is called creative non-fiction, an unconventional style of writing qualitative research that falls into this category of practices. In relation to CAP, Denzin (2006) explains:

These new writing practices include autoethnography, fiction-stories, poetry, performance texts, poly-vocal texts, reader’s theatre, responsive readings, aphorisms, comedy and satire, visual presentations, allegory, conversation, layered accounts, writing stories, and mixed genres. Creative nonfiction, performance writing, mysteries, memoirs, personal histories, and cultural criticism can be added to this list of narrative forms that can be used by the creative analytic ethnographer. (p. 420)
Lastly, the very objectives of scientific research, or what Mouton and Marais (1996) refer to as the often forgotten teleological dimensions of research, increasingly emphasise the usefulness and moral impact of research. In the words of Wall (2008), “critics of scientific traditions have argued for the abandonment of rationality, objectivity, and truth to move social science beyond a focus on method, toward the power of social research to have a moral effect” (p. 3). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), qualitative research is therefore a moral and therapeutic project as well as being an inquiry.

In addition to the moral imperative, the usefulness of research that never gets read has also been a subject of debate. If libraries of books are created without them ever being used, can we say that knowledge has been created? This disconcerting notion has recently also been expressed regarding the state of Industrial Psychological research in South Africa (Augustyn & Cillie, 2008). One might philosophically ask, relating to the tree that fell where no one heard, whether this is truly research. Vryan (2006), in writing about autoethnography, notes that the “value of an analytical product is more appropriately determined by its usefulness to others” (p. 408).

If research design is thus about the optimal arrangement of conditions to find the best way to study something to the best end, I find these three observations highly pertinent to my research and thoughts about methodology. In corresponding to the above-mentioned points, I am left with the following challenges and opportunities:

• My intimacy with the subject and membership of the group being studied leaves me with both a
• challenge and an opportunity to celebrate subjectivity, account for it, and rely on qualitative methods to navigate through it.
• I feel the challenge to not only study, but also write playfully about play and to present my findings in compelling ways which can convey relevant emotion.
• I am also challenged to think about a methodology that allows for a compelling account that is accessible and useful to the scientific community as well as to leaders, facilitators and employees.
• I am convinced that the approach, strategy and method presented here address these challenges uniquely and appropriately. Let us turn to these points in more detail.

4. Research strategy

The research strategy pertaining to this study is to present an autoethnographic account of my experiences of workplace play and play-based methods. This research can thus also be regarded as an explorative and interpretive autoethnographic case study, with the researcher being the primary subject. I have selected autoethnography as a strategic, disciplined and principled choice (Sparkes, 2002) because it corresponds to the philosophical principles discussed; it addresses the aforementioned challenges; and it also offers a unique fit to the practical aspects of my research setting.

5. Autoethnography

5.1. An overview – what is autoethnography

Defining autoethnography

Autoethnography is a recent development within qualitative research and has evolved from ethnography. Autoethnography is a method of studying culture through self by which we can connect the personal to the social, or “through studying a particular life, we can understand a way of life” (Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2004). Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006) define autoethnography as:

A research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social and political. Autoethnographic forms feature concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection portrayed in dialogue, scenes, characterization and plot. Autoethnographies may combine fiction with nonfiction (pp.189 – 190).

Chang (2008) adds that, “stemming from the field of anthropology, autoethnography shares the storytelling feature with other genres of self-narratives but transcends mere narration of the self to engage in cultural analysis and interpretation” (p. 43).
Autoethnographic research is therefore “highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding” (Sparkes, 2002, p. 21). The term was first used in the late 70s and has since become the preferred term for studies wherein an ethnographer studies his/her own people (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Ellis (2004) also argues that autoethnography incorporates writing as a means of knowing, as opposed to starting off with a detailed hypothesis.

Many different terms relate to this genre and Chang (2008) lists a page of them, including prominent ones like *native ethnography*, *complete-member research*, *autobiographical ethnography* and *radical empiricism*. Ellis (2004) points out that, in relation to psychology and specifically, phenomenology, terms such as phenomenological ethnography, or psychobiography have also been used.

Ellis and Bochner (2000) state that researchers in “autoethnography vary in their emphasis on research process (graphy), on culture (ethno) and on self (auto)” (cited in Chang (2008), p. 48). Differences in emphasis regarding these three axes give rise to the variety of autoethnography research.

Ellis (2004) mentions that autoethnography has been adopted in numerous disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, social work, counselling and psychology. Boyle and Parry (2007) also put forward an argument for the inclusion of autoethnography in organizational studies. Boyle and Parry review how topics such as workplace bullying, leadership and motivation, workplace adaptation, and motherhood and the academic life, have successfully been conducted from an autoethnographic approach. On the local South African front, Avraamides (2007) has taken the argument one step further by coining the phrase *autoethnographisational research* (p. 277) to refer to such research that can complement organizational studies, including studies in the field of Industrial Psychology. Although autoethnographic research focuses on culture, it can be appropriately applied to psychological constructs. The focus on phenomenology as well as on constructs of workplace play, play-based methods and well-being, brings this study into a psychological context, while maintaining an emphasis on the premise that psychology and culture are intimately linked.
Balancing the subjective and objective

The current definitional debates regarding autoethnography reveal a tension between the level of “subjectivity” or “objectivity” that is emphasised (Chang, 2008). The subjective position allows researchers to insert their personal and subjective interpretations into the research process while experimenting with alternative forms of presenting research findings. Those that side with the “objective” stance promote systematic and rigorous approaches that allow for analysis and interpretation that extend the self. Chang, for instance, holds that whilst autoethnography shares the story-telling feature of other genres of self-narratives, it also transcends mere self-narration and includes analysis and interpretation of culture. According to Chang, this qualifies autoethnography as a “social scientific inquiry approach rather than descriptive or performative story-telling” (p. 46).

The tension between a subjective, emotive and evocative approach versus a more systematic, rigorous and objective one has been the subject of much debate (Anderson, 2006; Atkinson, 2006; Vryan, 2006; Wall, 2008). Some scholars are critical of the evocative genre which seems to dominate current autoethnographic works while others stress its necessity. Atkinson (2006) criticizes approaches that over-elevate the personal and asserts that they run the risk of the “ethnographer [becoming] more important than the ethnography” (p. 402). Atkinson warns that researchers should therefore guard against the research pursuit becoming about personal fulfilment where analysis and theorising is lost. In his attempt to reconcile autoethnography with more traditional forms of science, Anderson ( 2006) advocates analytical autoethnography (AA), where the presence of the following conditions is stressed: (1) the ethnographer is a full member in the research group or setting; (2) analytic reflexivity; (3) the ethnographer is visible as such in published texts; (4) dialogue with informants beyond the self; and (5) the ethnographer is committed to developing theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena (p. 378).

It is the “and”.

From the previous exposition on the developments in qualitative research, it is evident that autoethnography finds itself wrestling with that seventh moment as defined by Denzin and Lincoln (2005), where much debate, contest, and subsequently, diversity of methodological considerations endure. Vryan (2006), however, offers an
alternative perspective to this “either/or” mentality and advocates a greater synthesis of both explicit analysis as well as evocative and emotional content. Vryan argues that:

The key difference between analytical and non-analytical (or exclusively evocative) forms of autoethnography—and perhaps it should be the only significant difference at this point—is the goal of explicit analysis. If creative or emotionally charged writing styles are very strongly presented in a work or if the work is based on the experiences of an individual, those facts alone do not bear upon whether or not the work is also capable of accomplishing effective analysis or making the types of general claims other methods are allowed; our general conception of analytic autoethnography must not exclude such research. (p. 408)

It is clear that both evocative and analytic approaches have much to offer. Analytical autoethnography as presented by Anderson (2006) promotes explicit analysis and interpretation that can help ensure greater validity and acceptability of research. Evocative autoethnography as presented by Ellis (2004), on the other hand, stretches the boundaries on evolved thinking regarding knowing and writing, which opens up opportunities for playfulness and potency. The approach I follow in this research attempts to combine these two approaches and, I hope, succeeds in sidestepping the “either/or” thinking that Vryan warns us about, thereby embracing the “and” of these two approaches.

**Benefits of autoethnography**

Autoethnography offers numerous benefits. Chang (2008) highlights three beneficial areas: (1) it offers a format that is friendly and accessible to researchers and readers, (2) it enhances cultural understanding, (3) it has the potential to transform self and others. Boyle and Parry (2007) support the view that autoethnographic research, written subjectively and evocatively, can also illuminate our understanding of the link between the individual and the organizational culture. It is important to note that there are also numerous pitfalls related to autoethnography. Chang provides a useful summary of this by pointing to the following: “(1) excessive focus on self in isolation from others; (2) overemphasis on narration rather than analysis and interpretation; (3) exclusive reliance on personal memory as data; (4) negligence regarding ethical standards regarding others in self-narratives; (5) and inappropriate application of the label ‘autoethnography’” (p. 54).
My approach regarding this research draws inspiration from Vryan’s (2006) advocacy of a combination of both evocative and analytical approaches to autoethnography. Such a combination, on the one hand, fits neatly with research about play in the workplace, which in itself carries some of the same tensions, and, on the other hand, allows findings to have greater validity and acceptability. I have therefore tried to allow for rigour, analysis and interpretation while resisting the marginalisation of the subjective and emotive. In doing so, I have aimed to address the challenges I mentioned earlier, i.e., of (a) celebrating subjectivity, (b) ensuring consistency between function and form, and (c) promoting accessible and useful research. By purposefully and conscientiously applying these principles, I aimed to avoid some of the common pitfalls associated with autoethnography. The following considerations and principles applied specifically to this research:

1. Making use of my complete-member status
2. Allowing for analytic reflexivity
3. Ensuring reflexive visibility of myself in the text
4. Making use of multiple data sources, including dialogue with others
5. Committing to telling the stories of lived experience
6. Ensuring that analysis and theorising remained an explicit objective

To further frame my research strategy and method, questions regarding my position in the study, together with specific methodological considerations, are discussed below.

5.2. Research setting.

The specific setting for this study was that of a team of facilitators that has, over the past three years, been both the recipients as well as the instruments of play-methods within the organisation for which I work. The work in which I have been involved with this team was integral in sparking my interest in the research problem formulated earlier, and also provided an applicable setting for the research objectives to be pursued. The group and, by proxy, myself therefore represent the culture of a facilitator team within a large multi-national corporation. Naturalistic observation within this team therefore capitalised on the serendipity of both applicability and accessibility in terms of the research data.
Another important aspect of the setting was the very nature of the work we do, which can be described as Organisational Transformation and Renewal. This initiative, as described in the prologue, aims at fostering healthy, productive and fulfilled employees by implementing a variety of interventions, primarily at but not restricted to leadership levels.

5.3. Entrée and researcher roles

Given that the research used naturalistic observation and that I was a complete member of the setting being researched, the entrée and researcher role is implied. This presented some specific ethical considerations, which are discussed in 4.10.

5.4. Sampling of lived experience

As mentioned previously, although autoethnography is primarily focused on the lived experiences of the researcher, numerous scholars argue for the inclusion of others. The inclusion of others’ experience follows an approach by which “you decide to investigate a certain life experience of yours, but, instead of studying only yourself, you include others with similar experience as co-participants…but the research is still anchored in your personal experience” (Chang, 2008, p. 65). The inclusion of shared experiences is therefore a point of departure in this study. I have also taken note of Ellis’ (2004) warning: “A detailed description of a few events is better than a more generalized description of many events” (p. 365).

I therefore focus on the lived experiences that I have shared with numerous group members over the past few years which included experiences of play. Firstly, I pay attention to specific incidents that involved workplace play and play-based methods. Secondly, I give priority to some of the more recent shared experiences. I involve other team members in these reflections, as well as key role players with whom I have interacted over the last few years. I feel that, as the study progresses, the exact sampling of experiences and participants becomes clearer.

5.5. Data collection

Chang (2008) notes that, “not a rigid design, but a keen observation of a malleable process produces insightful interpretation of a phenomenon” (p. 67). The data collection process in an autoethnographic study can, and arguably should, be
adjusted as the study progresses. In accordance with the methodological guidelines provided by Chang, I collected data using a combination of the following methods:

**Personal-memory data:** I made use of my recollections and memory of past experiences in relation to workplace play and play-methods. Personal-memory data is not without controversy. Chang (2008) asserts that memory can select, limit, shape and distort the past, but on the other hand, can also tap into a wealth of information regarding the self. Using personal memory is not different to techniques in qualitative research where other participants are asked to recall information. The only difference is the source. Chang lists a number of ways in which personal-memory data can be obtained, from chronicling to inventorying your memories, collecting them in themes, and drawing yourself and your past experiences. Ellis (2004) also mentions the dilemmas regarding memory and poignantly observes that the very act of memory recollection and writing about it affects what we remember. Although this is therefore an imperfect process, as Richardson (2000) points out, it is really about structuring it meaningfully as opposed to “‘getting it right’ – only ‘getting it’ differently contoured and nuanced” (pp. 930-931).

**Self-observational and self-reflective data:** Data was gathered through actual participation in workplace play and play-based methods on an on-going basis. Participant-observation is one of the classic approaches to ethnography wherein the researcher participates in the setting they are studying (Haviland, 1999). Self-observation is the autoethnographical counterpart. Chang (2008) suggests that, although your research agenda can influence your observation, raw data from the present is still tremendously useful to understand phenomenon. This offsets the personal-memory data with information from the present. Self-observation and self-reflection can be distinguished in terms of whether it observes the external or internal reality of the researcher respectively (Chang, 2008). I therefore kept a field journal to capture my observations and reflections.

**External data:** Personal-memory, self-observation and self-reflection can be seen as the primary nodes of data collection in autoethnography. Chang (2008) adds that “data from external sources – others, visual artefacts, documents, and literature – provide additional perspectives and contextualises information to help you investigate and examine your subjectivity” (p. 103). In this research study, personal-memory data
and self-observational data were corroborated and triangulated through unstructured individual interviews, group interviews and photos, memoirs and other written reports related to the topic.

5.6. Data recording

My field diary with notes on my observations and reflections also served as the study’s natural history or internal audit. When interviews were conducted, permission was obtained to record them. Photos or digital scans were taken of the artefacts pertaining to the study. All data, transcriptions and field-notes were digitised and stored in a secure encrypted format with secure online internet backups and were made available to my study leader for the duration of the study.

5.7. Data analysis and interpretation

Chang (2008) argues that data analysis and interpretation are the crux of autoethnography. While striking the right balance between the collective and the individual, the objective and the subjective, the analytical and the aesthetical, analysis and interpretation allow for that which is personally meaningful to also become socially relevant. Chang asserts that analysis and interpretation are “methodologically nebulous because analysis and interpretation require the researcher’s holistic insight, a creative mixing of multiple approaches, and patience, with uncertainty” (p. 126). They therefore always remain, as Denzin and Lincoln (2005) reflect, “on-going, emergent, unpredictable and unfinished” (p. 909). Chang distinguished between analysis and interpretation as activities that either stay very close to your data (analysis) versus activities that aim at finding meaning beyond the data (interpretation). The distinction is elsewhere described as the fracturing of data into its parts versus the connection of a whole from the parts (Mouton & Marais, 1996).

In alignment to these distinct yet interrelated ideas, I have analysed the data by identifying themes, categorising and coding the different aspects, looking for critical incidents, connecting the present with the past and comparing it with social science construct and theories. Within autoethnography, it is frequently pointed out that writing in itself is a means of knowing. In the words of Richardson (2000): “I write in order to learn something I didn’t know before I wrote it” (p. 924). I also used the writing process as a way of reflecting and making sense of data. Continuously
writing about the observations allowed me to stay close to the data while also developing a holistic perspective.

5.8. Data quality

An attempt to ensure data quality and integrity cannot be divorced from an understanding of what makes data good within a specific paradigm. It is therefore important to clarify the ontologically relevant guiding principles in accordance to which research claims are formulated and justified. Numerous scholars note that the unique ontological and epistemological positions in autoethnography deserve different criteria from that of more traditional positivist science (Ellis, 2004; Sparkes, 2002; Wall, 2008). Criteria such as credibility, authenticity, transferability, dependability, conformability, validity, triangulation, truth and verification have been widely regarded as applicable to qualitative research for some time (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). But Bochner (2000) argue that the unintelligible application of these criteria to autoethnography is problematic:

The word criteria is a term that separates modernists from postmodernists . . . empiricists from interpretivists . . . Both [sides] agree that inevitably they make choices about what is good, what is useful, and what is not. The difference is that one side believes that “objective” methods and procedures can be applied to determine the choices we make, whereas the other side believes these choices are ultimately and inextricably tied to our values and our subjectivities. (p. 266)

Sparkes (2002) agrees, and strongly warns against the use of inappropriate criteria:

Numerous critiques are now available of this position and the danger of imposing inappropriate judgment criteria on different forms of inquiry, so I will not rehearse them here (Guna, 1990; J. Smith, 1989, 1993). Needless to say, when standard, traditional criteria of what makes good "scientific" or "realist" telling are applied, then confessional tales, autoethnographies, poetic representations, ethnodramas, and ethnographic fictions, will always disappoint. (p. 193)

In order to avoid either paralytic nihilism or stifling conservatism regarding data quality, I have found the following ideas proposed by Leedy and Ormrod (2000) both practical and relevant:
• Purposefulness: The study sticks to the questions posed by the research problem.
• Explicitness of assumptions and biases: The researcher communicates assumptions and biases.
• Rigor: Preciseness in data collecting and analysing.
• Open-mindedness: Willingness in accepting new data that differs from expectations.
• Completeness: Taking the appropriate time to gather data.
• Coherence: The data yields findings that are coherent through triangulation and contradictions are reconciled.
• Persuasiveness: Logical arguments and weight of the evidence persuades one interpretation to the exclusion of others.
• Consensus: There is consensus between the researcher, participants and other scholars.
• Usefulness: The research is useful to promote better understanding of the area studied.

Richardson (2000) further recommends that we “seek to meet literary criteria of coherence, verisimilitude, and interest” (p. 11) in evaluating autoethnography. While striving to adhere to the above-mentioned ideas, I agree that verisimilitude is an important alternative to consensus when it comes to autoethnography.

In order to ensure that these ideas were carried into my data gathering, analysis, interpretation and reporting, I employed the following methods:

• Prolonged engagement in the field
• Integrating multiple sources (internal, external, past, present)
• Peer debriefing and member checks on an on-going basis
• Comparing theory and social science constructs
• Keeping a research diary
5.9. Reporting

As already argued, writing takes on a special relevance in autoethnography. How should we write our research? As Richardson (1990), in stressing that research are inevitably turned into text, answers:

How should we write our research? The rhetorical, ethical, and methodological issues implicit in this question are neither few nor trivial. Rather, the question reflects a central postmodernist realization: all knowledge is socially constructed. Writing is not simply a “true” representation of an object “reality”; instead, language creates a particular view of reality (p. 1).

Based on the positions outlined in the research approach, the writing of this research has been done by drawing appropriately from different styles. Sparkes (2002) differentiates between scientific, realist, confessional and autoethnographical tales. My intention has been to blend both realist and autoethnographic approaches, where both analysis and interpretation are woven into emotive and descriptive narrative.

5.10. Research ethics

Even though autoethnographic research circumvents some of the more classic conventions regarding ethics, Wall (2008) points to the presence of unique ethical questions, especially in representing others through the researcher’s story. In the words of Lovell (2005), “There is a power relationship in writing biography, and history accords the balance of power quite emphatically to the biographer” (para. 5).

It is therefore important to consider whether one owns the story simply because you can tell it (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). Chang (2008) suggests that, because stories of the self always include others, it is important to consider matters of privacy and anonymity in all reporting. Orb (2000) emphasises that principles of respecting people’s autonomy, ensuring beneficence of research and maintaining justice and fairness also bear special weight on qualitative research. But, as Ellis (2004) demonstrates regarding ethical dilemmas, the ‘greater good’ pertaining to research is not always that clear. She promotes an awareness of ethical questions while keeping in mind that one’s writing might result in hurting someone about whom you wrote.
Even though it is therefore undeniable that ethics require contextual alignment given the ontology, epistemology and methodology at work in this research, I have still taken guidance from the following ‘ethical classics’ put forward by Mouton (1996) regarding the rights of participants:

- The right to privacy (including the right to refuse to participate in research)
- The right to anonymity and confidentiality
- The right to full disclosure about the research (informed consent)
- The right not to be harmed in any manner (physically, psychologically or emotionally) (p. 243)

With these principles in mind, I gave serious consideration to narrowing down the research questions, setting and participants. Choosing an autoethnographic study within the context of my current team was in part also motivated by and partially addressed with these ethical principles. Nevertheless, ethics remain complex and often conflicting. In addition to the research objectives, I attempted to maintain an acute awareness of these principles as the compass to navigating this research.

6. Chapter summary

In this chapter, qualitative research in general, and autoethnography specifically, was explored in more detail in order to highlight and motivate the particular reasons why an autoethnographic approach was seen as applicable to this research. We see that the developments in qualitative research that argue for greater subject/researcher intimacy, the experimentation with different forms, and the different objectives of the overall research process, open doors for autoethnography. I also argued that autoethnography, as a qualitative genre that allows for emotive and subjective narrative, is uniquely suited to studying play playfully.