

RESEARCH PROPOSAL EXAMPLE

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**EXPLORING SOUTH AFRICAN
BUSINESS WOMEN'S RELATIONSHIPS**

1. CONTEXTUALISATION

1.1 Introduction

Although enormous progress has been made in the world of work as we know it today, leadership opportunities for women remain limited. An interesting, if not alarming, phenomenon being reported, is that women rising through the ranks at work are acutely aware that they often compete against each other for the small piece of power granted to them. As such, realistic women eye each other as more of a direct threat – and act accordingly (Sills, 2007). Sarler (1999: 14) writes:

“So Man opened the door to the boardroom and in walked Woman, chin up against the line of men, but hang on, what’s this she sees at the far end of that long table? Well, knock her down with a mascara wand – if it isn’t another woman! The horror of it slowly dawns. The only way that other women could possibly have got to that seat, is the same way that she did, which means that there is someone who knows all the same tricks, all the same manoeuvres, and who will be just as relentless and ruthless as she is”.

In the provocatively titled, “Catfight in the Boardroom: Do women hold other women back?”, Judith (Sills, 2007: 61-62) presents a fascinating analysis of the perceptions of women in the workplace who perceived that other women in power were holding them back. Sills (2007) asks the following questions: “A woman’s worst workplace enemy? Another woman. Is there validity to this perception? I haven’t seen data to prove it’s true, but the fact that it is a common survey finding, is powerful in itself. Women blocking other women is a dangerous perception. It reinforces some inchoate portrait of the woman executive as insecure bitch, easily threatened, overly emotional, less able to focus on achievement, because she is preoccupied with squelching younger talent.” Raymond (2005: 1) examining “The Dark Side of Sisterhood in the New Millennium” in an article entitled: “Women’s New Workplace Reality Compete Over Complete?”, quoted as follows from Weaver: “I am the daughter of a physician, so I was well aware of the discrimination and sexism I would face when I was in a classroom with all males . . . I just anticipated two big hurdles – making it into medical school and then proving my ability to the guys in my class and the professors. But wow, was I wrong! Most career-oriented girls grow up with the sense of some prejudice toward women. You know, ‘the men get it all’ kind of mentality. But I never expected jealousy from women supervisors who were supposed to

be helping me ... Generally the nurses' actions are subtle, and often funny – unless you're at the receiving end".

Research undertaken in the USA in the 1970s (Rindfleisch, 2000: 172) revealed that many successful women in business denied that women faced difficulties in management and were reluctant to assist other women. Researchers labelled this phenomenon the "queen bee syndrome". Nicola Horlich (quoted in an article by Dobson & Iredale, 2006), the City financier nicknamed "superwoman", because she successfully combined a demanding job with a large family, illustrates this syndrome further by explaining that some women viewed other women as a threat and therefore preferred to surround themselves with men. "It is called the 'queen bee syndrome'. I have seen women in managerial positions discriminating against other women, possibly because they like to be the only female manager or woman in the workplace".

Jennifer Rindfleisch (2000) studying the views of senior management women in Australia on the barriers women face in management and their willingness to assist other women into senior management positions, interviewed 41 senior management women in Sydney and reported interesting findings shedding light on women's positions in management and their relationships with other women. She conducted a content analysis on the responses and demarcated four broad categories: "conservatives", "moderates", "reluctant feminists" and "definite feminists". Two-thirds of respondents fell into categories representing women who did not hold views resembling "queen bees", while the remaining fell into the two categories which most closely resembled "queen bees". The fact that a minority of senior management women resembled "queen bees", challenges the myth that senior management women are reluctant to assist other women in the workplace. However, the results do clearly show that not all senior management women support other women in the workplace.

Sharon Mavin (2006a) of the Newcastle Business School questions the queen bee concept in two articles. In the first, she concluded that several issues emerge from the debates surrounding it, namely: (i) the challenge to solidarity behaviour as a means of advancing women in management and the assumption that women will align themselves with other women; (ii) the expectations of senior women in relation to other women in

management and whether these are appropriate and realistic; (iii) questioning the unproblematic and continued use of the queen bee label and raising negative relations, and (iv) introducing the concept of female misogyny between women, without creating another “blame the women” perspective. She (Marvin, 2006) feels strongly that, in order to change the experiences of women in management, rather than masking or ignoring the tensions and complexity embedded in different perspectives and experiences of such women, these should be discussed openly and transparently in order to raise consciousness. One way of engaging in future action, is to study negative relations between women and the contexts in which these occur. In her second article, Mavin (2006b) explores negative relations between women in management and surfaces processes of female misogyny. She draws upon the debates and offers research findings to study how less positive relations between women questions assumptions of sisterhood and solidarity behaviour and the value of the queen bee label to women in management research. Using an alternative lens, she interprets narratives from senior women and academics in the UK to question the complexity of processes of female misogyny. She also challenges the expectation that women in senior management would exhibit solidarity behaviour.

In an article entitled: “Office queen bees hold back women’s careers”, Dobson and Iredale (2006) refer to new research that provides insight into women’s prejudice against women in the workplace. One of the studies found women bosses to be significantly more likely than men to discriminate against female employees. When presented with applications for promotion, women were more likely than men to assess female candidates as less qualified than their male counterparts. In the same article, Rocio Garcia-Retamero, a psychologist at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin, points out the fact that the opposite is also true: “Female and older participants showed more prejudice against the (idea of a) female leader than did male and younger participants” (Dobson & Iredale, 2006). She further states that “the findings showed that many people still hold the stereotypical view that leadership is a masculine notion. (This) obviously leads to a bias against a female candidate’s promotion to a leadership post”.

Could this state of affairs be the sole reason for the rivalry between women, or are there other causes for this divide? Could Leora Tanenbaum (2003) be correct in drawing the

conclusion that “no one has taught us women how to interact with each other in the competitive world of office politics, and as a result, we often botch things up”. And what about her observation that this competition is not restricted to the boardroom alone: “Competitiveness between women is a fact. It has a history and function ... that does not benefit women”. So begins “Cat Fight: Rivalries Among Women ... From Diets to Dating, from the Boardroom to the Delivery Room” (Tanenbaum, 2003). Does a peak into woman’s world of aggression, rivalry and competition exist and can one draw a line between healthy competition and self-motivated, destructive sabotage as she does?

In the article, “The Psychology with which women regard other women”, Shere Hite (2007: 1) asks an important question: How often is it said at dinner or a party: “Well, women are 51% of the world; if they want to change it, why don’t they do so?” According to Hite (2007) the implication is that most women don’t want to change anything; they like their place in society and, as a matter of fact, like being servants of men and accept their lesser status, even if they are paid less and respected less. But is this true, or is there, as Hite (2007) seems to hypothesise, a hidden taboo on positive public relationships between women? Is it possible that the reasons for women’s struggle into leadership echelons and not rising to top positions in business and politics lies therein that they are so busy being rivals that they cannot work together? According to her (Hite, 2007), the explanation for the repetition of old competitive clichés and jealous situations between women even today is that they are “brainwashed” to prefer men, to compete with other women for male recognition and think of women as “second best”. Hite (2007) also proposes another reason for women sometimes being nervous of each other, namely an unspoken taboo on putting another woman first operating by means of subtle threats that, if a woman does, no one will take her seriously; they’ll say she’s a lesbian, etc. Because of this, women are afraid, which, in turn, lead them trying to hide any important friendships with other women by denying that these are meaningful. Carol Sadler (1999: 1) provides the following explanation for this: “When two high-flying females lunch together, they don’t drink wine”. The reason for this according to Sadler (1999: 1), is “not, as you might glibly think, because they are watching their weight, but because they are watching their tongues.” She (Sadler, 1999: 1) explains why Amanda Platell, who wrote the novel, “Why women aren’t sisters at the office”, deserves a medal “just for telling the truth”. “Like Platell, I only have direct experience of the various industries within the communications media, so I suppose it is just about

possible that in the world of, say, science, women are cuddle-bunnies with each other. But I doubt it, because the clearest lesson learnt in the past quarter of a century is that the concept of 'sisterhood' was the most ludicrous of the pups we were sold from the feminist litter. Women don't support each other, especially in the upper echelons of the workplace. Broadly speaking, they hate each other".

Susan Barash (2006), a professor of gender studies at Marymount Manhattan College, who became fascinated by women's relationship with each other, believes that while the women's liberation movement created more options for women, it also seemed to have contributed to more competition. She interviewed five hundred women from a wide range of ages, classes, ethnicities, and religions, asking them directly about their experiences. She wanted to (i) know the role women's rivalry played in their lives; (ii) their experiences as both targets and perpetrators of female envy; (iii) to understand how these dynamics had shaped her subjects' life choices, their relationships with people of both sexes, and, most importantly, their sense of self; and (iv) why some relationships seemed to transcend these problems while other bonds were marked by bitterness and betrayal. Her (Barash, 2006) findings were quite astonishing: (i) women's colleagues, best friends, and sisters stole their boyfriends and husbands; (ii) women's fear of female rivalry was so strong that they chose to live in small towns "so there would be less competition"; (iii) women avoided certain parties "because I don't want my husband to meet too many single, beautiful women"; and (iv) girlfriends dropped a woman when she snagged a promotion at work, finally found a great guy, or even became pregnant. Women also described the wear and tear of constant competition, of continually comparing themselves to friends, co-workers, sisters, even to their daughters. Many women confessed that they spent their lives trying to steer between two painful courses: reaching for the advantages that other women seemed to have and struggling to defend themselves from other women's envy. Although Barash (2006) knew that female rivalry was a theme in many women's lives, she emerged from her research, feeling as though it *must* be a theme in *every* woman's life. Women are just not allowed to talk about it. In fact, when Barash (2006) recovered from her first wave of shock at the unexpected stories she heard, she reduced her findings to three conclusions:

- “• Despite all the efforts of the women's movement to change this troubling pattern, we're still willing to cut each other's throats over what we value most – jobs, men,

and social approval. Although we've moved into the workplace and the public arena as never before, we tend to ignore men when it comes to competing, focusing our rivalry almost entirely upon each other.

- We'll do anything rather than face up to female envy and jealousy – especially our own. Between traditional social pressures to be the “good girl”, and feminist expectations of female solidarity, we sweep all evidence of a bleaker picture under the rug. Indeed, in these post-feminist times, women are often rewarded for romanticising female friendship and punished for telling the truth about female rivalry.
- Even though her focus is on female rivalry, she also found some wonderful examples of female bonding – within families, between friends, and among colleagues. In these positive instances, she discovered that the key for women was to have realistic expectations, of themselves and each other. When we stop demanding total, unconditional support; when we accept our loved ones' differences as well as similarities; when we own up to our own rivalrous natures; and when we confront problems rather than ignore them, women are capable of creating extraordinary bonds that nourish them throughout their lives.”

Competition may play a different psychological role in the development of women than that of men. Two noted experts on women's psychology, Luise Eichenbaum and Susie Orbach (1987) propose that women search for their identity through connection with others, while men develop by distinguishing themselves from others. So, for boys and men, competition helps them to become their own person and consequently this is something to be sought. Yet, for girls and women, competition can be terrifying. It seems to threaten important relationships by saying, in essence, “I am not the same as you.” And since women's identity is defined in relation to others, women may prefer to rather withdraw from competition than potentially lose an important person or lose their sense of self. Leonora Tanenbaum (2003) points out that women have always competed, primarily with each other. Despite the assumption that women are “relaters”, she asserts that women are conditioned to view each other as adversaries rather than allies. Historically, there have been few legitimate arenas in which women could compete and prove their femininity – in other words, have feminine power. Being attractive, marrying a “good catch” and having “faultless children” have been the main venues. And to complicate matters, competitiveness has traditionally been viewed as unwomanly. So what has happened?

Tanenbaum (2003) argues that competition between women has traditionally taken a more covert route, resulting in destructive rather than constructive dynamics.

Nelson, in her book *Embracing Victory* (1998), comments that women struggle with competition since men have defined it. Thus, as women enter the workforce, they have to learn to play “men’s rules” which govern most business operations. Understandably, women have felt ill-prepared and uncomfortable, because they neither know the rules nor the language.

Judging from an article by Audrey Edwards (2005), contrary to what could be expected of black women who experienced the full brunt of discrimination, they are as guilty as other racial groups when it comes to sister rivalry. She (Edwards, 2005) discusses several examples and quotes a number of experts in this field, with regard to the pressures that put black women against one another, in her article “The new office politics: we’ve seen the enemy at work and sometimes it’s us. The truth is that black women have moved away from the mythology of black women supporting one another at work, because they now have to operate in a corporate environment where it’s much more competitive and individualistic”, says ESSENCE career columnist, Ella Edmondson Bell, an associate professor of business in the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth in the same article (Edwards, 2005). “There is literally room for only one [black female] at the top, and we’ve all gotten caught up in deciding that “I’m going to be that one”. Companies may talk about team work, but the reality is that it’s the individual woman who gets ahead, sometimes doing so at the expense of other individuals she is working with.

At the heart of fear and loathing in the workplace are the psychic wounds of race and history, explains Joy DeGruy-Leary (Edwards, 2005), an assistant professor of social work at Portland State University in Portland, Oregon: “We have been conditioned to see each other as a threat – it’s part of our being socialised in a racist society”, she says. She continues: “There’s this feeling that there can only be one or two of us in these corporate positions, so we’re not collectively unified. As a Black woman, you always have the fear that you can be replaced by another Black woman – and the other woman may have better skills or a better education”. Add to this vulnerability plus all our issues around being women in general – *How well liked am I? How well dressed? Do I have a man? Is my*

house big enough? - and we have the potential for explosive conflicts between black women at work.

Sometimes sister-hating at work is more subtle and indirect, but painful nonetheless. Some Black women will simply go out of their way to avoid being seen in the company of other women of their race. "They view associating with other Blacks as a liability", contends Ruffin (Edwards, 2005) who remembers working with a senior Black woman at a large publishing company, who actually refused her invitation to lunch by saying, "Let's not be seen together". "I was shocked," says Ruffin. "I thought, if Whites can be friends at work and help each other out, why can't Blacks?" Samms (Edwards, 2005) argues that it's "Black people who have a problem with nepotism in the workplace. Whites don't. We're so afraid of losing these positions that we operate from a place of fear and not from a place of power."

Kanter (1977) describes activities which have become the basis of solidarity behaviour between women in organisations, noting that minority members of an organisation can become allies, form coalitions, affect the culture of the group and develop support networks that enhance the chances of women's career advancement. Korabik and Abbondanza (2004) describe solidarity behaviour between women as bringing together processes of forming alliances, collaborating, joining together with shared aims, a commitment to changing social structures for women at the collective and not just the individual level, as well as behaviours which demonstrate loyalty and gender awareness in managerial practice. They argue that solidarity behaviour is enacted by women acting as instruments of social change and therefore place the emphasis of change upon individual women (Korabik & Abbondanza, 2004).

An assumption held of solidarity behaviour contends that women will support and align themselves with other women (Mavin, 2006a). This is implicit in studies which seek to explain the experiences and positions of women in management, recommending that women should have proactive, visible and high profile senior women as role models and mentors, and for the development of women's networks as a primary means of encouraging women in management (Mavin, 2006a). Senior women are often recommended to support, develop and work to raise the profile of other women. However,

such research has, in general, ignored and therefore perpetuated, a “cover up” of negative relations between women in management (Mavin, 2006a).

Many researchers, including Kanter’s (2007) work, look at women in senior positions, either recommending that senior women do more to help other women (Bryans & Mavin, 2003; Mavin & Bryans, 2002; McKeen & Burke, 1994; Singh *et al.*, 2000; Singh & Vinnicombe, 2003) or blaming them for becoming honorary men (Gini, 2001), or both. Legge’s (1987) position is that women who fail to exploit their potential power in organisations, result in them failing to build alliances with their natural allies: other women. But do women view other women as their natural allies in management? “Do women dislike each other, as is often said – or is there a hidden taboo on important alliances between women, one that keeps them ‘competitive’?” (Hite, 2007: 1).

1.2 Research questions

From the preceding, the following general research questions could be posed:

- Do women who have much to gain by learning to work together with other women, often betray or abandon each other in senior leadership in the local workplace?
- Why do women undermine each other in the workplace?
- What are the implications of women leaders undermining their sisters’ career development?

1.3 The anticipated contributions of the study

I am convinced that this study will add value to the field of Leadership and related areas of study, like industrial and organisational studies at a theoretical as well as a methodological level. **Firstly**, insight into the world of local women leaders will contribute to our knowledge of this phenomenon. In particular, it will illuminate women leaders’ relationships with other women at work and provide an answer to whether women block each others careers and its impact on women leadership in organisations. **Secondly**, applying qualitative methods will introduce qualitative methodology to the study of women leaders and supplement local work done recently in the general field of leadership. **Thirdly**, generating knowledge of women leadership may create a framework to facilitate the improvement of women leaders’ everyday relationships in organisations. **Finally**, the study is expected to produce suggestions for policy regarding women in leadership positions in local business. While

much has been done over the past decades to develop policies and programmes promoting equality between men and women, resulting in the country having adopted legislation prohibiting discrimination or guaranteeing equal rights for men and women, much work remains. The insights gained from an in-dept qualitative study should assist in developing strategies and policy for local organisations, especially to prepare themselves better to enrol women in leadership positions and ensure healthy relationships between women leaders.

1.4 Aims and objectives of the study

The main purpose of this study is to embark on research what Roger Dobson and Will Iredale (2006) call the queen bee syndrome and to add to such work being undertaken in the UK, US and Australia. More specifically, the research will explore and describe local women leaders' experiences and perceptions of (i) women deliberately **undermining** the careers of other women; (ii) women's sisterhood and solidarity behaviour; and (iii) how gender structures, cultures and systems in organisations may be refocused to meet future challenges of women in management/leadership positions.

2. RESEARCH APPROACH

While there are currently two broad research approaches in the social sciences, namely quantitative and qualitative research, I, as already indicated, opted for the latter in the study. Let us now take a closer look at this research approach. From a brief overview of the state of the art of qualitative inquiry, it is clear that such research has an impressive history and continues to be applied in many varied ways in basically all known disciplines and study areas.

2.1 What is qualitative research?

Denzin and Lincoln (2003: 4-5) define qualitative research as a situated activity that locates the observer to the world. It consists of a set of interpretive material practices that make the world visible and then transform it. In addition, these practices turn the world into a series of representations including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This implies that its researchers study

things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them.

According to Schurink (2008), establishing an agreed-upon meaning for qualitative research has been far from simplistic, if at all feasible. Qualitative research involves the use and collection of a variety of empirical tools. These include case studies, personal experiences, introspections, life stories, interviews, artefacts, cultural texts and productions, observational, historical, interactional and visual texts that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives. Accordingly, qualitative researchers display a wide range of interconnected interpretive practices, always striving to better understand the subject matter at hand. For them, each practice makes the world visible in a different way. Hence, they use more than one interpretive practice in any study (Schurink, 2008).

Since a closer understanding of contemporary qualitative inquiry can be obtained by reviewing its history and development, I now deal with its origin and growth.

2.2 *Moments of qualitative research*

Norman Denzin and Yvonne Lincoln (1994, 2000 & 2005) who may be regarded as the two most influential persons in qualitative research, have made an important contribution with their well-known moments' typology and therefore I now review it briefly.

They demarcated the following eight moments in the development of qualitative research:

- The first moment, called the traditional (1900 to the late 1940s) approach, primarily followed the positivist scientific paradigm and saw the "other" who was studied as alien, foreign and strange.
- The second moment or golden age of qualitative research (1940s to the 1970s) represents the modernist phase and extended through the postwar of the 1970s. During this time qualitative researchers attempted to study important social processes, such as deviance and social control in the classroom and society. Particularly noticeable in this period, is the Chicago School of Sociology, who studied gangs and institutionalised persons. In studying education and students, Perry (1970) examined the intellectual and moral changes in Harvard males, and by studying this

group valued by dominant society, helped to move qualitative research closer to the centre of serious research (Maykut & Morehouse, 1998: 8).

- The third moment, referred to as the moment of blurred genres (1970-1986), provided a full complement of paradigms, methods and strategies of qualitative research. Leading scholars (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002; Marcus & Fisher, 1986; Plummer, 2001; Barone, 2000; Bochner, 1997, 2001) suggested that the boundaries between social sciences and the humanities became blurred. These softened with regard to the various science and art activities, fact and fiction, and between various academic disciplines facilitating the use of writing styles and genres previously considered inferior or non-literary (see Sparkes, 2002).
- The fourth moment (the mid-1980s) witnessing a profound break with what Denzin and Lincoln (2003) term the crisis of representation, was brought about by works of Marcus and Fisher (1986), Turner and Bruner (1986), Clifford and Marcus (1986), Geertz (1988) and Clifford (1988). These authors re-emphasized the reflective nature of research and the writing-up of data and explicated the implications of the “blurred genres”.
- The fifth moment, also referred to as the post-modern period of experimental ethnographic writing (1990 to 1995), focusses on making sense of the triple crises. New ways of composing ethnography were explored and researchers experimented with different ways to represent the “other” (see, for example, Ellis & Bochner, 1996). This moment was defined and shaped by the assumption that the qualitative researcher could not capture lived experience directly. Schurink and Schurink (2000a) state that scholars increasingly felt that data should not be interpreted or analysed. Rather, the researcher should gather and present data in such a way that “the subjects speak for themselves” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Thus, scholars believed that lived experience could not be created in the social text written by the researcher. Furthermore, as Denzin and Lincoln (2000, 2005) state, the tendency arose to abandon the concept of the aloof observer. Consequently theories were written in narrative terms as “tales of the field”, and the search for ground narratives was replaced by more local, small-scale theories fitted to specific problems and particular situations (Denzin & Lincoln). According to Schurink (2008), action, participatory and activist-oriented research came to the fore during this moment.

- The sixth or “post-experimental enquiry” (1995-2000) is, according to Schurink (2008), a period of great excitement, where the Alta Mira’s book series entitled “Ethnographic Alternatives” with Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner, has created a platform for new authors to experiment with novel forms of expressing lived experience, including literary, poetic, auto-biographical, multi-voiced, conversational, critical, visual performative and co-constructed representations that blurred the boundaries between the social sciences and the humanities.
- The seventh moment or the methodological contested present (2000-2004) is framed by the introduction of two new qualitative journals, namely “Qualitative Inquiry” and “Qualitative Research”. Denzin and Lincoln (2005: 1116) summarise this period as follows:

“..... a time of great tension, substantial conflict, great methodological retrenchment in some quarters ... and the disciplining and regulation of inquiry practices to conform with conservative, now liberal programs and regimes that make claims regarding truth ... It is also a time of great tension within the qualitative research community simply because the methodological, paradigmatic perspective and inquiry contexts are so open and varied that it is easy to believe that researchers are everywhere”.

Lincoln and Denzin (2005: 1123-1124) predict that fuelled by the methodological backlash currently experienced and the evidence-based social movement in the ninth moment, methodologists will place themselves on two widely different and opposing sides.

Schurink (2008) concludes that important issues will be debated, including the following: (i) the question of ethics in the context of technological developments in the global world; (ii) the continuing challenge of finding appropriate criteria to assess qualitative research; and (iii) the ongoing question of representation.

From the above, it is clear that the new research topics and methods, and the blurring of boundaries between different genres, have opened up a whole new field for qualitative research within the social sciences. Schurink (2008) emphasises that each moment is still found today and explains that we are still being influenced by prior political hopes and ideologies, as well as research findings confirming prior knowledge.

The traditional phase has focussed on writing objectively, the modernist phase has been mainly concerned with the standardisation of methodology, the blurred genre phase has been characterised by confusion, the crises of representation moment has been concerned with the legitimacy of ethnographers/researchers, the fifth moment has emphasised the approval of researchers' actions, the sixth has been kept busy with taking qualitative research "to the people" in order to allow them to benefit from its outputs or outcomes, while both the seventh and eighth moments have come to the fore, because of a backlash against what has been before.

2.3 Qualitative research and leadership studies

One of the first concrete examples of qualitative studies found in the field of leadership study, is that of Bryman, Bresnen, Beardsworth and Keil (1988). Amongst others, grounded theory has been claimed as a relevant method to study leadership, as well as to generate theory for leadership (see Parry, 1998). Some leadership scholars have suggested that quantitative studies should be supplemented by qualitative research and that the latter should play a more important role in such studies. Conger's (1998, 118-119) views are relevant:

"As a research tool, qualitative methods have been greatly underutilized in the field of leadership. ...(Q)uantitatively-based surveys have been the method of choice....(but it)... fails to capture the great richness of leadership phenomena and instead leaves us with sets of highly abstracted and generalized descriptors. ...(Q)ualitative methods are ideally suited to uncovering leadership's many dimensions. When done well, these methods allow us to probe at great levels of depth and nuance in addition to offering researchers not only the flexibility to explore the unexpected, but to see the unexpected. Our challenge then as qualitative researchers is not only to enhance our craft through the exchange of 'best practices' and the continual improvement of our methods, but also to play a missionary role. The larger academic community within which we live is not open to qualitative methods. The paradigm that still guides the field is the quantitative model. Our task must be to join editorial boards, to help build reviewer pools of talented qualitative researchers, and to submit rigorous qualitative-based research to mainstream journals. In addition, we must encourage investments to be made in training doctoral students in qualitative methods, as well as encouraging radical revisions in the academic reward structure towards a system that values qualitative studies. Like the leaders we study, we too must lead".

But what is the status of qualitative studies in the South African research practice?

2.4 Qualitative research in South Africa

As far as could be established, no systematic historical analysis of qualitative studies in South Africa has been done thus far (Schurink, 2008). Schurink's (2003) synoptic study of the local literature clearly reveals that, while this research style has been institutionalised at certain South African universities, most notably sociology, psychology and education, and at certain centres and organisations, it is certainly not widespread (see Mouton & Muller, 1998). According to these authors, examples of qualitative empirical studies become harder to find as one moves outside South African anthropology and history.

Whilst South African researchers have used qualitative research methods in the past, it seems that since the 1990s, utilising these methods in research has steadily increased in local research (Schurink, 2003). Mouton and Muller (1998: 14) correctly point out that local qualitative research is characterised by plurality based on the variety of philosophical, theoretical and methodological approaches utilised in the field. According to Schurink (2003), all the known types of qualitative research are found in local qualitative studies. While single methods like unstructured interviews have been used mostly, more recently researchers have started employing multi-methods, i.e. a combination of in-depth interviews, participant observation and/or documents of life. As far as analytic traditions of qualitative research are concerned, local scholars have used all the known methods, like analytical induction (AI) and grounded theory (GT), the latter being particularly popular (Schurink, 2003). "Grounded theory is one of the most commonly used approaches in qualitative research in South Africa, especially in theses and dissertations" (Mouton et al. 2001: 501).

Schurink (2003) believes that qualitative research is "alive" in organizational/ management and related areas and disciplines in South Africa, but as to it being "well", hard work is required to not only sustain such research, but also to expand it by taking advantage of developments and trends abroad. He (Schurink, 2004) is of the opinion that if we are truly committed in creating an optimally managed and profitable industry with creative leaders in the "Rainbow Nation", and if we believe that the social sciences in general and qualitative research in particular, are required for such a course, we should appreciate the huge

responsibility the younger generation of qualitative researchers working in organizational, leadership, and other fields of study has to undertake quality research.

I believe that, whilst local qualitative research is scarce, it has great potential and thus provide unique opportunities to South African researchers working in the field of leadership. I never doubted applying qualitative research in this study, but how precisely do I intend utilising it?

2.5 My approach to qualitative research in the study

It is practice in qualitative research that one explicate one's research philosophy before one design one's study. Particularly important here is one's scientific beliefs, namely ontology, and epistemology. Before explicating these assumptions, it is necessary to borne in mind that these can only finally be explicated and cemented during the execution of the study (Schurink, 2008, personal communication). In addition to these philosophical views, there are a few other important decisions one needs to attend to rather sooner than later in one's research journey, namely: (i) the extent of making use of existing theoretical concepts in the literature; (ii) one's own involvement in the study; and (iii) one's approach to research ethics (Schurink, personal communication, June, 2008). I will first deal with these issues before I outline the key research process considerations, like strategy or design, selecting data sources, and methods of data collection, data capture, data storage, data analysis, and data representation.

2.5.1 Explicating my research values – scientific beliefs

- **Ontology**

Mouton and Marais (1996) state that "ontology" refers to the study of being or reality. Therefore, when we refer to the ontological dimension of research in social science, we have in mind the social reality that is investigated. Stated differently, how do we view the social world?

As researchers, we always study something that can be recorded a reality or truth (Baptiste, 2001). We have different views as to how the reality should be understood and these tend to vary on a continuum ranging from an objective reality that exists independent of human conception to the notion of multiple, subjective realities that are socially constructed (Baptiste, 2001; Snape & Spencer, 2004). Within the range of ontological

perspectives, I embrace the continuous construction of reality, but also believe that it exist independently of peoples' understanding thereof. Thus, I view women leadership behaviour as real, which becomes meaningful as a result of people's understanding and experience of it. However, I believe that such behaviour is not only subjectively experienced, but that it is manifested within socially and contextually defined and accepted conventions which facilitate how people in the workplace construct women leaders and their relationships.

- **Epistemology**

“Questions about what we regard as knowledge or evidence of things in the social world are epistemological questions and, overall, are designed to help you to explore what kind of epistemological position your research expresses or implements. It is important to distinguish questions about the nature of evidence and knowledge—epistemological questions—from what are apparently more straightforward questions about how to collect, or what I shall call ‘generate’ data...Your epistemology is, literally, your theory of knowledge, and should therefore concern the principles and rules by which you decide whether and how social phenomena can be known, or how knowledge can be demonstrated. Different epistemologies have different things to say about these issues, and about what the status of knowledge can be...Epistemological questions should therefore direct you to a consideration of philosophical issues involved in working out exactly what you would count as evidence of knowledge of social things” (Mason, 2002: 16).

Ontology and epistemology is difficult to keep apart (Crotty, 2005). For example, as ontological stance, realism is closely related to the epistemological stance of objectivism. Bryman (2004: 11) emphasises the issue of whether we can and should study the social world according to the same main beliefs and procedures as that of the natural sciences, which is widely known as *positivism*¹.

Assuming realism entails objective truth which, in turn, supposes the utilization of particular methods assuring objective truth, i.e. objectivism (Crotty, 2005). Be it as it may, epistemology entails a “general set of assumptions about the best ways of inquiring into the nature of the world” (Thorpe & Lowe, 2002: 31). Applying Baptiste's (2001)

epistemological views when searching for truth, I believe that I will only be able to understand the behaviour of female leaders if I appreciate how people experience it and understand the meanings they ascribe to it. Therefore, people's viewpoints and expressions of women leaders' experience at the workplace are suitable sources of knowledge (Baptiste, 2001). I also believe that we are socialised in particular ways, which affect how we perceive and interpret our world and that our norms, values and beliefs are molded in the social context in which we were brought up. Here I adopt the epistemological notion of constructionism (Crotty, 2005). This is related to the ontological assumption of subtle realism proposing that reality exists, but cannot be known accurately but only what it means to the people who are part of it. Crotty (2005: 45) describes this aptly "...no object can be adequately described in isolation from the conscious being experiencing it, nor can any experience be adequately described in isolation from its object". Since we enter a world of meaning that already exists by birth, it is important to take cognizance of social constructionism. This world includes symbols of meaning, such as beliefs, values, and norms found in the particular social structures we found ourselves in, like culture, community, and family and serve as "...interpretative strategies whereby we construct meaning" (Crotty, 2005: 53). Within this context, I believe that we create reality as we live it day by day. Therefore our social world is not static, but forever changing. It is also my belief that as researchers, we cannot be objective or aloof, since we co-create whatever we study together with our research participants.

Having described my research philosophy, an important question arises: **What is my research orientation, differently put: where do I stand regarding the moments of qualitative research?** Since the respective moments of qualitative research tend to overlap and in particular their ontological and epistemological beliefs, locating oneself within a particular moment or qualitative paradigm is very difficult, as Barnard (2008) realised in her doctoral work: "I find it very difficult to locate myself within a particular paradigm as a result of overlapping philosophical assumptions and a variety of conceptualisations of various paradigms in qualitative research literature..." She correctly assumes that this dilemma closely resembles the era of the "blurred genres" in which various research traditions are at work providing a multitude of paradigms, theories, methodologies and criteria for good research; while new ways of inquiry, analysis and interpretation are continuously evolving. Nevertheless, following Crotty (2005) in that there

should be a consistent string of thought from the epistemological stance through the theoretical perspective to the methodology and methods used (Barnard, 2008), she concludes:

“I am predominantly post-positivistic in my approach, yet I have found myself sometimes to be positivistic in my orientation and at other stages more post-modern. I, for example, feel that the mere act of writing a thesis, arguing a particular methodology, applying rules or criteria to ensure data quality, writing up the data to present it as findings of the research, to some extent presumes a positivistic notion that human behaviour can be observed and accurately described. Further to this, the critical stance that I display within interpretivism as the guiding theoretical orientation to my research, can be linked to a postmodernist perspective (Bryant, 2002). Therefore, despite a predominantly post-positivistic epistemological and ontological stance reflecting a predominantly interpretive approach, I feel I cannot deny that philosophical assumptions about theory, reality, theory development and knowledge creation that range across positivism, post-positivism and post-modernism, is evident in this thesis. I would not like to deny this, as I believe some of the criticisms in any one approach is evident of the solutions in another and vice versa, thus making it very difficult to go through the research act in a purist manner. Having acknowledged that positivistic notions may be evident in this research, I do think the overall ambience of the thesis is towards the middle (post-positivistic) and other (postmodern) end of the philosophical continuum, assuming a predominant interpretive stance”.

How will I ensure “goodness” or quality in qualitative research?

“Getting acceptance for scientific work is partially an intellectual achievement and partially an ability to communicate and handle the social and political interaction with superiors, peers, and others who exert an influence over your career. Both aspects of quality, the intellectual dimension and the social dimension, have to be handled satisfactorily and in combination. The literature on science deals with the intellectual dimension almost solely and therefore gives a false impression of the scientific process” (Gummesson, 2000: 169).

Focusing on the *intellectual dimension*, Schurink (2004) points out that assessing qualitative research is no easy matter and has led to a number of heated debates and controversies amongst scholars. Briefly reviewing his own immersion with qualitative research over 30 years, he remembers that questions regarding the quality and credibility of qualitative studies have always been present. While some may argue: "So what's new? We all are used to our quantitative colleagues claiming that even our most carefully undertaken studies are at best nothing more than interesting explorations of phenomena (as in my case, exotic life styles) and worse, unscientific and a waste of money and energy, which make absolutely no contribution to social science methodology, theory or practice!" (Schurink, 2004: 3). From his "Lecture Thirteen: Evaluating qualitative research" (Schurink, 2004), it is clear that addressing quality in qualitative research moved from arguments that qualitative research is as scientific as quantitative research, but that the former should be made more refined and criteria more explicit, to establish scientific credibility (by compiling *natural histories*) to ensure trustworthiness, quality and authenticity.

Schurink (2005: 5) provides a pretty good visual display of the criteria used in judging qualitative research projects in the following Table of Daymond and Holloway (2002: 101) he adjusted and which incorporates, amongst others, views of Creswell (2003), Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Marshall and Rossman (1999):

Referring to the present status of the evaluation of qualitative research, Holloway and Wheeler (2002: 250) emphasise that qualitative researchers will in their work encounter at least two schools, namely (i) those colleagues who argue that reliability and validity should be retained, but can't simply be "translated" from quantitative to qualitative work; and (ii) those supporting trustworthiness and authenticity as alternative and parallel terms. They (Holloway & Wheeler, 2002: 250) also point out that qualitative researchers should take cognisance of these schools.

Table 1: Assessing the soundness of qualitative research projects

| PARADIGM | CRITERIA/BENCHMARKS/CANONS | |
|--|----------------------------------|---|
| Realist or positivist | Reliability and validity | Reliability, internal validity, generalizability, relevance, and objectivity |
| Interpretative | Authenticity and trustworthiness | Authenticity, credibility, transferability, dependability, reflexivity and confirmability |
| <p>Strategies: triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, external audit trail, natural history, “rich”, “thick” descriptions, and self-reflection clarifying researcher bias, presenting negative or discrepant information, spending prolonged time in the setting repeating observations and/or interviewing research participants</p> | | |

From the literature, it is clear that postmodernist orientated qualitative researchers propose yet other criteria for assessing such work, while some, like Holloway and Wheeler (2002), with their call of *criteriology*, even propose that standards be abandoned!

Autoethnographical approaches provide an important case in that their particular ontological and epistemological perspectives imply that strategies assessing the soundness of modernist qualitative research cannot be applied readily, if at all (see Garratt & Hodkinson, 1999; Sparkes, 2000). Does this imply that there are no guidelines for conducting good autoethnographic research? The answer is negative, since there are!ⁱⁱ Since people’s experiences do not occur in a vacuum as Holt (2003) points out, their “social worlds” may be demonstrated by matching them up with other’s similarly lived experiences. Ellis (1995: 318), the most prominent auto-ethnographer or Diva, applying evocative storytelling, states: “...the story’s ‘validity’ can be judged by whether it evokes in you, the reader, a feeling that the experience described is authentic, that it is believable and possible; the story’s generalizability can be judged by whether it speaks to you, the reader, about your experiences”.

Richardson (2000: 15–16) highlights the following criteria against which an autoethnographic study needs to be assessed: (i) *substantive contribution*: does the study contribute to our understanding of social life? (ii) *aesthetic merit*: does this piece succeeds

aesthetically; is the text artistically shaped, satisfyingly compelling and not boring? (iii) *reflexivity*: how does the author come to write the text? how has the author's subjectivity been both a narrator and actor of this text? (iv) *impactfulness*: does this affect me emotionally and/or intellectually and does it generate new questions or move me to action? and (v) *expresses a reality*: is this a lived experience? is it authentic?

I will consider the preceding views and proposed criteria for qualitative research applications carefully during the study and while this, in my view, is important, I also heed Ellis's (2004) warning that criteria are found rather than made!

2.5.2 Existing theoretical concepts

Using existing theoretical concepts like theory in qualitative research and having some construct as an outcome, remains thorny questions in qualitative research (Schurink, 2006). From the literature, it is clear that there has been little consensus amongst qualitative researchers about abstract constructs' place in qualitative research (Flinders & Mills 1993). Anfara and Mertz (2006: xiii), in their book entitled: *Theoretical frameworks in qualitative research*, write: "Students, as well as experienced researchers who employ qualitative methods, have trouble identifying and using theoretical frameworks in their research. This trouble is typically centred on finding a theoretical framework and understanding its pervasive effects on the process of conducting qualitative research". After having discussed the use of theory in qualitative research, Creswell (2003: 140) concludes:

"In qualitative research, inquirers employ theory as a broad explanation much like in quantitative research, such as in ethnographies. It may also be a theoretical lens or perspective that raises questions related to gender, class, or race, or some combination. Theory also appears as an end product of a qualitative study, a generated theory, a pattern, or a generalization that emerges inductively from data collection and analysis. Grounded theorists, for example, generate a theory 'grounded' in the views of participants and place it as the conclusion of their studies. Some qualitative studies do not include an explicit theory and present descriptive research of the central phenomenon".

Apart from using findings and insights from studies on the queen bee and women leaders' relationships in contextualising the study, I deliberately steered clear from an extensive literature study. There are certainly many excellent international works on leadership and women.

I will apply my tacit views of women leaders' relationships with colleagues. Finally, I will follow Ellis's (1995; 2004) approach, as well as the work of other autoethnographers, who incorporate existing theoretical concepts in their work.

Ellis (2004: 18) states: "I can't shake off the feeling that if I don't present formal theory, somehow my knowledge claims will be suspect". After writing "Final Negotiations..." (1995), she endured much criticism, because "...it did not offer a theory of something". However, subsequently she states that the book "...argue for story as analysis, for evocation in addition to representation as a goal for social science research, for generalization through the resonance of readers, and for opening up rather than closing down conversation." Elsewhere she alludes to the fact that autobiographical stories really make theory and history come alive and there is "...nothing more theoretical than a good story" (Ellis, 2004: 23).

In conclusion: to the extent that existing abstract constructs will be applied in the study, this will occur towards the end of the research process and writing up phase. From an autoethnographic perspective, once the stories have been written, I may relate insights gained from them with relevant abstract theoretical concepts, almost in analytical induction fashion (see Bogdan & Taylor, 2007).

In qualitative research, the researcher is regarded as the instrument of research (see, for example, Georges & Jones, 1980; Kvale, 1996; Terre Blance & Kelly, 2004): his or her presence in the lives of the subjects invited to partake in the research is crucial. Marshall and Rossman (1995: 59) put this as follows: "Whether that presence is sustained and intensive as in long-term ethnographies, or whether relatively brief but personal, as in in-depth interview studies, the researcher enters into the lives of the participants". This brings a range of strategic, ethical and personal issues to the fore. These are: (a) technical issues, i.e. issues addressing entry and efficiency in terms of researcher roles; and (b)

interpersonal concerns – issues capturing the ethical and personal dilemmas that normally arise during the execution of a study.

Two of the consequences of the close involvement of the researcher in qualitative research that needs attention at this point and to which I next turn, are deployment of self and research ethics.

2.5.3 Deployment of self

A third issue one needs to consider, is your involvement during the research. It is generally accepted in qualitative practice today that it is not possible for a researcher to stay detached during the research process and from his or her research participant's experiences and views. I considered the existing literature in this regard and in particular Patton's (1990) and Marshall and Rossman's (1999) views, and there is no doubt that I need to consider my own involvement in the study and in particular my experiences and views regarding relationships between women leaders very carefully. Two questions I need to resolve include: (i) How do I deal with "directiveness" during interviews? and (ii) How should I deploy my "self" whilst still conducting quality research?

2.5.4 Research ethics

"Ethical issues are the concerns and dilemmas that arise over the proper way to execute research, more specifically not to create harmful conditions for the subjects of inquiry, humans, in the research process" (Schurink, 2005: 43). I am very much aware of the big responsibility to be sensitive and respectful of research participants and their basic human rights and fully endorse the Ethical Code of the University of Stellenbosch. In particular, I will ensure the following throughout my study: (i) explicate the aim and objectives of the study as well as the procedures to be followed up front to everybody taking part in the research; (ii) make it clear to them that participating in the study is voluntary, and that should they for some reason want to withdraw from it, they have the right to voluntarily do so at any time; (iii) that everybody participating in the study complete an informed consent form I will compile together with my promoter; and (iv) that their privacy will be respected at all time and that everything they share will be treated as confidential.

As Schurink (2005) points out, research ethics is a complex matter to which there is unlikely to be clear solutions. He (Schurink, 2005: 44) believes that it is useful for researchers to follow a practical approach in which they ask questions and push themselves hard to reach answers: “The researcher needs to be honest about the purpose of his or her research. The study is likely to include not only the advancement of knowledge or understanding of some aspect of the social world, but also factors involving personal gain such as the achievement of a personal qualification, of a promotion, of some standing in a discipline (amongst colleagues, friends, rivals, relatives, etc.), and/or of some research funding.”

2.6 Research design

“(The) research design is a plan or blueprint of how you intend conducting the research” (Mouton, 2001: 55). In Bogdan and Biklen’s (2007: 49) words, it is the “researcher’s plan of how to proceed.” A number of qualitative research designs are recognized today. From a qualitative research perspective, these are often regarded as strategies of inquiryⁱⁱⁱ. Denzin and Lincoln (2000c) describe such strategy as comprising the skills, assumptions, enactments and material practices one uses when moving from a paradigm and a research design to collect and analyse data about your research subject. Be it as it may, in order to meet the aims of the study, I opted to use elements from three strategies, namely the case study, life history and autoethnography.

2.6.1 Case study

In immersing themselves with the activities of people to obtain an intimate familiarity with their worlds, qualitative researchers often use some form of case study **or casing**^{iv} Babbie and Mouton (2001) write as follows about the origins of the case study: “The origins of the case study are unclear. Some authors have traced it back to Bronislaw Malinowski in anthropology and Frédéric Le Play in French sociology, while other have nominated the members of the Chicago School in North American Sociology...as the real pioneers in the use of case study methods. ..(S)mall cases were studied by members of the Chicago school, who were interested mainly in unemployment, poverty, delinquency, and violence among immigrant groups, shortly after their arrival in North America. After this, the Chicago School was soon considered the leader in the field of the case study approach,

with members including Ernest W. Burgess, Herbert Blumer, Louis Worth, Robert Redfield, and Everett C. Hughes”.

Schurink (2004) believes that Becker and his co-workers in their *Boys in White* (1961), focusing their research on the effect of the Kansas Medical School on students' training and their subsequent experiences, provide one of the best examples of the utilization of the case study in qualitative research of the modernist period.

While casing has a long, distinguished history across many disciplines such as psychology, sociology, education, medicine, law and political science, human resources management and business studies (Creswell, 1998), it has always been debated to some extent resulting in it being used in varying degrees. In recent years, it has been used to an increasing extent and has, as Gummesson (2000) points out, been accepted progressively more as a scientific tool in management research.

But what does casing entails? Discussions of a case study abound in the literature, but the following two scholars' views arguably capture the essence of this strategy. Merriam (1988: 21) writes: "A qualitative case study is an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon or social unit". For Thomas (2004), a case study represents a detailed examination of a single example of a class of phenomena, that is, it strives towards an thorough examination of one or a small number of instances of the unit of research interest.

As is the case with qualitative research generally, case studies are typically used where little or nothing is known about the phenomenon of interest. When casing is used to unravel one person's life and to establish patterns in his or her life, actions and words of a person "...in the context of the complete case as a whole" (Neuman, 1997: 331) it entails a *life history*.

2.6.2 Life history

From the literature, it is clear that life history and its various terminologies have received substantial attention, especially in recent years. The considerable development in life story work abroad^v and the development of *biography, narrative, lives, oral histories,*

subjectivity, and *telling tales*, has resulted in a wide network of research since the early nineteen eighties, which, in turn, contributed to life story and auto/biographical work becoming more diverse and theoretically sophisticated (cf. Plummer, 2001).

Using life history has had a chequered history (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). Life histories have been around for many decades and can be traced back at least to autobiographies of American Indian chiefs that were collected by anthropologists at the beginning of the twentieth century, but as many scholars point out, the main landmark in the development of life history methods came in the 1920s in the work of Thomas and Znaniecki^{vi} in which they explored the experience of Polish peasants migrating to the United States. This pioneering work established the life history as a bona fide research device (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). As Schurink (1989) points out at the same time, the psychiatrists, Healy and Bronner, used life history in studying deviant behaviour, which sparked a series of life history studies that have become regarded as classical works (e.g., *The Gang* (Thrasher, 1928), *The Jack Roller* (Shaw, 1930) and Edwin Sutherland's *The Professional Thief* (Cornwell & Sutherland, 1937)). However, after reaching its peak in the 1930s, life histories for a number of reasons (because it is so time-consuming and labour-intensive) fell out of favour. After it reappeared on the social science scene a number of times during the past decades, it is currently embraced increasingly.

In the light of the preceding, it should certainly not be surprising that life history means many things to scholars (Tierney, 2000). For Taylor and Bogdan (1984: 143), a life history entails a description of "...the important events and experiences in a person's life" told to capture "...the person's own feelings, views, and perspectives". Plummer (2001), regarded as one of the most esteemed contemporary life history scholars, concludes that life history represents a plethora of terms including *autobiography*, *oral history*, *life story*^{vii}, *autoethnography*, *interpretive biography*, *classical biography*, *letters*, *journals*, *obituaries*, *life histories*^{ix} *self stories*, *personal testaments*, *life document*, and *biographies*^x.

Particularly useful is Plummer's (1983) division of long and short life-stories. The *long life-story* entails the full-length book account of one person's life. Here data is gathered over a long period of time, with guidance from the researcher with the research participant or storyteller either writing down episodes of his or her life or tape-recording them. This type

may be supported by using diaries, observing the storyteller's life, interviewing his or her friends, family and colleagues and by reading through letters and photographs. The *short life-story* requires less time, is generally quite focused and is typically presented as one of a series of stories. Information is gathered through in-depth interviews, usually taking between 30 minutes and 3 hours.

Atkinson (1998) points out that the life-story covers an individual's life as well as the role it plays in a community. He believes that it is through listening to stories that one gains context and recognises meaning, because in them the unspoken is made understandable, the hidden made visible, and the confusing is made clear. Beyleveld (2008) correctly concludes that the long life-story is more suitable for studying one person's life-story, while the short one is more appropriate for examining a particular topic by interviewing a number of people about their life experiences of that topic.

Simplifying the data generation of a life-story, Atkinson (1998) points out that its aim is to put together the central elements, events and beliefs in a person's life; integrating them into a whole. The purpose of this is to learn from them, to teach others about them and to remind the rest of the community what is important about them in life. A story told in this manner puts them into a narrative form. This means that the story has a plot and doesn't merely represent a series of events. For example, the plot illustrates changes the teller went through, how situations were approached and whether the story entails a drama, comedy, tragedy, adventure or some combination of these. Consequently, it becomes important when collecting data to be on the look out for submerged stories that may shed light on the individual. Also, and particularly important, a life-story necessitates reflection on events and experiences that the teller may not have explicated.

Both Atkinson (1998) and Plummer (1983; 2001) discuss the setting of a life-story. In referring to the life-course paradigm, Plummer (1983) points to the following four key elements: (i) the location of lives in time and space; (ii) the linking of the different lives; (iii) the importance of human agency and meanings; and (iv) individual goals in the timing of a life. Also useful here are the following conceptual distinctions as defined by life-course research (Plummer, 1983):

- **Historical time line:** Plot the specific historical timeframe in which a life occurs. This includes cultural background and demographics.
- **Age cohort generation:** To which group of people does this life belong? Is it a group of people born in a specified period or number of years?
- **Generation cohort perspective:** This is the more subjective sense that people acquire of belonging to a particular age reference group through which they may make sense of their memories and identities.
- **Chronological age:** Linked to the historical features is the changing sequencing and phasing of a life course. A basic starting point is the *chronological age* and determining the "seasons of life". It is also important to define the *subjective age* (how old a person feels), *interpersonal age* (how old others think you are) and *social age* (the age roles you play).
- **Life trajectory or life course:** This is a pathway defined by the ageing process or by movement across the age structure. Within this life trajectory, we can work through **critical life events** (from major events such as death and divorce to less significant events), working through *central life themes* (like love, work, and play) and how all of these link up with *life cycles* (birth to retirement) (Beyleveld, 2008).

2.6.3 Autoethnography

The Diva of autoethnography, Ellis (1995: 3), defines autoethnography as follows: “ (It is)...a multilayered, intertextual case study that integrates private and social experience and ties autobiographical to sociological writing...”. Elsewhere she (Ellis, 2004) writes that autoethnography is a strategy which entails one looking both inwards and outwards. It is simultaneously research, writing, story and method connecting the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social and political. It also features concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness and introspection which are portrayed in dialogue, scenes, characterisation and plot.

Autoethnography puts the self at the centre of sociological observation and analysis (Warren & Karner, 2005; Esterberg, 2003) and strives towards understanding the researcher’s own experiences by relating the story while being able to reflect on these experiences (Ellis, 2000). For Blenkinsopp (2006: 10) the approach represents developing a very rich life history which has: “...the practical benefit of having a participant (the

researcher) who is willing and able to write and re-write his/her career story on demand in pursuance of a deeper understanding of how processes (by which emotion impacts on career) unfold”.

Ellis (2004) distinguishes various approaches to autoethnography ranging from personal ethnography, reflexive ethnography, systematic sociological introspection, narrative inquiry to biographical methods. She (Ellis, 2004) points out that reflexive ethnography illuminates the culture under study by using the researcher’s personal experience. These “...exist along a continuum ranging from starting research from one’s own biography, to ethnographies where the researcher’s life is actually studied along with other participants’ lives” (Ellis, 2004: 46-47).

In conclusion: I will apply two well-known qualitative strategies, casing and life history, as well as a more recently developed one, autoethnography, in my study. But how do I plan dealing with the research process?

2.6.4 Key research process decisions

In answering the research questions and fulfilling the aim and objectives, a number of decisions must be taken of which the following are key:

- **Selecting lives: Who to study?**

Different to quantitative research designs typically requiring large samples from which generalisations are drawn, in qualitative strategies researchers are searching for small groups of people who have experiences of the research topic. With regard to life histories, researchers basically have two selection options, namely *intensity sampling*- tracing and convincing one or more key informants who have insight into the research topic; or *critical case sampling*- finding and obtaining access to stories offering detailed information on key critical experiences (Byleveld, 2008). In life histories, selecting relevant material are normally accomplished as Plummer (1983, 2001) points out by chance, luck and being pragmatic, or by selective sampling based on abstract theoretical principles.

More particularly, I will apply *purposeful sampling* (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) in tracing and obtaining access to women who have leadership experience in the corporate world and whose experiences and viewpoints I can study in order to contribute to gaining more

knowledge. In addition to myself, I will be searching for women leaders depending on the candidates I manage to trace (I intend utilising networks of acquaintances in the corporate world as well as placing advertisements in local business journals), in close consultation with my promoter candidates, considering the most suitable storytellers for this study. Career span, insight and exposure to leadership, social demographic features like race, age, gender and cultural grouping will be taken into consideration.

I decided not to demarcate the storytellers to any established business or a section or division of a firm, but to trace and persuade a small number of women (**myself and three women**) representative of South African business leaders to participate in the study. Therefore I opted for a *collective multiple, or comparative case study*^{xi} that would enable examining leadership experiences of local women with the intention of examining the queen bee syndrome, expanding leadership knowledge and simultaneously offering guidelines of improving relationship between women leaders.

- **Determining life-story type**

I opted for the *topical life document* enabling the study of leadership experiences in both my own and the other women's lives. In soliciting these documents, I will, as Plummer (2001) points out of necessity seduce, coax and interrogate these documents out of my own life and that of my research participants or story writers.

- **Selecting lived events in my story and research participants**

Following from the preceding, I will select particular periods from my life, as well as the other women's lives, since writing about our lives from birth to where we find ourselves at the time of writing (a comprehensive autobiography; see Tlou, 2007) entails a mammoth, if not a life-long task.

As should be clear by now, I intend to deal with experiences of leadership during working careers. More particularly, I will follow Ellis's *Final negotiations: a story of love, loss, and chronic illness* (1995), in selecting particular periods from our lives. Ellis (2004: 365) advises: "Select a story that can be covered in the page limit suggested. This may mean that you have to select one or two events out of a series of events. A detailed description of a few events is better than a more generalized description of many events".

With regard to my research participants, I intend using their stories as an addition to my story. As already indicated, I have decided to select three women leaders.

Since I am interested in individual perceptions and experiences, it is of the utmost importance that my participants are eloquent and articulate. In addition, they must be willing to speak in honesty about their perceptions and experiences. It goes without saying that rapport and reciprocity between me as the researcher and interviewer, and my participants is crucial. The importance of rapport and reciprocity in interactive qualitative research methods is highlighted by Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006: 158) when they state that it: "is vital to the successful interview process".

- **Collecting and capturing relevant material and writing autoethnography**

In contemporary qualitative inquiry when conducting research, one needs to compile field notes of one's experiences. It is understandable that, when deciding to write a personal narrative about some experiences in one's life, you seldom have notes or documents available, since you didn't, at the time you went through these experiences, think to write them down. Of course, if you happen to be a person who keeps a diary or write poems, you will have such material and must consider yourself very fortunate indeed. Be it as it may, when you set out on your study, you need to, in the tradition of ethnography, start keeping field notes as systematic and rigorously as you possibly can.

"Because of the frailties of human memory, ethnographers have to take notes based on their observations. These should be fairly detailed summaries of events and behaviour and the researcher's initial reflections on them. The notes need to specify key dimensions of whatever is observed or heard (Bryman, 2004: 306). Esterberg (2002: 73) advises that detailed field notes be written directly after any interview and emphasises the following matters to be considered: the setting, the appearance of the participant, any disturbances in the environment, as well as any specific details about the interaction that stands out. Finally, Esterberg (2002: 74) believes it important to note personal impressions of how the interview went. Finally, Ellis and Bochner (2002: 172) add that ethnographic field notes should be "interpretative" rather than "observational".

I will, as far as possible, use the preceding scholars' advice and guidelines in the study, but will also utilise photos and documents during compiling field notes. These photographs, as well as unsolicited documents, are important to assist me and the story writers in recalling particular experiences during field note writing.

As with data collection purposes in social research generally and qualitative research particularly, interviewing are used in conducting life histories. This is in contrast to the Chicago tradition of qualitative research where life history data would be obtained by researchers requesting subjects to write down their experiences. Since the nineteen sixties life history researchers have for the most part compiled such stories by carefully editing transcripts of data recorded during series of in-depth interviews (see Bogdan, 1974). In addition, while certainly not often used both ways of collecting life history are also found. Schurink (1989), for example, constructed Dha'kar's life history by using the recollections of his life he wrote down and audio taped at his request as well as data he obtained during interviews with his friend.

More particularly, I will explain the following options and other important considerations with the women:

- Interviewing and transcripts where I audio record interviews, or they record their experiences after which either of us transcribe them. I will point out to them that deciding as to who will be responsible for the transcribing the tapes are very important and that these persons will be given guidelines Prof Schurink and I will put together. I will also stress the importance of me understanding their experiences and views as comprehensively as possible and that we need to devise ways of ensuring that I could request elaboration and clarity on possible unclear aspects. We will also discuss the possibility of them writing or typing up their stories and how I can solicit additional information from them regarding these accounts.
- Interviews with some colleagues. I will explain to them the importance of obtaining material from their peers but that this is only possible if they are willing to allow this.
- Looking over personal documents such as letters, diaries and photographs. Again, I will explain to the women the value of these data sources.

Beyleveld (2006) summarises what needs to be discussed at the outset between life histories and their research participants aptly. Amongst others, it is (i) necessary to keep in mind that while utilising multiple methods is ideal from a social science perspective this is demanding on story tellers' time; (ii) it must be appreciated that a participant might not be at ease with the researcher talking about personal detail with others some of which may be prominent in his/her life and that therefore it is crucial that there is agreement on these aspects upfront and that both parties are happy with the strategies to be employed; and (iii) that provision must be made for the researcher to deploy particular strategies to comply to certain "soundness/quality" requirements of life history research such as demonstrating that sufficient and authentic detail information were obtained.

- **Analysing the material**

It is important to note at this point that compiling field notes already entails interpreting events, activities and emotions, a process which, similarly to what Taylor and Bogdan (1998: 140) write, does not entail a mechanical or technical one, but rather "inductive reasoning, thinking, and theorizing". They (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998) further state that due to the intuitive and inductive nature of qualitative data analysis, most researchers choose to analyse and code their own data. According to Taylor and Bogdan (1998) data analysis consist of three specific activities: the first entails scrutinizing the data for themes, concepts and propositions; the second requires coding the data and refining one's understanding of the subject matter, and the final activity involves, understanding the data in the context it were collected.

Although there is some similarity between the preceding view of analysing qualitative data, autoethnographers and other scholars working with stories make use of one or other form of *narrative analysis* when interpreting them. Ellis (2004) has developed particular strategies, which I intend to study thoroughly in the course of the study. However, eventually I will most probably develop my own.

It is also important to take cognisance of existing software with which qualitative data may be to systematised in order to facilitate analysis. I do not intent using any of these packages since I can't see how they may contribute to the requirements of good personal

narratives. In fact, they may hinder writing "...evocatively, engagingly, and passionately, so that the reader will experience..." (Ellis, 2004: 365) what one experienced.

- **Data presentation and writing autoethnography**

Since the middle of the 1980's particularly quite some attention has been devoted to the qualitative writing process with some researchers even having written entire books on the writing of qualitative research (see Bogdan & Taylor, 1998). Despite this attention there is at present, still little uniformity in the manner in which qualitative researchers report their work (see Sparkes, 2002).

To the extent that the study will be *postmodernist* and in particular applying an autoethnographic perspective, I will be using what may be regarded as untraditional, if not controversial, writing styles. These include short stories, art, photography, personal essays, fiction and literature, diaries, plays, dance, film and video, music, and museum and art installations (see Ellis, 2004). For example, Sparkes (2002) in building on the work of Von Maanen (1988) describes the following different styles of qualitative research writing:

- The *realist tale*, which generally entails scientific writing.
- *Confessional tales* representing the researcher's voice and concerns for what happens during actual fieldwork.
- *Autoethnographies* relying on systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall allows the researcher to relate stories regarding their own lived experiences; relating the personal to the cultural.
- *Poetic representation* where interviews are written up as poems including the speakers' pauses, repetitions, alliterations, narrative strategies as well as rhythms.
- *Ethno-drama* transforming data into a theatrical script. This style's strength lies in its ability to capture lived experiences, as well as its ability to reach wider audiences and remain true to life.
- *Fictional representation* where two types may be demarcated, *ethnographic fiction* where the representation is fictional, but the data on which it is based, are factual, and *creative fiction* where the focus is on: "crafting an engaging, evocative and informative story."

However, in addition to the experiential writing like the autoethnographic and additional writing styles I will also write in more traditional modernist writing styles (for example, *realist* and *confessional tales*).

I will use selected life experiences. I will offer a brief overview of my life in concluding the research proposal.

3. ABOUT ME

I am the Head of Leadership Studies at the University of Stellenbosch Business School and was appointed as Associate Professor. I returned from London during 2006 where I held the position of HR Director, UK Banking, for Barclays PLC. Prior to this, I was Group Executive Director of ABSA, managing a portfolio that included Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), Group People Management, Group Marketing, and Group Communications and Public Affairs. Over a period of nearly twenty years I have distinguished myself as a people management specialist and a skilled communicator. My academic career has included three Master's degrees and the attainment of several international management diplomas.

I am a qualified industrial psychologist. I hold an MA degree in Psychology from Pretoria University, an MBA from the University of Stellenbosch Business School (*cum laude*) and an international Master's degree in Consulting and Coaching for Change from the prestigious HEC (HAUTES ETUDES COMMERCIALES) Business School in France.

During 2000/2001, I was chairperson of the Institute of Bankers in South Africa, the first woman to hold this position since its inception in 1904. In 2004 I was elected chairperson of BANKMED, the first woman to have been either the vice-chairperson or chairperson of BANKMED. I was a finalist in the 2000 Boss of the Year of South Africa competition. In 2006 the University of Stellenbosch Business School recognized me with the USB Alumnus award.

The sustained excellence of my leadership was well demonstrated by the success of ABSA People Management which, in both 2002 and 2003, achieved for ABSA the accolade of top position in the annual "Best Companies to Work For" competition

sponsored by Deloitte & Touche Human Capital Corporation and the *Financial Mail*. I was also responsible for ABSA's strong focus on employment equity and of valuing diversity as sound business practice; an approach that supports BEE with regard to broad-based empowerment and development of the Group's employees.

I am a Director of the ABSA Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees (KKNK) and a member of the Board of Directors of Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study (STIAS). I serve on the Council of North-West University and am a member of BANKMED Board of Trustees.

My interests include my passion for travelling, especially Paris and other European cities, cycling, reading, opera and classical music.

I also acquired a historic small farm in Prince Albert. During 2007, I renovated the historic building (1850) and built a small theatre that can seat 100 people. This theatre and conference centre will be used as a cultural centre for the Prince Albert Community.

To me, one of the most important things about being a woman in a still male-dominated business world is to realise that I have the power of choice as to how I want to be seen and treated. I don't have to buy into other people's stereotypes about women or their opinions about me. I am responsible for my own "branding" and my own self-definition – and people will respond to me according to what I think about myself. As Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "No-one can make you feel inferior without your consent."

The American writer, Sherry Argov (2002), has useful advice for women who are trying to define themselves and hold their own in personal and business relationships. In a book entitled, "Why men love bitches", she shows why strong women who can stand up for themselves attract others, command respect and can achieve whatever they put their minds to by living life on their own terms.

Argov (2002) uses the term "bitch" in a particular way – she is talking about the "new and improved bitch", not the old version who may be regarded as someone who is abrasive, mean and nagging – all negative female stereotypes. This is how she defines the new and improved version:

A woman who won't bang her head against the wall obsessing over someone else's opinion. She understands that, if someone does not approve of her, it's just one person's opinion; therefore, it's of no real importance. She doesn't try to live up to anyone else's standards – only her own.

According to Argov (2002), a strong woman is defined from within, not by the opinions and expectations of others – she chooses her own destination and makes her own decisions about her career, dreams and aspirations. No one can take away this choice. We have to define ourselves from within and to set our own goals and standards.

Defining ourselves from within also means that we should pay attention to the different spheres of our being, and not neglect parts of ourselves in the pursuit of career success. As human beings, we have spiritual, emotional, intellectual and physical lives and we cannot allow our working lives to dominate to such an extent that we ignore our other needs. This is the most difficult balancing act – to excel at our work, as well as in our lives and relationships.

I don't have the answer to how one should achieve this – I can only explain what has worked for me.

Define what is important to you in life, prioritise according to that, and make time for the priorities you have chosen. Work is important, but we should keep in mind that we are disposable – the organisation and the workplace will be able to get along without us. The poet T.S. Elliot has said in another context, "Teach us to care and not to care". This apparent paradox also says to me something about a healthy approach to our work – of course we will do our best and strive to excel at it, but at the same time keeping in mind that our work is only part of who we are.

A sense of humour is essential. If we can laugh at ourselves and the absurdities we often encounter in the workplace, it helps us to maintain balance and a sense of perspective.

It is also important to make time to break away now and then and to treat ourselves to interesting and enriching experiences.

We don't have to try to be superwoman, and especially not superwoman as defined to us by society and the media. To me, the challenge is rather to define ourselves as individuals, to decide what our priorities are in our working and personal lives, and to work at balancing the priorities we have chosen. We cannot be everything to everybody – we have to make choices and focus our energies on the priorities we have chosen. We don't all have to do things in the same way – you can only contribute optimally if you feel free to be yourself.

Why have I decided on this topic for my PhD?

Being in a senior leadership position in the business world in South Africa and the UK, I was in a good position to observe the behaviour of women at work – in the boardroom specifically – and I have always said that, if I ever should do a PhD, this will be the topic.

4. STRUCTURE OF THESIS

I anticipate the following structure:

Chapter 1: Background to the study.

Chapter 2: Explicating and assessing the study's methodology.

Chapter 3: The data/findings.

Chapter 4: Reviewing the literature.

Chapter 5: Discussion and interpretation of the data/findings.

Chapter 6: Synopsis, conclusion and recommendations.

5. TIME FRAMES AND DELIVERABLES

| | Area | Deliverable | Start date | Completion date |
|---|--|---|------------|------------------|
| 1 | Finalizing the research proposal | Document | 2007 | Oct 2008 |
| 2 | Unpacking the study in order to prepare for the interviews | Discussion document | 2008 | Mar 2009 |
| 3 | Research selection contracting | participant and informed consent form | 2008 | May 2008 |
| 4 | Conducting interviews | | 2009 | Jul/Aug/Sep 2009 |
| Chapter 1: Contextualizing the study | | Draft Chapter | 2008 | Feb 2009 |
| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revised chapter incorporating comments • Language editing | | |
| Chapter 2: Explicating and assessing the study's methodology | | Draft chapter | Nov 2008 | Jul 2009 |
| | | Final chapter | | Nov 2009 |
| Chapter 3: The data/findings | | Draft chapter | Oct 2009 | Dec 2009 |
| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revised chapter incorporating promoter comments • Language editing | | |
| Chapter 4: Review the literature | | Draft chapter | 2008 | Jul 2010 |
| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revised chapter incorporating promoter comments | | |

| | | | |
|--|--|----------|----------|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language editing | | |
| Chapter 5: Discussion and Interpretation of the data/findings | Draft chapter | Jan 2010 | May 2010 |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revised chapter incorporating promoter comments • Language editing | | Jul 2010 |
| Chapter 6: Synopsis, conclusion and recommendations | Draft chapter | Aug 2010 | Oct 2010 |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revised chapter incorporating promoter comments • Language editing | | |
| Submission of Thesis to promoter | Draft | | Nov 2010 |
| Final Document | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Final thesis to promoter • Final minor adjustments and language editing | | |

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END NOTES

ⁱ Bryman (2004: 11) writes about this tradition: “Positivism is an epistemological position that advocates the application of the methods of the natural sciences to the study of social reality and beyond. But the term stretches beyond this principle, though the constituent elements vary between authors”.

ⁱⁱ See, for example, Sparkes (2002), Jones (2005) and Avraamides (2007).

ⁱⁱⁱ Another term used in this context is “research traditions” (Creswell, 1998) which include: biography, phenomenology, GT, ethnography and case studies.

^{iv} *Casing* is increasingly found as synonym for case study or studies, especially amongst American scholars.

^v The life history has been used increasingly in South Africa (see for example, Schurink, 1989; Tlou 2006; Botes, 2006; Bester, 2007 & Beyleveld, 2008).

^{vi} *The Polish peasant in Europe and America in 1918* (Plummer 1983: 2001).

^{vii} Plummer (2001) sees “life story” as an account of one person's life in that person’s own words. Goodson and Sikes (2001: 17) distinguish between life story and life history: “The rendering of lived experience into a ‘life story’ is one interpretive layer, but the move to ‘life history’ adds a second layer and a further interpretation”.

^{viii} Studying a life or a segment of it as reported by the person him or herself.

^{ix} Studying how something happened in the life of an individual or a group.

^x Plummer (2001) cautions that psychobiographies and psychohistories do not entail first person accounts since these are mainly re-readings and interpretations based on psychodynamic models.

^{xi} Different to the intrinsic case study where one wishes to obtain a better understanding of a particular case of particular interest and wants to examine it primarily to provide insight into an issue or to redraw a generalisation, or simply to use it to illustrate a particular issue with the collective case study one studies several cases in order to learn more about the particular phenomenon or issue (Stake, 1994 & 2000).