CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter examines how the research was operationalised (put into practice) and what has been learned from the experience of conducting research. It details the methodology used in order to answer the question ‘how effective has academic staff transformation been at the University of Cape Town and the University of the Witwatersrand?’ It discusses the research methods employed, provides a background sketch to participants, examines sampling methods, methods of analysis, discusses problems encountered, provides an ethics appraisal, and discusses the experiential aspects of research.

Data collection methods

As both the research question and the definition of transformation employed are very broad, it was necessary to apply a flexible methodology that would tap into many different sources of information both institutional and experiential. This necessitated the collection of institutional documents and news clippings about each institution; interviewing staff in executive, academic, and transformation positions; and where possible, attending institutional functions.

The discussion on data collection methods has been organised into three sub-sections: the first being, the rationale for the methods used; second, a background sketch to participants is provided; and finally, sampling, representativity, and generalisability are discussed.

Rationale for methods used

The aim of the research was to develop both a broad and deep understanding of the academic workplace and of the transformation of academic staff in post-apartheid South Africa. Therefore, the nature of the research necessitated the collection and analysis of a variety of data, both qualitative and quantitative. The data that informs this research has been drawn from primary and secondary sources (such as national legislation, official university documents, academic literature/reports/theses, newspaper articles, and other
publications by higher education organisations). Additionally, university employment statistics, national and provincial demographic and educational statistics have also been consulted. All of this secondary material has been used for contextual and referential purposes within the analysis. The bulk of the findings however, reflect upon primary data that was collected during the course of this research and that speaks to the perceptions, experiences, and the practice of transformation at UCT and Wits.

In carrying out the research, I employed a case study design in which I hoped to describe, explain and compare the perceptions and experiences of academic staff at UCT and Wits. In keeping with this design type, it was necessary to gather much contextual information, in addition to both individual and collective perspectives. This allowed for the collection of individual and group stories and the cultural frames through which they have been constructed – which aid in understanding and interpretation (Miller & Glassner in Silverman, 2000: 124 - 5). Furthermore, this multi-pronged approach allows for the emergence of a multi-dimensional perspective of each unit, and grounds the particularities of each case, thereby contributing to theory generation and testing (de Vaus, 2001: 235).

Due to the ‘gap’ that I had identified in earlier work on transformation of academic staff², the use of in-depth interviews was deemed the most appropriate for the collection of both individual and collective perspectives on transformation and the experiences of working within a university. This decision was made on the grounds that semi-structured in-depth interviews have the potential to yield great flexibility, to secure personal comfort/feeling of ease, and allow for the preservation of anonymity, as well as allowing the time and space for participants to shape the interview in the direction that concerns or interests them the most (Greenstein, 2003:57). Furthermore, Fontana and Frey, and Atkinson suggest that a flexible, adaptable, non-imposing, and negotiated approach is the best method to employ in order to facilitate the emergence of the ‘truly’ particular and individualistic understandings of participants (Fontana & Frey, 2000: 654 and Atkinson, 2002: 131).
The operationalisation of these ideals was done through the use of an interview schedule that allowed for interviewer guidance and flexibility, so that the participants main concerns could also drive the process and shape the research. This was deemed to be of crucial importance, as I wanted the interview data to be reflective of participants’ experiences and perceptions rather than being overwhelmingly influenced by the researcher’s concerns. This flexibility of form also allowed for the modification and further exploration of participants’ concerns according to information revealed by participants. In addition, I also hoped to dispel some of the traditional power relations between interviewer and interviewee by allowing for a flexible, participant-centred discussion.

In opting for semi-structured interviews, I had hoped to gain deep and contextualised understandings, “thick descriptions”, and I hoped to understand how participants came to understand their experiences within the university and the process of change. In so doing, I sought to learn what factors influenced and shaped their understandings. Finally, I hoped to gain insight into how participants simultaneously hold complex and contradictory perspectives (Johnson, 2002: 105 - 107). Understandings of this nature would clearly facilitate the development of a dialogue between the theoretical and empirical considerations, and would ultimately impact upon the conclusions reached.

Whilst the use of interviews allowed for considerable exploration of various individual and collective perspectives on transformation - as an ideology and as practice, I felt that there were still some gaps in how these various perspectives interacted together in public spaces within the university. Therefore, it was essential to incorporate observation into the research. One of the strengths of non-participant observation, is that it allows for the observation of ‘transformation in practice’ and for the qualification and/or challenging of information derived from interviews.

Observation allows for the identification and explanation of discrepancies in ‘what is said’ and ‘what is done’ (Greenstein, 2003: 3 and Robson, 2002: 310). Whilst the participants who were observed were, most of the time, not the participants who were
interviewed, this triangulation of methods allowed for a dialogue between collective perspectives as spoken about and as acted out in practice, therefore allowing for a more complex understanding of reality. Thus non-participant observation was a crucial element to this research, in that it facilitated the exploration of the topic whilst supporting and supplementing data derived from interviews (Robson, 2002: 311 - 312). The use of in-depth interviews and non-participant observation both contributed significantly to the aims of the case study design.

The particulars of the research process

During the time of fieldwork, I was an intern at the Sociology of Work Unit (SWOP) and received funding from the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) to undertake this research. The fieldwork for this research report has spanned two years, although it was conducted intermittently. The first period of fieldwork was conducted at Wits between August and October 2003, followed by supplementary interviews during August and September 2004. Fieldwork was also conducted in two stints at UCT, one week in August and two weeks in September 2004.

A total of 50 interviews were conducted; 24 at UCT and 26 at Wits. Interviews were conducted with academics, senior executives, transformation officials and activists, and participants on institutional programmes such as Growing our own Timber, Glass Busters, and Wonder Women at Wits. At Wits, the research also included non-participant observation at the installation of the Vice Chancellor, Professor Loyiso Nongxa, in addition to attendance at three transformation seminars run by the Transformation and Employment Equity Office (T&EE) and the Centre for Learning and Teaching Development (CLTD). Unfortunately, I was unable to attend any public/institutional events/forums whilst at UCT, and primary research data for UCT is therefore limited to interviews.

Whilst participants were assured of confidentiality and that their identity would remain anonymous (in terms of name and department), I have provided some background information (race, gender, location, and highest qualification attained at the time of
interview) for the purpose of contextualising participants’ backgrounds and shedding some light on the sample particulars.

**Participant background information**

As one can see below, white women outnumber all other groups at both institutions, totalling 34 percent of the whole sample (38 percent at Wits and 29 percent at UCT). However, if one uses race as a category of comparison and uses the expanded notion of black, then the number of white and black participants at UCT are equal (50 percent/50 percent), whilst the Wits’ sample still remains skewed by more white participants (62 percent) than black participants (38 percent). At UCT, there is some representation of all groups, as participants of each race and gender category were present. At Wits however, Indian men remain unrepresented⁴.

Table 3: Participants by ‘race’ and gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>African women</th>
<th>African men</th>
<th>Coloured women</th>
<th>Coloured men</th>
<th>Indian women</th>
<th>Indian men</th>
<th>White women</th>
<th>White men</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UCT</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wits</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In terms of location, participants spanned each faculty (see below). The bulk of participants at UCT were located within Humanities, Engineering and the Built Environment, and the ‘Other’ category (referring to those located outside of faculties, or in jobs classified as other than academic [mostly in transformation related areas or in executive positions from DVC and above]), together accounting for 62 percent of the UCT sample. Meanwhile, participants at Wits from Humanities, Science, and the ‘Other’ group predominate, accounting for 80 percent of the sample.
Table 4: Participants by faculty location

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>CHED</th>
<th>COMM/CLM</th>
<th>EBE</th>
<th>HS</th>
<th>HUM</th>
<th>SCI</th>
<th>OTHER</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UCT</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wits</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Whilst academics were the main focus of the research, it was also crucial to speak to people involved in transformation and the senior executive – who account for 36 percent of the total sample. These positions have been clustered as ‘other’ in the charts (with the exception of deans who have been clustered with their faculty).

Table 5: Participants categorised as non-academic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>UCT</th>
<th>WITS</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dean</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DVC</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VC</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trans but not SET</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data was also gathered on participant’s highest qualification/title at the time of the interview, and was grouped into three categories: Masters, PhD, and Professor. Whilst not an accurate and fool-proof measure, this does give some indication of the relative levels of participants within the academic hierarchy. At UCT, participants with PhDs constitute the majority (55 percent), whilst at Wits this category represents only 31 percent, together accounting for 41 percent of the total sample. Meanwhile, participants with a Masters degree as their highest qualification account for 38 percent of the Wits sample and only 18 percent of the UCT sample, averaging out at 28 percent of the total sample. Lastly, Professors account for 31 percent of the Wits sample, 27 percent of the UCT sample, and 29 percent of the total sample.
Table 6: Non-professorial staff by highest qualification & professorial staff

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Masters</th>
<th>PhD</th>
<th>Professor</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UCT</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wits</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sampling**

In order for the research to fulfil its aim of being both descriptive and exploratory, it was necessary that a wide variety of perceptions and experiences be sourced. It was also vital to access some of the more marginal voices on campus, and a random (representative) sample was thus ruled out, due to its systemic bias towards the majority and thus, the dominant thought(s). Although this bias could have been eliminated through statistical modification and purposeful over-representation of marginal groups in selection, this method makes certain assumptions about positionality and voice that are likely to be essentialist and limiting.

Therefore a non-random sample was deemed preferable, and its value was enhanced through the use of purposive and snowballing methods of selection. These methods allow for the identification of key sources and influential people, who by their very occupation deal with transformation-related issues, and who add value to the study because of the depth and breadth of their knowledge. Whilst the selection of people in transformation-related occupations was fairly self-evident and straightforward, the selection of academics was slightly more difficult and necessitated preliminary scoping and the identification of key academics with wide institutional knowledge who could offer suggestions about who to approach.

Snowballing also allowed for the exploration of networks and was particularly useful in accessing people a wide variety of opinion. This method was crucial for the fieldwork in Cape Town. Given the time constraints, this method allowed me to reach many vital people in a short time, through capitalising on institutional knowledge which key members of each community are privy to. Whilst snowballing has been critiqued for its tendency to be network-bound, this was reduced in this instance as snowballing branched
out from a multitude of initial purposive contacts and hence moved in various directions. Although, of course, such methodology is unable to capture the full extent of opinion and experience within the population - but this is a general weakness of qualitative research. In practice, snowballing often also became purposeful in that new participants were sought on the basis of race, gender, occupational position, location, transformation-related practice, and/or known ideological position – in order that a wide spread of participants be accessed.

Whilst the whole study may not be replicable, the use of purposive sampling as a first guide to locating initial participants (which account for 36 percent of the total sample) adds credibility to the research. These sampling methods cannot assure representivity, and I make no claim to this, as the sample is not randomly selected and is thus not statistically representative of the total population of academic staff.

In qualitative research, theoretical generalisability as opposed to statistical generalisability is of importance (de Vaus, 2001: 237 - 239). Theoretical generalisability is the rigorous testing of theoretical assumptions and deductions in order to establish whether the findings, conclusions, and theoretical contributions hold up in different contexts. If they do not, then this method allows for the highlighting of specifics/particularities that make each case unique – hence this strengthens one’s theoretical position/contribution. In order to fully explore both sites and to rigorously test my assumptions, it was necessary to ensure theoretical replication through the selection of a wide variety of participants (Yin in de Vaus, 2001: 239). Discussion of this topic is resumed within the analysis section.

Despite a more-or-less similar strategy employed at each institution, the application of purposive and snowballing methods had different results. At Wits, most participants (76 percent) were practitioners or participants in institutional transformation programmes, or had some level of responsibility for transformation in their job. At UCT, 63 percent of those interviewed were inextricably linked to transformation, whilst the remaining 37 percent were strictly academics.
The predominance of transformation participants at Wits is due to the extended period of fieldwork, in which I was able to explore many of the transformation projects and speak to many coordinators and participants on these programmes. At UCT time constraints and restricted access prevented the same level of project exploration. On the other hand, however, a more thorough analysis of the collective generalist position was possible than had been at Wits. This crucial difference, whilst introducing limitations to the research, is not viewed as problematic because it adds further dimension and scope to the findings as it reflects on both intentionally structured and unstructured interaction with the transformation process (to be elaborated on later).

**Analysis**

The analysis of the research data took several forms and occurred throughout the research process. The analysis incorporated a dialogue between empirical data (collected during the fieldwork) and conceptual issues (which emerged from literature). This ongoing analysis allowed for rigour to be built into the process and for further testing through methodical processing of the data.

Firstly, the initial analysis was conducted in tandem with the work done on the literature review and was comprised of an analysis of secondary material in the public domain. This was crucial in determining the theoretical outlook, focus areas, priorities, assumptions, connections, and silences in existing data; thus allowing for the carving out of a research niche through the identification of gaps in the literature. At this stage, non-participant observation had begun, and I was able to collect general data whilst also gathering information on how participants’ speech and interaction compared to what was said in the literature. Hence, in this initial stage, the analysis was given direction through the analysis of literature in conversation with what was being acted out on the public stage at Wits.

An interview schedule was used in all interviews, and some preliminary analysis occurred after each interview, by taking note of ambiguities, questions, and interesting phenomena. In this way I was able to early on detect silences, points of convergence or divergence, and aspects that needed follow-up within interview material, and was able to incorporate these
into subsequent interviews. In this way, I partially engaged with Glasser and Strauss’ constant comparative method and what Miles and Huberman call ‘early analysis,’ as I gathered hunches, tested (affirmed and rejected) my own and participants’ assumptions, and was able to begin on theory building whilst still collecting data. This analytical modification was facilitated by the data collection methods employed, as they allowed for flexibility and change. The fieldwork at UCT benefited the most from this process, occurring a year after the initial fieldwork at Wits. This enabled a comparison and internal dialogue between the two data subsets, whilst of course each was modified according to its own specifics. A few interviews were held at Wits after the UCT trip in order to further facilitate inter-subset dialogue.

The bulk of the analysis occurred post-data collection (after all fieldwork had been completed), in order that focus could be directly on analysis. All the interviews were transcribed verbatim and brief notes were written about each. At the end of the transcription period, the brief notes were read together as a group, which allowed for a snapshot of all of the data. Whilst I acknowledge that it would have been more beneficial and rigorous to do a preliminary reread of all the interview transcriptions, this was not feasible given time constraints. However, the use of note taking allowed for a quick look at all the data simultaneously and for initial categories and themes to come to the fore [Adapted from Erasmus and de Wet’s application (2003: 15) of Miles & Huberman].

After the note taking of initial categories and themes, manual coding of all transcripts took place. The initial themes arose primarily out of the interview questions (see appendix E) and hence were of a descriptive nature. The main themes were perspectives on transformation, experiences of working at UCT/Wits, experiences of institutional culture, and evaluation of institutional transformation. At this point data was reduced and reorganised into each theme. The analysis of each theme occurred independently, allowing for the generation of sub themes. Once descriptive data had been reflected on, contextualisation of data occurred in which the data was clustered according to similarities. This was done in order that I could determine who was saying what and look for explanations of why they were saying what they were saying. From this, race, gender,
class, age, and position on the academic hierarchy arose as formative guides to experience and perceptions. It is important to note that these were not essentialist and exclusive categories in the findings but were spoken largely as such.

This lead to reflection on the salience of these categories and how participants come to locate themselves within the university. To measure the prominence and significance of each, in addition to the inter-relationships, a record was kept of the frequency with which these concepts arose in participants (unprompted) discussion, as well as the relative importance accorded to the concepts and the context within which they arose. This allowed for increased understanding of the perceived structure of the institution and the experiences through which the institution becomes stratified – all of which speak both to institutional culture and transformation. Institutional culture was generally derived from participants’ discussions on their perceptions and experiences of the institution, and notes were taken on affirmation and discontent as well as who was articulating these statements and why. Transformation and its evaluation was largely derived from participants’ discussions on what they would like to see and what they do see/experience. At each point I also tried to capture silences and the reasons for their existence.

The second level of analysis corresponded to Miles and Huberman’s discussion on second level coding and analysis (Erasmus & de Wet, 2003: 16). In practice, the generation of new themes, ideal types, and diagrams (see chapter six) developed organically out of the first phase of analysis, and tended more towards explanation of the findings. These were particularly reliant on the ‘who said what and why’ analysis and enabled theory generation and testing.

The third level of analysis revolved around the comparison of Wits and UCT data. Although this has been separated out in writing, in practice it was not always a distinctly separate and final stage of analysis (as much analysis of the Wits data had occurred prior to the start of data collection at UCT). None-the-less, the analysis of each site has largely been conducted independently, in order that an “intensive analysis” of each site be generated (de Vaux, 2001: 249). Rather than conducting one case study and then
replicating it in another context, the case comparison in this instance occurred mainly retrospectively during the analysis stage.

Thus, the research sought to enhance the dialogue between each case by analysing each data-subset sequentially and thereby prompting further analysis and reanalysis of original patterns. This was initially done informally through the use of memos, and then more formally through rigorous case comparison, by seeking possible explanations for similarities and differences between the two sites. Thus, this amounted to further exploration, testing and reworking of theoretical/conceptual issues in light of the two cases being compared and existing literature. In this way I have sought to yield a tight theoretical output through rigorous analysis by following Miles and Huberman’s steps of ‘data reduction’, ‘data display’, and ‘conclusion drawing/verification’ (Silverman, 2000: 143).

At each stage of analysis I also tried to incorporate a reflection on silences: what was not being said by participants and why; what did this reveal about the participant/group of participants/organisation as a whole; and were there aspects that I had not reflected on and why. In this way I hoped to further test the findings of the research and add complexity where necessary, in addition to limiting my own bias or neglect [Adapted from Neuman’s discussion on ‘Negative Evidence’; (Neuman, 2000: 435 - 437)].

The experience of research

Embarking upon research that explores the notions of race, gender, and institutional culture within racialised and gendered terrains such as UCT and Wits, it is crucial that a section on critical self-reflection be incorporated. The main reason for doing so is to foreground my own perceptions, biases, and myself (positioning) in order that their bearing may be explicit, and that my own motivation for conducting this research be known. As such, it is necessary that I confront my own position as a young white woman in contemporary South Africa and as a student at Wits and a former student at UCT – and the effect that these positions had on the research.
These reflections stem from the belief that in engaging (qualitative) research, it is not possible to ‘suspend one’s reality’ and to be a detached and objective researcher. One’s subjectivities and positionality constantly make themselves known. For example, in the ways in which one is perceived by interviewees and the ways that one perceives interviewees. The way that interviews are mutually constructed by the interviewee and the researcher. The way one interacts with interview material: during the interview, during analysis, whilst writing up, and long after the research process is officially complete. The type of conclusions reached and the silences that may be evident to other scholars – all of these contain the subjectivity of the researcher.

**Interaction between participants and myself**

In interviewing staff about transformation, the notions of race and gender arose organically in almost all interviews. As a result my own racialised and gendered experience\(^8\), as well as the fact that I am a relatively young student, came to the fore. As the sole researcher, I could not be divorced from these identities and thus it is crucial to note the dynamics that characterised interviews with staff. Race, gender, age, disciplinarity, position on the academic/management hierarchy, and experience were the key factors that drove the type of interaction that arose in interviews. Overall interviews proceeded smoothly and the degree and depth of discussion, in addition to the level of confidence with which I was taken in, indicated that a high level of rapport was reached and staff felt relatively free to express their experiences and concerns.

None-the-less, there were experiences of discontent and unease (on the part of some participants and the researcher). On four occasions, participants expressed rigidity to the point of not moving beyond their firmly stated viewpoint and therefore the exploration of the context within which their understanding was formed could not be tapped. In two of these instances, the participants held transformation occupations\(^9\), and one assumes that this rigidity was due to research reactivity and that due to their occupational context the participants assumed a critical lens would be used in which they would come under criticism. Whilst researcher reactivity cannot be ruled out in these cases, I feel that it is the topic of inquiry and complex institutional dynamics that caused the most reactivity.
In the other two instances, participants were referred by their superiors and I feel that this was the point at which tension occurred, as complex organisational dynamics meant that participants were weary of their identity being exposed (despite assurance otherwise). Several respondents at Wits also spoke of past experiences of the betrayal of confidence and anonymity, and hence this could have also influenced the tension exhibited. However, this could also have been exacerbated by researcher and/or instrument reactivity, in that perhaps participants would have felt at greater ease had an interviewer with different racialised and/or gendered experiences been conducting the interview. Similarly, they may have only been assured of anonymity had a different instrument, such as a survey/ questionnaire been administered. Despite these difficulties, the material from these interviews has not been discarded as it is still very rich and illustrates important facets of organisational life.

Approximately a third of the participants expressed a hope of change brought about by the research. This demonstrates that a significant proportion of participants believed that the research itself would have a transformative dimension through its criticism of institutional practices and motivation for positive action (Babbie & Mouton, 2001: 545). Whilst I empathise with participants who have experienced discrimination, prejudice, and who feel locked in and alienated by the system (as it is a just cause worth fighting for), I have also had to adopt a weak interventionist position and retain some academic distance for the purpose of this report. I have had to do this in order to avoid bias and the megaphone effect – were I am merely a conduit for participants to challenge the dominant modus operandi. Thus, I have had to treat all data equally and all perspectives equally in order to articulate a representative (of the sample) depiction of the complex institutional realities of higher education in post-apartheid South Africa.

Having said so, it is also crucial to acknowledge that I had the privilege of being privy to a multitude of different voices, many of which ordinarily experience marginalisation within the day-to-day workings of the university, being both pushed into silence and often falling on deaf ears. Therefore, it is crucial to facilitate space for such voices to
articulate themselves and to hopefully be heard. Finally, I have tried to convey the many different voices that I have heard without claiming the right to represent any particular viewpoint – I have tried to form some synthesis or conversation between the many different voices and tried to make sense of the reality within which they operate.

I have sought to produce an accurate representation of the participants, their world view and experiences, in order to present critical knowledge, reflecting on existing power relations and aiding the empowerment of subordinated groups, whilst also engaging in self-critical reflection of my role in the process and production of the research [See Babbie and Mouton’s guide for emancipatory and transformative social science: (Babbie & Mouton, 2001: 545)].

**The effect of participants on my sense of self**

From my own experience, I have also had to negotiate my way through several moments of discomfort and unease. One recurrent factor was when participants sought to collude with me as the researcher in an assumed sense of shared experience as white people or white women. This assumption fails to acknowledge that ‘being white’, like being a member of any social group, has a host of contradictory, symbolic and situationally specific meanings” (Gallagher, 2000: 69). Not only this, but it also has the effect of negating and marginalising other types of whiteness, my own particular variant included. In some instances it was a case of putting interview richness and understanding above personal comfort – a crucial factor, should a broad and deep description and explanation be sought after.

However, this does not negate the fact that in that particular space, the failure to challenge the participant “makes the researcher complicit in valorizing and creating a narrative of whiteness which absolves researcher and informant of the responsibility of challenging white racism and white privilege” (Gallagher, 2000: 72 - 73). Whilst this argument could be made of any failure to challenge any assumptions based on race, gender, class, age, and other identity-based ideologies/discourses, it is this momentary co-option into conservative whiteness that I found the most difficult to deal with.
In the research, articulations on racialised experiences and predominant racial ideologies present within institutions were plentiful, and appeared to suggest the interview provided a space within which this could be discussed. It is likely that my own position was read as being either complicit or sympathetic to participants’ perceptions and experiences (whatever they were). In a few cases where I was assumed not to share the participants’ worldview, participants engaged in ‘politically correct’ discussions. A hostile attitude to transformation and the fear that one’s experience within this context is not deemed public speak within an interview setting is in itself telling. It is my belief that the latter cases were in the minority, but still need acknowledgement because of what is missing in the findings and because of its implications for transformation.

An area where my identity as a woman came to the fore was in the silence/absence of articulations of conservatism against women (sexism), although readily expressed as an institutional reality by most women and some men. Therefore, it would appear that gender is interpreted as a major fault line, one which I as a woman could not cross in being complicit/sympathetic to sexist attitudes and practices. Whilst it is possible that the sample contained men who were all sensitive to gender equality and women empowerment, it is unlikely, given women’s articulation of experiences of discrimination. Women’s voices have affected my perception of academia, in a way I had not conceived of before. Reflections of discrimination, alienation, loneliness, and struggles around managing multiple burdens of being a woman academic have all had an effect on my own personal perception of my future career and family-life trajectory. Whilst I knew that such research could inspire activism along many paths, I had not considered that it would have such a deep impact on my sense of my own life.

The last identity-based factor that I am going to engage with is my student identity. I have spent the last five years within these two institutions as a student and although I have gathered many impressions of what each institution is like, researching this topic reinforced the salient division of staff and student. In most interviews, traditional interviewer-interviewee power relations were inverted as participants engaged with their
occupational role of disseminating information, whilst I engaged with my student role of attentively listening and engaging – both of which facilitated the interview process, as power was often held by participants which encouraged their disclosure of experiences and perceptions.

Another aspect I had not adequately envisaged was how my departure from UCT would lead to the feeling of dislocation. I realised that I still felt a fondness and a sense of belonging to UCT, which in most instances was reciprocated, if only in a joking sense in which several participants stated ‘they were sorry I had left the better institution’ or that I should consider returning for PhD study. However, in a small amount of cases I experienced moments of hostility, defensiveness, and unpleasantness which made me question why I had returned to the university that had provided me with many happy but also some quite hurtful experiences as a student. I was quickly able to separate this personal anomaly from my research, with the aid of very positive and encouraging participants who immediately lifted my spirits and reminded me why I was doing this research in the first place – to explore the extent and nature of transformation and to highlight the positives and the negatives of this complicated process.

Whilst this is not a complete discussion of the experience of doing research, I have highlighted the most salient experiences and will discuss the issue of insider/outsider in the following section on ethics.

A question of ethics or ethical questions?

Accessing participants

The nature of this research is undoubtedly important although highly sensitive, and as such, ethical considerations are of vital importance. In terms of accessing participants, I sent out individual letters of introduction and a request for an interview by email. In most cases, this was followed-up by a telephone call to arrange a meeting where interest had been expressed and willingness to participate affirmed. Interviews also began with a short
introduction to myself and the research, along with an assurance of confidentiality, so that participants were informed of the use to which the interview would be made (for a Master’s degree research report).

Accessing Wits

At Wits, only one participant felt the need to consult a superior about whether he could participate in the research, clearly highlighting that, in general, Wits’ staff felt that the decision to participate in research was their own decision to make. This coincided with my own view that I was researching individual participants’ perceptions and experiences of transformation rather than the ‘official’ institutional view, and hence granting/refusal of access was up to the individual concerned. One participant at Wits acted as a ‘gate-keeper’, actively trying to slow the research process by restricting access to further participants under their influence. Access to high-ranking executive members was easy, with all those approached agreeing to participate. Similarly, documents at Wits were relatively easy to obtain, many of which are in the public domain.

During the research at Wits, much was going on that pertained to academic staff transformation. There was the installation of Professor Nongxa as the Vice Chancellor, and the T&EE and CLTD organised three transformation seminars which I attended as a non-participant observer. My identity as researcher was not revealed at these events, except to the organisers of the transformation seminars. This was done to ensure that the events unfolded as naturally as possible, without my researcher identity shaping the events. I tried to be as unobtrusive as possible by assuming the role of interested audience member, however, the writing of notes may have affected the participation or responses of those immediately around me. In one instance, I was drawn into participation when the speaker selected me as an example for a point he was making. In this instance my presence was heightened and I could no longer remain peripheral. This was one of the instabilities of observation, as even if one’s chosen role is marginal, the action of another may catapult one from the margins to the fore.
The main ethical issue in regard to observation was the issue of consent. Due to the inability to brief participants of my researcher status and the observation of proceedings, minimal use has been made of this fieldwork. Instead I have used it as contextual information to set the tone of the environment in which transformation at Wits occurs. Furthermore, I was unable to access other sites of institutional decision-making due to the nature of these, and the methods through which members are elected/ascend into these structures.

Assessing UCT

At UCT, access to participants and documents presented a number of difficulties. Whilst academics continued to be their own decision-makers regarding participation, almost all other staff expressed the need to seek permission of a superior before they could participate in the research. As a result, such superiors at UCT acted as ‘gate keepers’ denying access to the staff under their influence. Several high-ranking members of the UCT senior executive also declined participation due to time constraints, and emphasised that there was an over-saturation of research on the topic of transformation. However, a few did grant access, and they were vital participants/informants for which I am most grateful. The obtaining of institutional documents at UCT was also severely curtailed due to blocked access and restrictions. Situational constraints have meant that the focus at UCT was modified to be more generalist rather than institutional, the impact of which will be further discussed in the findings section.

Subsequently, I have learned that previous research, which had been misrepresentative and damaging to UCT, was the reason for the clampdown on new research. However, this was not explained to me by the supervisors who restricted access to staff, and such inaction is viewed as inadequate for an institution whose very survival depends on other sectors of society granting access and participating in its research. I would also like to clarify that this is not a reflection of the whole university and that those who participated (academics, executives, and others) were most enthusiastic and dedicated. Furthermore,
largely due to time and access constraints, I was unable to conduct any non-participant observation within sites/forums of transformation at UCT.

The need for confidentiality and anonymous participants

No information on participants’ names and departments/schools/units has been reported on. This guarantee of confidentiality has been provided in order that participants felt at ease to express their perceptions and experiences without any possible negative repercussions of having done so. Participants asked not to be named in order to avoid being labelled, to avoid discrimination, and for some, to avoid being fired. It is also crucial to note that over half of the academic participants at Wits\textsuperscript{10} requested to remain anonymous and this is why it has been applied across the board. Although academic participants at UCT were not given the chance to ask to be named (as opposed to being anonymous), several asked for confirmation that they would not be named. Participants at both Wits and UCT remarked on previous betrayal of confidence and hence the protection of their identity was crucial in this instance.

A trade-off of this is that the location of positive and negative intra-institutional cases will not be reported on, thereby perhaps reducing the practical value of the report. However, the need to prevent all possible harm to participants and to maintain the integrity of the research was deemed to outweigh the need for institutional specifics. Any material derived through non-participant observation has likewise been made anonymous to protect the identity of the participants.

All interviews were audio-recorded (with the permission of participants), all recordings and transcripts have been kept safe and held in the strictest of confidence, listened to and read only by myself, as the sole researcher. Excerpts from the transcripts have been included in the report so as to allow for participants’ ‘voices’ to be present in the report, in accordance with the qualitative methods being employed. Atkinson affirms that the ‘giving (and sharing) of voice’ increases the validity of research through aiding internal consistency (Atkinson, 2002: 133). However, it is crucial to note that despite conducting
participant-centred interviews, both the participant and researcher worked together in a collaborative construction of “an essentially monologic view of reality” (Atkinson & Silverman in Fontana & Frey, 2000: 664).

Whilst elements of interviewer subjectivity always creep into interviews, self-disclosure was avoided altogether or only revealed at the end of the interview, so as to minimise the influence of the interviewer on the participants’ discussion. Whilst this is somewhat at odds with participative interviewing methodologies, I thought it the best approach given the sensitivity of the topic and the diverse range of opinion that exists. The extent of variety and depth of discussion in interviews highlighted that this approach was beneficial in this case. In addition, because of the emotive aspect of the topic and the nature of participants’ experiences, I thought it best to remain unobtrusive and to merely facilitate a safe space for discussion in which my main role was the empathetic listener.

Furthermore, excerpts have been selected and reported on in such a way that participant anonymity is not compromised in anyway. Benmayor (1991) states “As researchers with a commitment to change, we must decenter ourselves from the ‘ivory tower’ and construct more participatory, democratic practices. We must keep people and politics at the center of our research” (Fontana & Frey, 2000: 666). This is why I have discussed at length the issues around institutional access; and why I have incorporated many excerpts into the report.

**Insider versus outsider**

The contrast between the ease of access at Wits and the difficulties experienced at UCT in accessing officials and official documents illustrates the insider/outsider debate. My positioning at Wits (as student and SWOP intern), in addition to the position of my supervisor/mentor, aided access to various people and documents. Whilst at UCT, my status as non-student (despite having been a former student) lead me to be classified as an ‘outsider’ who was not privy to such official institutional knowledge. This does not necessarily point to differences in the bureaucracy of each university but could purely be
a reflection of the ease of collecting official information as an ‘insider’ and the difficulty of doing so as an ‘outsider’.

However, this is complicated by the fact that people who occupied the position of dean at UCT appeared more willing to participate in the research than their counterparts at Wits. Four out of the five deans approached at UCT agreed to participate, and the one who could not recommended someone in his place. At Wits meanwhile, only two out of five participated, with one other referring someone in his place.

In regard to accessing academics, there does not appear to have been any difference between the two institutions. In both instances there was an over abundance of academics willing to participate, with the result that not all were included in the research because of time constraints on the researcher. This discussion illustrates that one does not occupy a single position as an ‘outsider’ or ‘insider’, and that people react differently to one’s assumed position. Therefore, there are advantages and disadvantages, pluses and minuses of each position as opposed to one position being beneficial and the other not (Twine, 2000: 13). Whilst this debate can be extended to all aspects of my positionality, I have chosen to just write about my interaction with institutional identities, as these were by far the most overwhelming throughout the research. The significance of this insider/outsider discussion will be further illuminated on in the findings section.

**Conclusion:**

This chapter has focused on the practical dimensions of the fieldwork process. It has examined how the guiding concepts have been operationalised, measured, and analysed. It has sought to demonstrate how both conceptual and empirical data have shaped the fieldwork every step of the way, in order to enhance the rigour of the findings. It has described the practicalities of data collection and analysis, in addition to reflecting upon the experience of conducting the research, both personally and in terms of ethics.
Chapter Four Endnotes

1 ‘Transformation positions’ is used to describe staff who are either employed by the institution to undertake/manage transformation or who by very nature of their jobs have much experience and involvement with transformation initiatives. Therefore, this term does not only refer to those located within a transformation or employment equity office but also to those within other offices, organisations or units on campus.

2 This gap in the existing literature is elaborated upon within the chapter on literature review.

3 Transformation officials and activists refers to both those who are employed to do transformation work and those who are not but have an interest in giving effect to transformation, elsewhere in the report these are collectively called transformation participants.

4 The discussion on sampling, which comes later, explains the nature of the sample.

5 **Faculty codes:**

   CHED: Centre for Higher Education Development, UCT
   COMM: Commerce at UCT and CLM: Commerce, Law & Management at Wits
   EBE: Engineering & the Built Environment, UCT & Wits
   HS: Health Science, UCT & Wits
   HUM: Humanities, UCT & Wits
   SCI: Science, UCT & Wits
   OTHER: Non-faculty staff such as senior executives & people in transformation positions

6 Here, an interview schedule refers to a list of questions and topic areas that act as a guide to direct the interview process and inform its content without necessarily specifying the exact form and format that the interview must take.

7 The labelling of Wits and UCT as racialised and gendered terrains is drawn from both the historical legacy as well as the fieldwork conducted for this research; hence this statement shall be backed up by the findings.

8 I am a white British woman. I have spent all my life in Zimbabwe and South Africa, and my step-father is Japanese.

9 Transformation occupation refers to those jobs which have a dimension of transformation directive, responsibility or interest. Thus it is does not solely refer to those people employed to effect transformation but also refers to people who work in areas such as race and gender relations at a faculty/university-wide level, in addition to academic interest groups.

10 Interestingly the only group that did not request to remain anonymous was white men.

11 Self-disclosure refers to frank and explicit discussion of the researcher’s position. In this case, it was not deemed suitable as it could have limited participant’s engagement in the research.