

#disabled and incarcerated: The autoethnographical study of an ex-offender

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DECLARATION

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ABSTRACT

This autoethnographic study examines my lived experiences as a disabled man and ex-offender as I navigate the complex challenges of change, physical rehabilitation, societal reintegration, and a period of incarceration. I reflect on how the limitations imposed by my disability and the correctional environment influenced my identity, autonomy, and self-perception. Incarceration, with its inherent restrictions on independence and social interaction, exacerbated the feelings of vulnerability, isolation, and dependency that I often experienced as someone living with a disability. Following an ethnographical method, this qualitative study analyses the interplay of stigma, self-care practices, and resilience. Relocating myself after a traumatic experience reveals significant insights, accenting the positive effect that education, both in life and formal learning environments, can have on one's lived reality. The theoretical framework, influenced by theories of criminality, social stigma and resilience, highlights the significance of adaptive strategies in addressing emotional struggles, including shame, guilt, and loss of dignity. The study's main themes reveal the crucial role that family support, community, and self-compassion have played in reconstructing my self-worth and identity amid adversity. Through the lens of my personal experiences, this study uncovers the profound impact of early life experiences, the challenges of navigating a world defined by physical limitations and the relentless pursuit of meaning. This phenomenological study contributes to critical disability studies, offering insights into how disabled individuals in societal and institutional settings navigate societal expectations of autonomy and reconstruct their sense of self. Interpretative analysis allows me to advocate for more inclusive and empathetic approaches within rehabilitative and correctional environments,

acknowledging the transformative potential of resilience and relational support for marginalised individuals.

KEY TERMS

Disability, Spinal injury, Autoethnography, Correctional Services, Justice, Identity, Resilience, Wheelchair, Stigma, Discrimination, Offender, Rehabilitation.

OPSOMMING

Hierdie outo-etnografiese studie ondersoek my geleefde ervarings as 'n gestremde man en voormalige oortreder terwyl ek die komplekse uitdagings van verandering, fisiese rehabilitasie, maatskaplike herintegrasie en 'n tydperk van inhegtenisneming navigeer. Ek besin oor hoe die beperkings wat my gestremdheid en die korrektiewe omgewing opgelê het, my identiteit, outonomie en selfpersepsie beïnvloed het. Inhegtenisneming, met sy inherente beperkinge op onafhanklikheid en sosiale interaksie, het die gevoelens van kwesbaarheid, isolasie en afhanklikheid wat ek dikwels as 'n gestremde persoon ervaar het, vererger. Hierdie kwalitatiewe studie analiseer die wisselwerking tussen stigma, selfversorgingspraktyke en veerkragtigheid. Om myself ná 'n traumatiese ervaring weer te hervestig, het beduidende insigte geopenbaar, wat die positiewe uitwerking van opvoeding—sowel in die lewe as in formele leeromgewings—beklemtoon. Die teoretiese raamwerk, beïnvloed deur teorieë oor kriminaliteit, sosiale stigma en veerkragtigheid, beklemtoon die belangrikheid van aanpasbare strategieë om emosionele uitdagings, insluitend skaamte, skuldgevoelens en die verlies aan waardigheid, aan te spreek. Die hoof temas van hierdie studie toon die deurslaggewende rol van gesinsondersteuning, gemeenskap en selfdeernis in die heropbou van my selfwaarde en identiteit te midde van teenspoed. Deur die lens van my persoonlike ervarings ontbloom hierdie studie die diepgaande impak van vroeë lewenservarings, die uitdagings van 'n wêreld gedefinieer deur fisiese beperkinge, en die onverskrokke strewe na betekenis. Hierdie fenomenologiese studie dra by tot kritiese gestremdeheidsstudies deur insigte te bied oor hoe gestremde individue in maatskaplike en institusionele omgewings, die samelewing se verwagtinge van outonomie navigeer en hul

selfbegrip reconstrueer. Interpretatiewe ontleding stel my in staat om te pleit vir meer inklusiewe en empatiese benaderings binne rehabiliterende en korrektiewe omgewings, en erken die transformerende potensiaal van veerkragtigheid en verhoudingsondersteuning vir gemarginaliseerde individue.

SLEUTELWOORDE

Gestremdheid; Spinale besering; Outo-etnografie; Korrektiewe Dienste; Geregtigheid; Identiteit; Veerkragtigheid; Rolstoel; Stigma; Diskriminasie; Oortreder; Rehabilitasie.

ISIIFIYEZO

Lolu cwaningo lwe-autoethnography lubheka izinselelo engihlangabezane nazo njengendoda ekhubazekile futhi eyake yahlala ejele, lapho ngizama ukumelana nezinguquko ezinzima, ukwelulama ngokomzimba, ukungena emphakathini kabusha, kanye nesikhathi sobusha ejele. Ngiyazindla ngokuthi izithiyo ezibangelwa ukukhubazeka kwami nendawo yezokulungiswa kwezigebengu zathinta kanjani ubuwena bami, ukuzimela kwami, nokuthi ngizibona kanjani. Ukuvalelwa ejele, ngenxa yemikhawulo yakhona yokuzimela kanye nokuxhumana nabanye, kwenze imizwa yokuba sengozini, ukuphelelwa yithemba, kanye nokuncika kwabanye kwaba nzima kakhulu kimi njengomuntu okhubazekile. Lolu cwaningo lwekhwalthethivu luhlaziya ubudlelwane phakathi kwehlazo lomphakathi, imikhuba yokuzinakekela, kanye nokukhuthazela. Ukuzithola kabusha ngemuva kwesigameko esinzima kwangiholela ekuqondeni okujulile, futhi kwagqamisa umthelela omuhle wemfundo—kokubili empilweni nangaphakathi kwezikhungo zemfundo. Umongo walo cwaningo ususelwa ezimfundweni zobugebengu, ihlazo emphakathini, kanye nokukhuthazela, okuveza ukuthi amasu okuvumelana nezimo abalulekile ekubhekaneni nemizwa enjengamahloni, isazela, kanye nokulahlekelwa isithunzi. Izindikimba ezisemqoka ziveza ukubaluleka kokwesekwa ngumndeni, umphakathi, kanye nokuzihawukela ekwakheni kabusha ukuzazisa kwami kanye nobuwena bami phakathi kwezimo ezinzima. Ngokusebenzisa izipiliyoni zami, lolu cwaningo lukhombisa umthelela onzulu wokuhlangenwe nakho kwasebuntwaneni, ubunzima bokuphila ngaphansi kwezimo zokukhubazeka, kanye nokufuna injongo empilweni. Lolu cwaningo lwe-phenomenology lunomthelela kwizifundo zokukhubazeka ezibucayi, luphakamisa ukuqonda indlela abantu abakhubazekile abaphila ngayo

ngaphansi kwezingcindezi zomphakathi kanye nezinhlango, bephinde bazame ukuthola ukuthi bayini nokuthi bangobani. Ukuhlaziya izipiliyoni zami kuyanginika amandla okukhuthaza izindlela ezibanzi nezinozwelo kakhulu ezindaweni zokuvuselela nasezinhlelweni zezoluleko, ngokuqaphela amandla amakhulu okukhuthazela nokwesekwa kwezobudlelwano kwabangavikelekile emphakathini.

IZINDIKIMBA EZISEMQOKA

Ukukhubazeka, Ukulimala kwamgogodla, I-autoethnography (Ucwaningo lokuzihlaziya ngolwazi lomuntu siqu), Izinkonzo Zezokulungiswa Kwezigebengu, Ubulungiswa, Ubuwena / Ubunikazi, Ukukhuthazela, Isihlalo sabakhubazekile, Ihlazo, Ubandlululo, Isigebengu / Umuntu onecala, Ukubuyiselwa esimweni esingcono / Ukululama

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“The privilege of a lifetime is to become who you truly are.”

Carl Jung

Dedication

I dedicate this study to my daughter Tayla for her love, trust and faith.

ACRONYMS/ABBREVIATIONS

DCS: Department of Correctional Services

SCI: Spinal Cord Injury

CJS: Criminal Justice System

SADF: South African Defence Force

UNISA: The University of South Africa

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Chapter 1

1.1. Introduction to the study

The lived experiences of individuals with physical disabilities who navigate incarceration present a profound and underexplored intersection of societal marginalisation, systemic inequities, and personal resilience. Despite the growing discourse in disability and correctional studies, the voices of disabled, incarcerated individuals remain primarily absent, leaving critical gaps in our understanding of how these overlapping identities shape and are shaped by social structures. This study seeks to bridge this gap through the lens of autoethnography, leveraging a first-person narrative to illuminate the challenges, adaptations, and resilience mechanisms of a physically disabled man who has experienced incarceration.

My dual role as a researcher and a participant in this study offers a unique perspective. In 1981, a life-altering motorcycle accident at the age of twenty-one led to paraplegia, introducing me to the world of disability. In 2016, I experienced incarceration in a South African correctional facility, further shaping my identity. Navigating systemic ableism within a punitive correctional system has given me insights that are not only personal but also deeply relevant to broader societal discussions on disability rights and correctional reforms.

This study is centred on the interplay between personal identity, systemic oppression, and resilience. It highlights the dual marginalisation of being disabled and incarcerated, exploring how these overlapping experiences challenge conventional constructs of disability and criminality. By adopting an autoethnographic approach, this study contributes a critical counter-narrative to existing literature, which often overlooks the lived realities of disabled individuals in correctional settings.

The study's significance lies in its potential to inform and shape academic and policy discussions. For academics, it challenges dominant discourses that rely on detached, third-person analyses, emphasising the importance of lived experience in disability and correctional studies. For policymakers, it offers insights into the systemic failings of correctional institutions to accommodate disabled inmates, advocating for reforms that prioritise inclusivity, accessibility, and dignity. The potential impact of this study on policy and systemic reform is significant, offering hope and inspiration for a more inclusive and equitable future.

This chapter introduces the foundational elements of the study, framing the research problem, its rationale, and the objectives that guide this inquiry. It also sets the stage for a deeper exploration of the intersection of disability and incarceration, with subsequent chapters delving into the literature, methodology, and findings. Through this study, I hope to share my story and contribute to a broader understanding of the systemic and personal dimensions of disability within the correctional system.

1.2. Background to the research problem

The relationship between disability and incarceration in South Africa exists within a historical and social context shaped by systemic inequities and societal attitudes. Internationally, the fight for disability rights has gained momentum since the mid-20th century, resulting in key frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (Watson et al., 2022). In South Africa, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Devenish, 2005) and policies such as the White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Department of Social Development, 2016) signify progress. However, implementation often falls short, especially in marginalised spaces such as correctional facilities, where disabled individuals face compounded exclusion and neglect (McCall-Smith, 2016).

Societal attitudes toward disability further exacerbate these issues. Ableism – the belief that non-disabled individuals are superior – remains persistent, promoting stigma and discrimination against disabled individuals (Goodley, 2016; Shakespeare, 2017). This is evident in correctional systems, where disabled inmates are often perceived as burdens or vulnerable targets, intensifying their marginalisation (Fitzgerald O'Reilly, 2018; Harner & Riley, 2013). Social constructs of criminality intersect with disability to compound exclusion, portraying disabled inmates as "less than" even within already stigmatised incarcerated populations (Erevelles & Minear, 2010).

The intersectionality of disability and incarceration creates unique challenges. Disabled individuals in South African correctional facilities often experience dual marginalisation—first, as disabled individuals in a largely ableist society and second, as inmates in an overburdened carceral system (Reiter et al., 2017). While policies like the Nelson Mandela Rules advocate for humane treatment, including accommodations for disabled inmates, enforcement remains inconsistent (Fitzgerald, 2018). Structural barriers, such as inaccessible correctional facilities and inadequate healthcare, further alienate disabled individuals, limiting their opportunities for rehabilitation and reintegration (Schlanger, 2018).

This study situates itself within the historical and social backdrop of the South African corrections environment, aiming to shed light on the lived realities of disability and incarceration in South Africa. Through an autoethnographic lens, it seeks to bridge the gap between policy ideals and the day-to-day experiences of those most affected.

Research has also highlighted the social stigma and victimisation that disabled individuals experience in corrections (Harner & Riley, 2013). Disabled inmates face a higher risk of exploitation and violence due to their perceived vulnerability. The dual marginalisation of

being both disabled and incarcerated places these individuals at the intersection of systemic inequities.

The man is no longer on his motorcycle. He now lies on the road, on his back. Unusual tingles and numbness seem to invade his legs. What has just happened?

My accident on January 25, 1981, changed the trajectory of my life completely. A spinal fracture allowed instant access to the world of people with disabilities. There are no lengthy documents to be completed, as the only stipulation is a dysfunctional physical body. The unsought group benefits include societal discrimination, identity uncertainty, loss of independence, malfunction of bodily processes, and various emotional and psychological challenges.

1.3. The rationale of the study

Most disability research has predominantly been conducted by non-disabled researchers (Kitchin, 2000) or individuals who have never experienced incarceration (Feeley, 2014). This creates a significant gap in perspective. However, this situation presents a substantial opportunity for readers to engage with these critical topics through a first-person viewpoint.

The narrative must be expertly crafted to compel full engagement from the reader. It should not only inform and challenge but also present perspectives that have often been overlooked. As the researcher, I am committed to deeply involving the reader by vividly describing the smells of a correctional facility, the taste of the food served, and the unmistakable sound of steel gates slamming shut at 2 PM and unlocking at 7 AM. These intense realities cannot be captured through standard interviews; they demand the richness autoethnography offers.

Autoethnography is far more than a basic account of personal experience—it is a powerful tool that enables readers to forge connections with the narratives they encounter. It fosters the creation of new stories that can inspire change and ignite dialogue, leading to a profound understanding and appreciation of the subject matter (Denzin, 2003). The text becomes dynamic, establishing a connection between context and cultural practices. Ultimately, readers are invited to inhabit the story, making it real and tangible while confronting their prior assumptions.

This approach brings to light crucial aspects of disability and incarceration that have been consistently overlooked. My unwavering commitment to honesty and my intention to share personal and intimate details are essential to driving social, legal, and policy reforms in disability and incarceration. Policymakers must recognise that their reliance on available research is inadequate, especially when the medical profession continues to speak for disabled individuals. The development of correctional services policy must include input from offenders directly affected by these decisions, ensuring their voices are heard and considered.

1.4. Significance and aims of the study

This study sought to delve deeply into my life experiences, illuminating the complex psychological, social, and cultural influences shaping my worldview. By sharing my lived experiences as both an individual with a physical disability and as someone who has been incarcerated, I aspire to provide readers with meaningful insights and a nuanced understanding of my journey.

Through the detailed articulation of my experiences, I have explored various coping mechanisms recognised in theoretical frameworks and the personal strategies I have developed to navigate my unique challenges. I invite readers to immerse themselves in my narrative, rich with

descriptive language and emotional depth. According to Frank (2005), storytelling fosters a sense of community, creating a space where readers can connect with my experiences. As they engage with my story, I hope they can identify and understand how I have addressed and managed the obstacles I faced - successful resolutions and those that fell short.

The primary goal of this study is to vividly illustrate the harsh realities that accompany living with a physical disability, as well as the complexities of the lived experience of incarceration. By weaving together theoretical explanations with my discoveries regarding coping mechanisms, I aim to provide valuable insights into my process of adaptation and resilience. This exploration has shed light on how I grappled with and ultimately overcame the multifaceted challenges presented by my disability and my time spent in prison.

As I reframe these narratives, I hope to offer readers an insider's view of the intricate processes I navigated in dealing with my dual identity of being disabled and an offender. In doing so, I aim to reconstruct my story and inspire readers to reflect on their life experiences, potentially empowering them to rewrite their narratives in a more positive and liberating light. This study fosters the creation of a new story for me as the researcher and the readers who embark on this journey with me.

1.5. Statement of the Research Problem

There are significant gaps within disability research, especially in how society reacts to people with disabilities (Shakespeare, 2015). In addition, research studies of disability based on medical or social models fail to capture the subjective but extremely relevant nuanced reality of the lived experience (Baglieri et al., 2011).

An interviewer may find it difficult to pen my version of what paralysis feels like, how incontinence impacts daily function, or to what degree societal exclusion and accessibility

impact my psycho-social well-being. These complex and intricate issues cannot be captured in a sentence or short paragraph during an interview. While disability studies by non-disabled researchers will always be contributory and valuable, they cannot replace the insider viewpoint. Insiders often only appreciate the volume of information they hold once asked to share their individual lived experiences. Incarceration research similarly lacks the benefit of the realities of the offender's lived experience due to the protected nature of the correctional centre environment (Napier et al., 2012).

Disability and correctional research, to be truly effective, must, I believe, contain input from researchers who, if not personally involved, should embrace experiences as close to the truth as possible. I feel fortunate to have lived as both a non-disabled person and someone with a disability, as well as having experienced incarceration. This unique background allows me to carry knowledge that would otherwise be difficult to uncover. Because of this, I believe sharing my experiences provides a distinct perspective. Many researchers in the fields of disability and incarceration often do not have firsthand experience with either, relying instead on interviews and the analysis of those shared experiences. My insights bring a different depth to this research.

My disability and offender status do not live alone; however, they are attached to me, my world, and my interactions with others. As the researcher, I examine areas of my life in depth, expose and analyse my reactions to those lived experiences, and seek understanding throughout the study. This creates a climate that informs, expands, educates, and creates a platform from which new perspectives may be developed and myths may be debunked.

1.6. Research methods and strategy

There is a postulation that qualitative research constructs reality and truth through individuals' interactions with one another and their environments (Silverman, 2009). As a result,

an autoethnographical approach is advantageous when studying physical disability and incarceration because it incorporates personal experience and interaction with the world.

The research process can be accommodated from a variety of perspectives, and in this, I tend to be attracted to the area of evocative autoethnography. This perspective hinges on the connection readers can develop with the researcher's feelings and experiences while narrating the lived experiences shared throughout the study. Physical disability is, by its very nature, an intensely personal journey. The very same can be said regarding the term of incarceration. Aspects of the realities of both experiences are varied and extremely interesting. The chosen research method will accommodate a climate that informs, expands, educates, and creates a platform from which new perspectives may be developed and myths may be debunked.

My disability and offender status do not live alone; it is attached to me, my world, and my interaction with others. Therefore, as the researcher, areas of my life are examined in-depth, my reactions to those lived experiences are exposed and analysed, and a search for understanding is sought. Autoethnography has been used as a recognised qualitative research method.

“Autoethnography is an intriguing and promising qualitative method that offers a way of giving voice to personal experience to extend sociological understanding”, according to Wall (2008, p. 1). This stance is also prominent in the writing of Ellis et al. (2016, p.10), who states that:

“autoethnography is not simply a way of knowing about the world, it has become a way of being in the world, one that requires living consciously, emotionally, and reflexively”.

Therefore, the autoethnographic approach draws on the individuals' experiences, questioning their beliefs, thoughts, and understanding of the world around them. The self does not simply exist in a vacuum but is unavoidably mutually influenced by relationships, the environment, and experience. One of the many exciting facets of autoethnographic research is

that the researched is simultaneously the researcher (Ellis & Flaherty, 1992). Autoethnographic research responds to several research needs. These create a particular type of knowledge and ways of the world that honour story, creativity, emotion, and the body. The reader should be compelled to regard the writer's experiences in a compassionate light, with empathy, and to allow themselves to experience difference, intricacy, and change. These features furthermore reveal how and why autoethnographical writing evolved as a research method that is critical, qualitative, and interpretative.

Research conducted within an autoethnographic framework is a transformative process. It incorporates self-reflection and writing by an author exploring and linking their life experiences to a series of broader cultural and social interpretations. The self becomes the focus of this interpretative process, which constructs, analyses, and finally rebuilds a renewed identity and understanding from memory. This unique feature of autoethnographic research offers opportunities for the researcher to explore in-depth, as Raab (2013) concurs.

Autoethnography is particularly suited for exploring marginalised perspectives. It allows the researcher to document their lived experiences in ways that challenge dominant narratives (Ellis et al., 2012). By focusing on personal narratives, autoethnography humanises broader social issues, such as the experiences of disability and incarceration.

In disability and carceral studies, autoethnography can reveal how macro-level systems intersect with micro-level experiences. It provides insight into how the embodied realities of disability shape interactions with the carceral environment. Previous autoethnographic research has successfully illuminated the lived experiences of marginalised populations, including those with disabilities and incarcerated individuals, though studies combining both aspects remain sparse (Leavy, 2020).

As autoethnographers, we find it challenging to relate to the person we were in the past and how those experiences, interactions, and experiences have translated into our identity today. The effort is well worth it, writes (Custer, 2014), because the benefits are to be discovered through reflexivity and introspection when exploring our past experiences. Researchers confront a situation when deciding on where to position the self. The researcher and the researched are complexly linked (Ellis, 2004; Goodall, 2000), and as a result, the self is a rhetorical and unanswered question in a dance demanding reflexivity and continuously having consequences in the end—the benefits, therefore, in the negotiation of that reflexivity process during the reconstruction process of the self. However, this process is further detailed because others are also involved in reflexivity and introspection. The effort, although intense, culminates in a more transparent, deeper, and rewarding appreciation of the self. Disability and incarceration are both areas of research which necessitate an approach that can reflect an unbiased, unrehearsed, and real-lived experience of an individual throughout this study.

This is an autoethnographic study, and as such, autoethnographic research methodology adopts an interpretive stance, with phenomenological research forming part of the dataset. The interpretative approach's ontology stems from the appreciation that our understanding of reality is ultimately realised through our understanding of human experience (Karlsson, 1993).

Schwandt's (2000, p. 192 as cited in Wichmann, 2012) *Understanding the interpretivist philosophy* confirmed my choice to use an autoethnographical research methodological approach after reading the statement: "... the idea of acquiring an 'inside' understanding – the actors' definition of the situation is a powerful central concept for understanding the purpose of qualitative inquiry". Personal experience and academic achievement thus far afford me the skill set to successfully research this content and compile credible data framed by the pursuit of

answering the research questions. Moreover, the length of life with a physical disability, now forty-one years, and the incarceration period of close to five years, I believe, qualify as a reasonable time.

The preliminary literature review highlighted the need for research from individuals who are both disabled and previously incarcerated. The dataset provided by this insider view alone would be valuable because it contains my lived experiences as the researcher. Three autoethnographical studies (Nel, 2006; Wichmann, 2012; Wittstock, 2019) all reflected the intensely personal reflective content and nature of their studies. My chosen design relies on my recollection of my experiences and any additional data, such as photos, letters, and emails, which may confirm or support the memory. I also appreciate that by interpreting the data sets, I have created new data that warrants further interpretation, coinciding with the constructionist belief.

1.7. Ethical considerations

An autoethnographic study, as it relates to the personal, escapes some of the traditional ethical requirements so crucial in academic studies. Christians (2005), in her discussion on ethics, states that four areas need to be included in guiding the ethical process. The first is informed consent, followed by the prevention of deception. Privacy and confidentiality are the third most important aspects, followed by accuracy, which is the last but certainly not least aspect. Informed consent should not be seen as a once-off approval by participants. Ellis (2007) clearly states that throughout the project, there must be consultation with participants to confirm their willingness to continue with the study.

Ellis (2009) also includes in her comments on ethical practice within an autoethnographical study that the researcher must be aware of the potential audience which may be exposed to their completed work. In this regard, she questions whether exposing an individual

to relive a traumatic experience due to their reading of yours would be ethical. Ellis (2009) suggests that specific questions are prerequisites when planning autoethnographic works. The concept of not harming self and others, where the focus here is protecting both the researcher and the participants. One should always consult the university's Ethics Codes Committee. While ethics committees are often seen as hostile, this is not true. It is always the best policy to ask permission first rather than beg for forgiveness later in the project. Ethics committees offer excellent guidance. Failing to consult can and does result in severe consequences for the researcher.

Also, it never underrates the life expectancy of a published. Completed work will remain unchanged. However, the responses of audiences do certainly change. Therefore, autoethnographic writing should accommodate a wide range of potential audiences and protect those that appear in the text. Apart from the autoethnographical framework related to ethics, the following is of equal importance. The research proposal was also presented to the Departmental Higher Degrees Committee for scientific review and the College Research Ethics Committee for ethical approval. The research material is in the form of a systematic review based on publicly available material, and as such, no ethical clearance from the DCS will be required.

1.8. Demarcation of the study

This study explored the experiences of a physically disabled man during five years in a correctional facility, emphasising themes of resilience, identity reconstruction, social stigma, and support systems. Using an autoethnographic approach, it combines personal narratives with theoretical insights to enhance understanding of these experiences.

The focus is on the periods before, during, and shortly after incarceration and the long-term impacts on the researcher's life. While societal and systemic contexts are acknowledged,

the primary perspective remains personal and reflective, situated within the correctional system in Westville, Durban, South Africa.

The research incorporates theoretical frameworks but does not aim to generalise findings to all physically disabled individuals or former offenders. It prioritises personal narratives and is limited to the researcher's experiences, with supporting literature providing context rather than forming the focus.

1.9. Context of the Research

The South African correctional system operates within a historical and socio-political framework deeply rooted in colonialism and apartheid. During these eras, prisons were designed not merely as institutions of rehabilitation but as tools for enforcing systemic racial oppression and labour exploitation (Dissel, 2008; Singh, 2008). The legacy of these policies continues to influence the current correctional landscape, with issues such as overcrowding, inadequate healthcare, and limited rehabilitation programs persisting despite post-apartheid reforms. Efforts such as the 2005 White Paper on Corrections aim to transform the system into one focused on human rights and rehabilitation, yet substantial gaps between policy and practice remain (Department of Correctional Services, 2005; Muntingh, 2009).

Within this broader context, the experiences of marginalised groups—particularly disabled individuals, remain critically underexplored. Disability intersects with incarceration in unique and complex ways, as correctional facilities are often inaccessible and ill-equipped to meet the needs of offenders with physical, sensory, or cognitive impairments (Stewart, 2019). Disabled inmates face compounded vulnerabilities, including inadequate healthcare, social isolation, and heightened risks of abuse (Haney, 2003; Goyer, 2003). Despite these challenges,

there is an absence of research examining how disability shapes the lived experiences of incarcerated individuals, particularly in the South African context.

This study situates itself at the intersection of these gaps, seeking to illuminate the lived experiences of a disabled man who spent five years in a correctional facility. By employing an autoethnographic approach, this research provides a unique lens to explore how systemic neglect, social stigma, and personal resilience interplay within the correctional environment. It builds on existing literature addressing incarceration in South Africa while addressing the critical omission of disability as a central axis of analysis. It contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the correctional system and its implications for marginalised populations, offering insights that can inform policy and advocacy efforts.

1.10. Conclusion

This introduction forms the foundation through which personal yet critical introspection into autoethnography would be done in the study, taking disability and incarceration into perspective. Interactions of societal, cultural, and systemic dynamics have highlighted the differing lived experiences that physically disabled individuals have in correctional institutions. The need to explore such marginalised perspectives via lived experience is underlined with theory, systemic challenges, and lack of research evidence running in tandem. It has thus been a unique opportunity not only to introduce the positionality of me, the researcher, but also to underline the relevance and validity of autoethnography as a method for contesting the dominant discourses and expanding the arena of academic debate. The chapter, therefore, provides the framework for investigating identity, resilience, and social integration that is so nuanced that it will no doubt shed light on a few previously unconsidered crossroads between disability and carceral studies.

Certain truths at this stage need to be emphasised to give the reader context. I am paraplegic, paralysed from just below the neck, due to a spinal fracture resulting from a head-on collision with a motor vehicle on January 25, 1981. I was on a motorcycle and was twenty-one years old at the time. I am, therefore, entirely dependent on using a wheelchair. In 2010, my left leg was amputated above my knee due to a vascular issue. I represented myself in my criminal case for eight years. I was unsuccessful and was convicted of fraud in 2016 and incarcerated for four and half years at a South African correctional centre in KwaZulu Natal. I am divorced with a twenty-nine-year-old daughter, who is married and recently relocated to Australia.

1.11. Definition of the concepts

This study will contain these defined concepts below:

Disability: Disability encompasses societal discrimination, identity uncertainty, loss of independence, malfunction of bodily processes, and various emotional and psychological challenges concerning societal beliefs and constructs regarding disability (Goodley, 2016; Shakespeare, 2017).

Offender: An individual convicted of a criminal offence and serving time within the correctional system (Department of Correctional Services, 2005). Broadly referenced within correctional services and rehabilitation frameworks (Fitzgerald, 2018).

Ex-offender: A person who has served a sentence for a criminal conviction and is now reintegrating into society. Discussed in the context of reintegration challenges and societal stigma (Mdakane, 2016; Muntingh, 2005).

Incarceration: Incarceration refers to the confinement of individuals within correctional facilities due to criminal conviction. It embodies the complex interplay of systemic, socio-economic, and historical factors that impact the lives of those incarcerated, particularly

marginalised groups. Incarceration in South Africa reflects the legacies of colonialism and apartheid, perpetuating overcrowding, systemic neglect, and inadequate rehabilitation efforts despite post-apartheid reforms (Muntingh & Redpath, 2018).

Autoethnography: Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that combines self (auto), culture (ethno), and writing (graphy) to critically explore personal experiences and connect them to broader cultural, social, and institutional contexts. (Adams et al., 2017, p. 1).

Lived experience: The subjective and deeply personal insights gained through an individual's direct encounters with various life phenomena, emphasising emotional, psychological, and social impacts. Reid et al. (2005) emphasised the importance of "lived experience" as a crucial framework for thoroughly exploring and understanding the various complexities associated with health, identity, adversity, and triumph. Frechette et al. (2020) further defines lived experience as an exploration that reveals the intricacies of human existence.

1.12. Outline of the study

Chapter 1 introduces the study focus: the lived experiences of a disabled ex-offender through an autoethnographic lens. Chapter 2 discusses the literature review and theoretical framework. Chapter 3 examines the research design and methodology. Chapter 4 considers the study's findings, while Chapter 5 concludes the study, presenting limitations and suggesting further research recommendations.

Chapter 2

Literature review

2.1. Introduction

Chapter 1 introduced the focus of the study, while Chapter 2 will discuss the literature review of the autoethnographical study to contextualise my narrative within existing research. Gaps will be identified in the intersection of disability and incarceration, providing a theoretical framework to deepen the study's insights.

While substantial research exists on incarceration in South Africa, it predominantly focuses on broader systemic challenges such as overcrowding, recidivism, and general correctional conditions, often sidelining the experiences of specific marginalised groups like disabled inmates (Dissel, 2008). The lack of disaggregated data on disability within the corrections population compounds this gap, making it difficult to assess the prevalence of disability and the specific needs of these individuals (Goyer, 2003). Studies that do address incarceration and disability tend to focus on healthcare shortcomings without delving into the broader implications of accessibility, inclusion, and social integration within correctional facilities. This limited scope fails to capture the intersectional challenges faced by disabled inmates, such as compounded discrimination based on disability, socioeconomic status, and, in some cases, race or gender (Stewart et al., 2022).

Moreover, while policy documents such as the 2005 White Paper on Corrections emphasise rehabilitation and human rights, these documents often lack concrete frameworks or strategies for addressing the unique needs of disabled inmates (Department of Correctional Services, 2005). Empirical studies evaluating the implementation of these policies are sparse, and those that do exist often reveal significant gaps between policy objectives and actual practice

(Muntingh, 2009). While rehabilitation programmes are presented as inclusive, they frequently exclude individuals with physical or cognitive impairments due to inadequate resources or training among correctional staff (Heap et al., 2009). This disconnect not only perpetuates systemic neglect but also undermines the broader goal of creating a correctional system that is equitable, rehabilitative, and aligned with human rights standards. Addressing these gaps in both research and practice is imperative for ensuring that the correctional system upholds its rehabilitative mandate for all inmates, including those living with disabilities.

2.2. Introduction to the lived experience

The study of lived experience introduces both the researcher and the reader to the complexities of human existence (Frechette et al., 2020). In this chapter, I review the intricate intersectionality of spinal injury disability, social discrimination, resilience, and incarceration found in academic studies. By exploring these interwoven facets, I intend to unravel the complicated complexities associated with the profound implications in my personal life. The interplay between spinal injury, disability, social discrimination, resilience, and incarceration must be explored on an academic level, not often found in academic literature. Furthermore, this study hopes to inform policymaking, promote social equity, and provide a platform for previously marginalised voices to uncover the misconceptions and illuminate the resilience embedded in these narratives.

Lived experience, often overlooked in traditional research paradigms, serves as a potent lens through which we can unravel the complexities of various phenomena, be it health, identity, adversity, or triumph (Reid et al., 2005). As we embark on this exploration, we aim to amplify the voices illuminating the academic discourse and enrich our understanding of the multifaceted dimensions of human experience.

2.3. Incarceration

Incarceration in South Africa reflects a complex interplay of historical legacies, socio-economic challenges, and contemporary policy reforms. Understanding this multifaceted issue is essential, particularly when considering the experiences of marginalised groups within the correctional system. This section of the literature review examines the evolution of South Africa's correctional system, current incarceration trends, the intersection of disability and incarceration, and the effectiveness of rehabilitation and reintegration programmes. By identifying the gaps in existing research, particularly concerning physically disabled offenders, this review seeks to inform future studies and guide policy developments. The relevant focus areas are dealt with individually rather than as a collective.

2.4. Historical context of incarceration in South Africa

The South African correctional system has undergone profound transformations over the years, significantly shaped by the legacies of colonialism, the oppressive structures of apartheid, and subsequent reforms in the post-apartheid era.

During the apartheid period, which lasted from 1948 to the early 1990s, South African prisons, as they were previously referred to, functioned as tools of racial segregation and systematic oppression. The government implemented policies designed to enforce strict racial classifications, which governed not only the composition of prison populations but also the treatment of inmates. These policies perpetuated a system of exploitation, where black South Africans and some other racial groups faced harsh conditions and degrading treatment, in stark contrast to their white counterparts (Murhula & Singh, 2019)

The Prisons and Reformatories Act of 1911 played a significant role in solidifying this framework of racial segregation within the correctional system. This legislation was built upon

earlier colonial laws, effectively institutionalising racial discrimination throughout the prison system and establishing separate facilities, treatment, and resources based on race.

With the dawn of democracy in South Africa in 1994, the Department of Correctional Services recognised the urgent need to reform this deeply entrenched system. Following extensive consultations and a re-evaluation of correctional philosophies, the department articulated a new approach focused on human rights and rehabilitation (Vandala, 2019). The 2005 White Paper on Corrections marked a pivotal moment in this transformation, outlining a vision for a correctional system that prioritises humane treatment and the rehabilitation of offenders. It emphasises the importance of promoting social responsibility and fostering human development, aiming to reintegrate individuals into society as productive citizens rather than merely punishing them (Department of Correctional Services, 2005).

These reforms represent a significant shift from an emphasis on punishment to restorative justice, reflecting a broader societal commitment to equality, dignity, and human rights in the post-apartheid context.

2.5. The state of incarceration in South Africa

South Africa's incarceration rate is alarmingly high (Mlomo-Ndlovu & Luyt, 2023).. The country grapples with a myriad of pressing challenges within its correctional system, including severe overcrowding, insufficient healthcare services, and a lack of effective rehabilitation programmes (Muntingh & Redpath, 2018). Recent reports highlight that the number of inmates far exceeds the facilities' intended capacity, triggering widespread concerns regarding human rights abuses (Mlomo-Ndlovu & Luyt, 2023).

The issue of overcrowding not only compromises the safety and well-being of offenders but also facilitates the rapid spread of infectious diseases. Furthermore, it stifles meaningful

rehabilitation efforts that could help inmates reintegrate into society upon their release, in stark contrast to global trends, where many countries are shifting towards alternative sentencing options such as probation or community service (Gelb et al., 2019).

The intersection of disability and incarceration presents an important opportunity for research in South Africa. Disabled inmates encounter specific challenges, such as insufficient facilities, limited access to appropriate healthcare, and heightened vulnerability to abuse (Herbig & Hesselink, 2012). The Department of Correctional Services has recognised the need for inclusive policies, which is a positive step forward. However, there is a significant opportunity to enhance this effort by developing comprehensive data and targeted programs for disabled offenders (Fitz, 2021). Addressing this gap could lead to meaningful research and policy development that ensures the rights and needs of disabled inmates are effectively met.

2.6. Lived experiences of incarcerated individuals

Research on the lived experiences of inmates in South Africa underscores significant issues of systemic neglect, violence, and inadequate access to rehabilitation. The evidence demonstrates that overcrowding and a lack of resources foster a dehumanising environment that severely restricts personal development and effective rehabilitation (Murhula, 2019). Furthermore, marginalised groups, particularly individuals with disabilities, confront compounded challenges as they deal not only with the overarching adversities of incarceration but also with specific obstacles related to their disabilities. This severe reality demands urgent attention and action.

2.7. Rehabilitation and reintegration

South Africa's correctional policies emphasise rehabilitation and reintegration, aiming to reduce recidivism and facilitate offenders' return to society (Mdakane, 2016). The 2005 White

Paper on Corrections underscores rehabilitation as a core objective, promoting programs that address offenders' needs and societal reintegration (Department of Correctional Services, 2005). However, challenges persist, including resource constraints, inadequate program implementation, and societal stigma hindering successful reintegration (Muntingh, 2005). Disabled ex-offenders face additional barriers, such as discrimination and lack of support services, necessitating tailored reintegration strategies.

The architectural design of correctional institutions, specifically for housing physically disabled offenders, is a crucial area of focus (Engstrom & Van Ginneken, 2022). However, implementing structural changes in correctional centres is not a priority for the Department of Correctional Services.

While the country has shown a strong commitment to humane treatment for all offenders, expanding legal provisions to include those with physical disabilities would further enhance this commitment. By building on its position as one of the first twenty nations to sign the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities on March 30, 2007 (Oyaro, 2015), South Africa can take meaningful steps toward ensuring comprehensive protections for all vulnerable groups within its correctional system.

2.8. Theoretical frameworks

The study of incarceration in South Africa has been approached through various theoretical lenses, including criminology theories, social stigma theory, and resilience theory. Criminology theories explore the socio-economic and political factors contributing to criminal behaviour, while social stigma theory examines the societal labelling and marginalisation of offenders. Resilience theory focuses on individuals' adaptability despite adverse conditions, as

discussed in Huang et al. (2020). However, there is a lack of research applying these theories to the experiences of disabled inmates, indicating a gap that future studies should address.

2.9. Critique of the existing literature

While substantial research exists on South Africa's incarceration system, significant gaps remain, particularly concerning disabled inmates. Existing studies often overlook the unique challenges faced by this group, resulting in a lack of targeted policies and interventions. Additionally, while rehabilitation and reintegration are emphasised in policy documents, empirical evaluations of programme effectiveness are limited (Heap et al., 2009). Addressing these gaps is essential for developing a more inclusive and effective correctional system.

While there is growing research on disability and incarceration separately, studies that explicitly focus on the lived experiences of disabled offenders are limited. Most research relies on quantitative or third-person qualitative approaches, lacking the depth of first-person narratives (Depraz et al., 2017; Frank, 2002; Lumma & Weger, 2023). The relational aspects of incarceration and how disabled inmates interact with corrections staff, healthcare systems, and fellow inmates are underexplored. There is also limited use of autoethnography to document the experiences of disabled individuals in corrections. This method could provide a critical counter-narrative to prevailing institutional discourses.

2.10. Conclusion

This literature review examined the complex landscape of incarceration in South Africa, emphasising the historical contexts that have shaped the current correctional system. It identified several ongoing challenges, such as overcrowding, under-resourced facilities, and systemic discrimination.

A significant aspect of this discussion is the pressing need for inclusive policies catering to the inmate population's diverse needs. Among the particularly vulnerable groups discussed are disabled offenders, who currently face a lack of adequate support and resources. This situation highlights the urgent need for targeted research and tailored interventions to improve their conditions and address their specific requirements.

Future studies should aim to fill these critical knowledge gaps, ultimately guiding policymakers in developing strategies that foster a correctional system marked by humanity and effectiveness. It is essential that all inmates, regardless of their backgrounds or circumstances, have their rights upheld and their needs met within the correctional framework.

The previous chapter explored the complex historical and systemic elements that contribute to the incarceration phenomenon in South Africa. Examining the multifaceted roots of these issues established a solid foundation for comprehending the various challenges and disparities that are further examined in this literature review. Through thoroughly analysing these intertwined factors, we gain insight into the broader context of the criminal justice system and its implications for marginalised communities.

Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1. Introduction

Chapter 2 introduced the literature review, which identifies the areas that may be improved and provides the backdrop for this methodology chapter. This chapter will reveal the motivation for the research approach and methodology employed. To address the research question, namely to explore the lived experience of a disabled man who also served a term of incarceration, various elements used in this study will be highlighted and discussed.

Autoethnography will be covered in some detail, outlining the qualitative research approach used in this study. The unique components of an autoethnographical approach and contributing factors related to the study's trustworthiness will be addressed. The concluding section will provide a summary of the methodological approach.

3.2. Qualitative research

The ultimate decision between quantitative or qualitative study was a straightforward choice for me. My experiences are coloured with the emotional, vulnerable, and subjective tones of lived experiences within two specific contexts: disability and incarceration. Quantitative approaches reveal little about the individuals living behind the data. This study is certainly not simply a study of my life, as it stretches like an intricate spider's web to embrace the lived experiences of those I encountered along the journey. According to Adams et al. (2015), the qualitative approach explores human actions, intentions, motivations, and emotions.

A postmodern or postpositivist approach has provided researchers with an alternative to quantitative methods by emphasising qualitative methodologies (Glesne, 2016; Russell et al., 2018). Qualitative inquiry delves into everyday experiences and centres on subjective

perceptions and consciousness (McIlveen et al., 2008). This approach allows for a profound comprehension of participants' lived experiences and the meanings attached to those experiences (Candela, 2019). Throughout this study, there are many instances of what Gergen (2015) describes as numerous truths. Consequently, I aimed to present my experiences unbiasedly, free from preconceived outcomes. Tuffour (2017) echoes Creswell et al. (2007) in asserting that researchers should accurately depict lived experiences, employing descriptive language to convey emotions and feelings, which provides readers with a clear understanding.

3.3. The narrative inquiry

Ellis (2004) proposes that our stories mould our thinking in our everyday lives. Narratives influence many disciplines. Bochner and Ellis (2016) established and advocated narrative inquiry; the term initially referred to a qualitative research approach focused on understanding the intricate elements of lived experiences, specifically through the analysis of plot, character, and setting.

This approach highlights the significance of storytelling in conveying the depth and complexity of individual experiences (Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Bochner & Riggs, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2016). According to Bochner and Riggs (2014), human sciences should emphasise individual experiences, meaning, and personal identity while promoting awareness and interactive and explanatory methodologies.

3.4. Methodological choice

Choosing a methodology within the qualitative field is often a somewhat daunting task. Chang (2013) warns researchers to approach their research process carefully and analytically before beginning their research journey. Initially, the choices available to me did not fully meet the criteria of me as both a participant and researcher. Writing my study as a novel was one

method that might accommodate the dual role. However, my discovery of the writings of Chang (2008a, 2008b, 2013, 2016) and Ellis (1997, 2000, 2004, 2009) contributed significantly to my settling on my final decision. Considerations towards others in this study of my lived experiences include family, friends, fellow inmates, and correctional staff. While this study represents my lived experiences and the self, I am not alone. Chang (2008) refers to this collective of other individuals as personally and distantly connected to the self.

Ellis's influence and Chang's sealed my decision to choose autoethnography. I appreciated that autoethnography would accommodate the self, which is part of the social constructionist lens, so prominent in autoethnographical studies and confirmed by Burr (2015). There is a postulation that qualitative research constructs reality and truth through individuals' interactions with one another and their environments (Silverman, 2000).

3.5. Autoethnography: A brief history

During the 1980s, the postmodern epistemological stance began questioning in which way the facts and so-called truths that were found were intimately tied to the scientists' languages and theories (Ellis et al., 2010). Jumping ahead to 1990, Bochner and Ellis taught narrative and autoethnographic courses that embrace the intricacies of research and the researcher's subjectivity, effectively capturing the vibrant chaos of life in diverse and impactful ways.(Bochner & Ellis, 2016).

As autoethnography has advanced, it has become a powerful tool for amplifying and repositioning marginalised voices (Marx et al., 2017). Autoethnography has been defined in various ways, but a contemporary and succinct definition describes it as an ethnographic inquiry that centres on the researcher's personal experiences. In this approach, the researcher draws upon their autobiographical materials, weaving together their narrative with broader cultural, social,

and historical contexts. This method allows for deep reflection and insight as the researcher analyses their life stories as a primary data source, thereby illuminating the relationship between the personal and the collective (Railsback, 2020).

According to Ellis and Bochner (2000), the autoethnographic approach has emerged because traditional ethnography's limitations often make the researcher an objective outsider. They argued that an autoethnographic perspective allows researchers to embrace subjectivity and encourages personal perspectives and emotions to enter the research process.

Ellis' two works, "*Final Negotiations: A Story of Love, Loss, and Chronic Illness*" (1995) and "*The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography*" (2004), questioned the boundaries of academic writing and highlighted the possibility of academic authors introducing storytelling and personal narrative into their work. The writing of Tony Adams (1998) and Arthur Bochner's "*Criteria Against Ourselves*" (2000) also made a significant contribution. These early pioneers laid the foundation to emphasise firsthand experiences, cultural understating, and self-reflection, which is core today and why it is regarded as a legitimate qualitative approach in research today (Ellis et al., 2001). During the evolution of autoethnography, it has become a way to relocate and reposition previously disregarded voices (Marx et al., 2017).

3.6. Autoethnography as a method

This research approach stemmed from the writings of Ellis and Bochner (2016), who stated that they begin with their own lives. They then focus their attention on physical emotions, thinking, and feelings. Thereafter, they use a process of introspection and sensitive recall to make sense of the experiences they have lived through. The mention of emotions, physical feelings, and thoughts opened an excellent opportunity for self-reflection in this work. According

to Bochner and Riggs (2014), autoethnography is a form of narrative inquiry that is both procedure and outcome.

Adams et al. (2015) go on to expound that autoethnography involves the self or (auto), culture or (ethno), and writing or (graphy). Autoethnography expands beyond the autobiography because it includes ethos and relations (Adams et al., 2015; Ellingson & Ellis, 2008; Ellis, 2004). Autoethnography is a qualitative research method in the social sciences that enables researchers to translate their discoveries into an academic context. This approach allows them to connect their personal experiences openly with their professional insights. (Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Schmid, 2019). Schmid (2019) emphasises that autoethnography is a method that enables often marginalised or unheard voices to enter academic discourse. She explains that it serves as a potential gateway for individuals with suppressed identities to articulate their experiences and share stories that may be silenced, overlooked, or considered taboo.

Schmid (2019) argues that autoethnography has the potential to transform individual reflexive narratives by revealing hidden and subversive texts. This approach can provoke meaningful discussions, enhance our understanding of personal and collective experiences, and challenge conventional narratives, ultimately inspiring new insights in future studies. An autoethnographic researcher would write knowingly (Bochner & Riggs, 2014; Chang et al., 2013) about a collection of people concerning the self (Adams et al., 2015; Chang, 2008; Reed-Danahay, 2021). Autoethnography, as a form of self-narrative research, puts us in the middle of things and urges us to write ourselves and our bodies back in (Ellis, 2004).

Autoethnography intertwines personal narratives with cultural study, providing a micro-analysis of the complexities of human experiences (Graham, 2015; Philaretou & Allen, 2005). As the researcher, I do not only reflect on my disability but also on the way the criminal justice

system introduced an entirely new consideration into my life. Through this dissertation, I hope to amplify my voice and critically examine how the social, cultural, and institutional forces have shaped my encounters with society both as a disabled person and as an individual within the confines of a correctional centre. I believe this study will contribute positively to disability studies and the discourse on criminal justice reform.

3.7. Autoethnography: Evocative, Analytic or Collaborative

The ever-increasing growth of researchers to employ autoethnographic approaches in their research reveals no single orientation in writing and can vary from grounded theory to emotional dialogue (Denshire, 2014; Rambo & Ellis, 2007).

The debate continues to establish what an autoethnography study should be like, with Méndez (2013) stating that no formal regulations exist. Within the autoethnographic community, the ideal form has also not been established, with two distinct emerging teams vying for recognition. The first team declaring evocative autoethnography is Bochner and Ellis (2016), and the second team, Anderson and Atkinson, is steadfast in adopting an analytical approach (Chang, 2008; Nicholson, 2010). The first team supports complete immersion of sensitivity and sentiment (Bochner & Riggs, 2014; Ellingson, 2006; Ellingson & Ellis, 2008), with the second leans towards a more contemptuous stance (Atkinson, 1997), suggesting the concept of complete immersion is egotistical, boastful, and narcissistic (Roth, 2009; Löwenheim, 2010; Wall, 2016) and as result autoethnography may be regarded as in an unconvincing light in academic circles. The ongoing debate about the balance between autoethnography's narrative and emotional aspects and its theoretical and scholarly components continues (Wall, 2016). This discussion highlights the traditional perspective of self within an ethnographic context rather than prioritising self as the focus.

Within both teams, the researcher shares their experiences in a specific culture; therefore, these approaches are valid. The merits and criticisms of both will rage on; however, I have decided to write this study in an evocative style, thanks to Ellis and Bochner's influence. I have also considered the reader in this regard, as I believe that a well-written autoethnographic study may have an impact from a humanistic level. This study revealed epiphanies and self-discovery during the analysis and discussion sections, which have been therapeutic to me, and I have no doubt had a similar effect on the reader. While the analytical and collaborative approaches have individual merits, they would not meet the intended outcomes I have penned into this study.

3.8. Evocative autoethnography

Evocative autoethnography approaches, suggests Ellis et al. (2010), are enveloped in an engagement of profound, present, and evocative research, which is always grounded in one's own experience. According to Anderson (2006), researchers who use personal stories in their work believe that describing emotional experiences truthfully and engagingly helps create an emotional connection with readers. This connection is the primary goal of their research.

I have preferred to study those significant life-changing events in my life. As Bochner and Riggs (2014) proposed, I intend to approach my research by engaging the reader with my thinking processes from an explorative rather than an explicit stance. The evocative approach will present my story so readers can conclude without my authority. My stance stems from the writings of Anderson (2006), Bochner and Ellis (2016), and Méndez (2013).

3.9. The Participant in Autoethnography

Chang (2008) argues that in autoethnographical studies, an individual is the primary data source. This means that my research is deeply intertwined with my identity as a human being. My background, early life and interactions with the world have significantly shaped this study. In

this sense, I embody “my story,” as highlighted by the works of (Ellis et al., 2011; Muncey, 2005; Rogers-Shaw, 2020).

The data set for this study was generated primarily from my memory and self-reflection of events over my entire life and within two specific contexts. During this chronological journey, I accept that other points of view have influenced my past experiences and perspectives. However, you will recall that I accept that multiple truths form valid descriptions of the same story. Therefore, I regard this as a positive aspect of the writing of my story. As the only participant in this study, I was not constrained by time, allowing me to take the reader through my diverse experiences, personal growth, and future aspirations. I will also clarify later how I maintained the focus of this dissertation within the boundaries of qualitative research rather than allowing it to evolve into a personal narrative.

3.10. The self of the researcher

This study needed to address how I could fulfil the role of simultaneously being a researcher and participant or, as Jones (2005) and Reed-Danahay (2021) refer to it, the dual identity of both researcher and participant. Reading the work of Gair (2019), I also stumbled upon this issue of the researcher being both the researcher and the participant. Gair suggests it creates a unique ethical dilemma that may present challenges regarding bias, objectivity, values, assumptions, and a potential conflict of interest. These challenges are negotiated via specific approaches that do not affect the study's credibility (Poerwandari, 2021). During this study, I imagined working for the Ministry of Hats, in that I often needed to wear a different hat, depending on the situation being explored.

An evocative autoethnographic study assumes the researcher is always biased (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), but the researcher should be open about them. I have always been aware of the

potential biases and included them in the study. Evocative autoethnography engages me deeply with narratives' recursive and constructivist aspects. By articulating my personal experiences, I connect my story to broader cultural and social constructs, enriching the narrative with insights that resonate beyond my journey. This introspective process enhances my understanding of how personal stories intertwine with collective experiences, revealing the complexities of identity and culture. Flemons and Green (2002) propose that you make certain assumptions about yourself that influence how you see yourself. If you share this story with others, you shape your identity personally and professionally.

The self-concept in autoethnographic writing is a process of intense scrutiny, reflexivity, deconstruction, and slow and steady reconstruction. (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). The process of deconstruction lays bare vulnerabilities and secrets. The researcher is then confronted with the dilemma of what to include and what to keep secret. Research issues wrestle with the researchers' challenge of self-protection, not only of the self but also of others (Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2008).

Therefore, although the Self is fundamental to the study, the Autoethnographical composition moulding this work allows me as a researcher to adopt an external position yet remain within the Self simultaneously (Reed-Danahay, 2021). During the data collection phase, I felt as though I was peering into the windows of the Self, searching for those nuggets of the lived experience that form the intricate parts of the entire study.

3.11. Data Collection

3.11.1. My memory data

Chang (2008) reveals that in autoethnographical research, data from information about individuals is acquired through their recollection, which can then be represented as textual data.

This recollection data is employed later in the methodological process (Chang et al., 2016).

While numerous techniques can be used to gather this recollection or memory data, it remains deeply personal.

As an autoethnographer, I possess unique access to my past experiences, their interpretations, and valuable insights into what is relevant to study. The memories derived from these experiences serve as the foundation for an autoethnographic dataset (Chang, 2008).

Viewing my world through a constructivist lens, I recognise that there are many ways to tell a story and that certain details may fade when recalling specific aspects of those experiences.

Memories may change from this perspective (Denzin, 2006). In addition, during the evolution of our life stories, we reexamine, rework, rewrite, restate, and recreate our stories (Bochner & Riggs, 2014). I have specifically used a recall technique of chronicling my past in this study. Chang (2008) described it as a personal narrative that outlines significant events or experiences arranged in the order they took place.

This chronological timeline, punctuated by momentous events over a lifetime, improves the accomplishment of my goals as a researcher. Using this method, I can concentrate on an event at a particular time and recall it in more detail. I often thought this experience was like being in a movie during the research process. I can recall smell, sound, and taste, resulting in a deeper understanding of those memories during the data analysis phase.

3.11.2. Autoethnographic interviews

Once again, it is here where the ‘Ministry of Many Hats’ enters the stage, and I reach up to the hat stand to select a suitable hat to wear. In the autoethnographic interview, as discussed in the work of Miyahara and Fukao (2022), I was required to adopt a dual role of interviewer and interviewee. I have conducted interviews with myself, exploring relevant topics, and in that

process, I used reflection and introspection to rediscover and expose lived experiences. The interview allowed me to criticise myself and simultaneously made me appreciate the importance of self-awareness, which Vryan (2006) also penned in his work titled “*Expanding Analytic Autoethnography and Enhancing its Potential*”. Self-awareness has shed light on my experiences dealing with trauma, identity, cultural and social belonging.

3.11.3. Observations

As suggested by Ellis and Flaherty (1992), data collection expands upon autoethnographic inquiry by stating that data collection hinges more on ethical and appealing sensitivities, which are then integrated into various autoethnographic modes of inquiry. Observation in this context has been a repetitive process for me. Identifying the behaviour of either myself or others is immediately captured and stored. I then know the initial impact; however, the more I observe, the more meaning is emitted. It is, therefore, critical to turn our observations back on ourselves and then pen our observations, disclosing in the process what we observe in the world from our own experience (Bochner & Ellis, 2016).

Frechette et al. (2020) concur that observation invites an enriching silence from the researcher, creating space for a deeper connection with the surroundings and various ways to gather information that tangibly engages the senses. In moments of stillness and openness, I become attuned to the nuances of my environment. I can see intricate details I might have otherwise missed, hear subtle sounds that linger in the background, and even taste the layers of flavour that float in the air. I feel the textures around me deepening my connection to the world. This mindful engagement transforms my experience, where every silent interval becomes a gateway to deeper understanding.

Observation is an essential contributor to the data collection process. However, as the researcher, I needed to know that observation is not a single-phased exercise but a repetitive process which delivers the rich meaning of the world around me and my reaction to that world.

3.11.4. My reflexive data

Autoethnography is a powerful and insightful process of self-reflection and introspection. It enables individuals to delve into their own experiences and emotions, crafting compelling narratives that engage with broader cultural contexts. One can be easily swayed into falling into a state of self-absorption. Prevention lies in the adoption of a methodical procedure that creates a distance from this practice. This meta-cognitive action provides the scaffolding for focused and well-balanced field journaling during fieldwork to assist in moving in and out of the self-reflexive state (Chang, 2008).

For my self-reflexive data, I relied on recorded audio and printed-out notes, as relevant and significant memories triggered thoughts and ideas during my reflective moments. My constructivist worldview also presented itself during this phase, as I did not conclude with objective truth but focused on presenting a study that allowed me to be authentic and as unedited as possible.

Reflexivity and positionality within any autoethnographical study emphasise the degree to which the researcher is aware of their own biases and subjectivity throughout the research process (Anderson, 2006). The concept of reflexivity is also included here to deal with the double identity referred to by Jones (2005) and Reed-Danahay (2021). This is also proposed by Richardson (2000), one of the pioneers of qualitative research, who emphasises that the researcher should be aware of the role of the self in defining the research process. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) also discuss the importance of researcher's awareness of their stance and bias in

qualitative research. Ellis (2004) also promotes reflexivity to reveal the researcher's emotions, subjectivity and vulnerability.

As this study deals with physical disability, I know its influence on the reader. Different disabilities manifest a different set of outcomes in research. I, for example, cannot pretend that I appreciate the life experiences of a visually impaired individual. As a researcher, I needed to be constantly aware of these potential influences (Owens, 2015; Persson et al., 2015).

3.12. Data management and analysis

Personal narratives and storytelling were instrumental in the data collection process. As the researcher, I explored my lived experiences through memories and reflections and then used storytelling to present and analyse the data. Autoethnography is a form of writing and research that combines autobiographical elements with various levels of awareness, according to Ellis (2004). However, in my writing, aware of my role as a participant and researcher, I was involved in a process in which I constantly came back to check on myself. Autoethnographic work produces personal accounts which influence the author's/researcher's insights to deepen sociological comprehension (Sparkes, 2000).

The question that arose for me, was the concern that Chenail (2012) has when considering which data point would represent a profound aspect to analyse. While there are many ways to analyse data in the qualitative environment, Bochner (2012) suggests that reflection is the core of autoethnographic storytelling, while Gornick (2008) suggests that it is the penetration of reflection that ultimately determines its success or failure. Chang (2008) goes on to point out that it is through information management that the researcher determines which components of the dataset fit into the study's aims and objectives. There is a point in time when

analysing data that no new information can be extracted (Boyatzis, 1998; Vaismoradi et al., 2016).

3.13. Thematic analysis

Terre Blanche et al. (2006) and Castleberry and Nolen (2018) suggest that thematic analysis may be divided into five steps. The first is reading and rereading texts to get to know and familiarise oneself with the texts so that the meaning is known. Second, one should identify themes that appear naturally and align with the research questions. Third, the themes should be coded, which involves placing data into analytical themes. The fourth step repeats the third step until new themes are found, and the fifth step involves checking and interpreting the data.

I used MS Word to highlight a particular theme immediately presented in the text. I did this by colour coding until I had several themes and no more colour choices. I then analysed the colours that seemed similar in terms of content. This exercise produced the final themes, which form part of the final analysis.

3.14. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

The interpretative approach has been used in several autoethnographic studies. For instance, the study by Fung (2014) on her relocation to Australia at the age of fifteen from Macau and how her lived experiences provided for absorption into different cultures, experiencing gender bias, identity crises and racial discrimination. Her triple hermeneutics of writer, interpreter, and observer resonated with me as she suggests that autoethnography research has a transformative influence on the researcher conducting the research.

The interpretative approach has four distinct characteristics, according to Hammersley (2012). The first is a subjective meaning associated with individuals and their experiences rather than seeking an absolute truth. Secondly, there is a contextual understanding of the social and

cultural contacts in which individuals live and interact. As the researcher, I recognise that cultural, historical, and social factors influence the meanings and behaviour of the researched individuals (Emery & Anderson, 2020; Nizza et al., 2021). The interpretivist method also seeks to capture the subtle nuances of subjective experience and interpretations. Finally, as the researcher, I actively reflect on my biases, assumptions, and values throughout the research process. Now, more on the coding and categorisation processes.

3.15. The coding and categorisation

The labelling and coding of my data followed a process of initially reading and identifying what I referred to as labelling from research readings by several authors. Once I had a set of labels, I coded these into themes. I soon appreciated that specific themes were repeating and subsequently grouped these. The data analysis in this study was achieved by combining two approaches: Thematic and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA has been used extensively in autoethnographical studies (Guihen, 2020). The motivation for the use was their similarities and their interchangeable characteristics. IPA explores the subjective experiences of individuals and the meaning they assign to those experiences.

Therefore, it provides a map for a detailed exploration of individuals underlying psychological processes. Extracting the themes, I regarded them as the process for which the subject matter required for IPA could be provided. IPA also proved extremely valuable in associating themes to the psychological theory relevant to exposing and explaining the theme content. Allow me to discuss these tools in greater detail.

Coding and categorisation are both vital parts of the qualitative analysis of the IPA. I regard it as rearranging the fruit basket, where I place the apples with apples and berries with the berries, likes with likes. While IPA promotes the inductive nature of the analysis, as the

researcher, I nevertheless needed to identify the patterns and themes embedded in the text and memory recall. This also applied to all other data types, which, as previously mentioned, included a wide range of inputs. Smith et al. (2009) emphasise the need to recapture themes in the text or dataset being analysed, irrespective of how frequently it is represented.

The thematic analysis results provided a dataset confirming that the IPA analysis was needed. The complementing of the two analysis approaches was evident at this stage. While I did not record during the IPA approach, I was provided with a map of the area's leading to the final and discussion processes. It was via the two processes of thematic and IPA that I found myself intricately involved in the analysis and could not disembodify myself from either process. The two formed one process, feeding off and strengthening the other.

3.16. Addressing credibility concerns

The autoethnographic approach needs to address the concerns associated with trustworthiness. While autoethnography is subjective and interpretive, questions related to trustworthiness remain to be answered. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), one strategy states that there is an ongoing process of self-awareness in which researchers examine how their own experiences, beliefs, and values influence the research process. I found that by explicitly addressing these aspects within my research, I was capable to enhance the trustworthiness of the study.

I employed a technique that Ellis (2007) referred to in her publication "*Telling Secrets Revealing Lives*", of 'member checking', where I shared my research findings and my interpretations with significant others to confirm the accuracy of my findings. This contributed to the trustworthiness of my study findings. "Triangulation" (Bowen, 2009, p. 1) is a further technique to strengthen the trustworthiness of my qualitative study. I have referred to this

technique in another disguise, but initially, triangulation is a confirming technique. One example is that I regard myself as a caring person. I wondered if this was always the case. I found a photograph of my sister and I, noticeably young, having a portrait photo session done. There is one photograph where I am consoling her as she cries profusely. This confirms the caring trait for me. This will be reconfirmed in the next chapter's final analysis results and discussion. In this regard, Creswell and Creswell (2017) state that triangulation helps provide a more complete and accurate representation of the phenomenon under study.

3.17. Rich description

I discovered the importance of what Anderson (2006) refers to as the extended and thick description of the social and personal contexts of the phenomena in question. I must adhere to my writing ability and provide the reader with a rich, detailed, descriptive context, data collection and analytical process throughout the study. This adherence allows the reader to understand my journey and my decision-making processes, aiding in the credibility of my interpretations. Adopting the above process means that the trustworthiness of any autoethnographic study can be strengthened and contribute to credible research.

3.18. Limitations, personal biases, and assumptions

Although there may be many limitations, the most immediate is that this study is confined to a physically disabled man who was disabled later in life. I was also incarcerated at the age of 55. Furthermore, I do not pretend or make excuses for my personality traits and view of my lifeworld. Any other individual with a different set of personality and life skills may present differently in a similar study. My constructivist view also allows for multiple inputs (truths), which are all valid and significant.

I will also safely assume that an individual with a different type of disability, such as hearing loss, may result in different outcomes. My racial classification, education, and interaction with a different historical past influenced the study's flow and outcome. Notwithstanding my biases, beliefs, and responses, I have undertaken to be responsible for not allowing them to infiltrate the final work.

In the writing of analysis from an autoethnographical perspective, the data reveals the sequence of events, the contextual significance and the consequences of involvement. In conclusion, I believe this design has contributed to shaping the study. Throughout the data collection process, I have uncovered subtle nuances of experiences, contributing to my personal growth, connection, and transformation. Ellis (2004) aims for an engaging narrative approach found in autoethnographies that invites readers to connect with my experiences and see how they relate to their own lives or those of others. I trust that my findings and discussions within the remaining pages will reflect the complexities and intricacies of the human condition. As a reader, I trust you may reflect on glimpses of your stories.

3.19. Trustworthiness of the study

Trustworthiness comprises credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). This comprehensive framework evaluates the quality and trustworthiness of qualitative research. Guba and Lincoln also state that conformability refers to the same concept as confirmability, which relates to any research study's objectivity and neutrality. Researchers now often use the Guba and Lincoln framework to assess the rigour and quality of their respective studies. Various authors have attempted to modify this framework, but the original allows it to appear.

How we evaluate the quality and credibility within an IPA analysis is now widely accepted as an important criterion in qualitative research studies (Nizza et al., 2021). Nizza et al. further reveal that IPA is a qualitative method that searches for meaning in a detailed and precise way based on personal lived experience. Credibility and trustworthiness are, therefore, crucial elements of any reputable study. The evaluation of IPA studies for achieving excellence was initially highlighted in the works of Smith (2011). Smith established guidelines that could be used to evaluate whether an IPA achieved any level of academic success. Nizza (2021) expanded on Smith's work by setting the quality criteria required into four distinct steps.

Nizza et al. (2021) further expanded upon these quality steps, drawing on two papers regarded as exceptional, both IPA. These are the publications of Conroy and de Visser (2015) and Dwyer et al. (2019). I have adhered to the same criteria, ensuring that the analysis conforms to similar criteria finally decided upon by Nizza et al. (2021).

Whether an autoethnographical study may be regarded as trustworthy also includes whether the work is ethical (Méndez, 2013). However, Le Roux (2017) suggests that while ethical parameters are important, five additional steps or criteria should also be present when assessing a study's trustworthiness. The first point is that the subjectivity of the study must allow the self to be visible in the study. Second, the researchers' self-reflexivity should be visible in the introspection, which considers the cultural and historical backdrop of the study. The third point seeks evidence of the degree of resonance the work shows and how the reader can effortlessly experience and engage with the story emotionally and intellectually. The fourth point revolves around credibility, the degree to which verisimilitude and honesty come to the fore in the work. Lastly, to what degree does the study generate and extend knowledge, and to what extent does the study contribute to potential ongoing research, empowerment, and social change?

Although, as mentioned before, specific criteria are set out to reach a consensus that a study has achieved academic success, the informed judgement of any assessor remains the best tool in evaluating studies for trustworthiness. The assessors' academic competency will always be the best guide in assessing any study's degree of trustworthiness (Roy & Uekusa, 2020). The writings of Harwood and Eaves (2017) suggest that incorporating rich, detailed descriptions will bolster the trustworthiness of any research while drawing from various data sources brings us closer to a more authentic representation of reality. This aligns with a social constructivist perspective, which embraces the idea of multiple truths existing simultaneously. Chang (2016), however, warns against five conditions to avoid safeguarding verisimilitude:

- A. Focusing too much on individual experiences without considering the broader social context.
- B. Prioritising storytelling at the expense of deeper analysis and cultural insights.
- C. Depending solely on personal memories for information rather than incorporating various sources.
- D. Failing to uphold ethical practices in sharing narratives that involve others.

Incorrectly applying the term autoethnography to works that do not meet its criteria

This research had me moving between two distinct cultures, disabled and offender, which led me to be fully aware of my participation in each cultural group. This satisfied the recognition of A) and B) above. My mindfulness of the potential bias on the recollection met the criteria for C). I used pseudonyms and descriptions, not real names when referring to individuals in my narratives to avoid D). I went further to the standards of Bochner and Ellis, which have three goals: to spark dialogue focusing on the experiences of real individuals, with an emphasis on

cultural awareness and understanding, to avoid universal language, and to present research in a straightforward and clear style (Ellis & Bochner, 2006).

Trustworthiness comprises credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). This comprehensive framework evaluates the quality and trustworthiness of qualitative research. Guba and Lincoln also state that conformability refers to the same concept as confirmability, which relates to any research study's objectivity and neutrality. Researchers now often use the Guba and Lincoln framework to assess the rigour and quality of their respective studies. Various authors have attempted to modify this framework, but the original allows it to appear.

Establishing credibility within this study will not comply with any template or protocols. The reason for this approach is supported by including psychological theories, introducing a further element of credibility to the study. However, the conclusions reached will be presented in a format that will confirm compliance with credibility. This approach is supported by Harley and Cornelissen (2022), who postulate that any study needs to demonstrate credibility but not be dictated to by a specific template and go further to state that credibility emanates from how researchers actively participate in a thoughtful reasoning process to draw theoretical insights from their data.

Establishing credibility Smith (2011) initially searches for sensitivity to context, commitment, transparency, coherence, impact and importance within a work (as cited in Vicary et al., 2017). The IPA subscribes to its theoretical principles: phenomenological, hermeneutic, and idiographic, and as the name suggests, the interpretation of phenomenon and the analysis of the same (Smith, 2011). This process has two parts: the first is that the participant must make sense of a particular phenomenon, and the second is that the researcher must make sense of the

participants' interpretation. This double hermeneutic is critical in deciding whether the IPA process identifies with quality and is valid (Todorova, 2011; Vicary et al., 2017). While this study has only one participant, the interrogation of experiences reflected against various interpretations, with a backdrop of psychological theories as an explanation, all contribute to the study's high credibility in the final analysis.

Although, as mentioned before, specific criteria are set out to reach a consensus that a study has achieved academic success, the informed judgement of any assessor remains the best tool in evaluating studies for trustworthiness. The assessors' academic competency will always be the best guide in assessing any study's degree of trustworthiness (Roy & Uekusa, 2020).

3.20. Conclusion

This chapter presented the methodological framework underpinning this study, focusing on the autoethnographic approach to exploring the personal and contextual dimensions of disability and incarceration. The research underscores the complex relationship between individual narratives and broader cultural analyses by employing reflexivity, thematic analysis, and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Detailed strategies such as triangulation, rich description, and self-reflexivity were implemented to ensure credibility and trustworthiness, aligning the study with rigorous academic standards while preserving its authenticity and emotional depth. The study's findings offer a nuanced perspective on lived experiences at the intersection of disability and incarceration, contributing to broader academic discussions in disability studies and criminal justice reform.

The next chapter will examine the results and discussions, focusing on emergent themes, critical reflections, and theoretical insights derived from the data. Embark on a thrilling exploration of narratives that connect personal experiences to the rich tapestry of the social,

cultural, and institutional frameworks. This journey promises to unveil a deeper understanding of the human condition, revealing the hidden complexities and dynamic contexts that shape our lives. Get ready to discover the extraordinary within the ordinary.

Chapter 4

Results and discussion of the findings

4.1. Introduction

This chapter will delve into the study's results and findings, underlining their profound significance. The Anderson analytic framework for autoethnography (Anderson, 2006) steers the discussion, validating the personal experience within a broader cultural, social, and political phenomenon. Anderson (2006) proposes an analytic reflexivity approach that links the researcher's personal experiences to larger theoretical frameworks, a process that will be explored in depth.

This depth aspect is facilitated by psychological autoethnography, a unique approach that uses psychological theories as frameworks for understanding personal experiences rather than relying solely on sociological or anthropological lenses (Ellis, 2004; Pelias, 2018). Furthermore, the discussion will be in chronological order, and I have included below a life timeline to facilitate the sequence and development of my lived experiences. I now discuss the various themes and sub-themes, including the life timeline for reference.

The Life Timeline below is a chronological graphical representation of the significant aspects of my experiences. These considerable aspects are reflected in the discussion of each theme and sub-themes.

4.2. Life Timeline

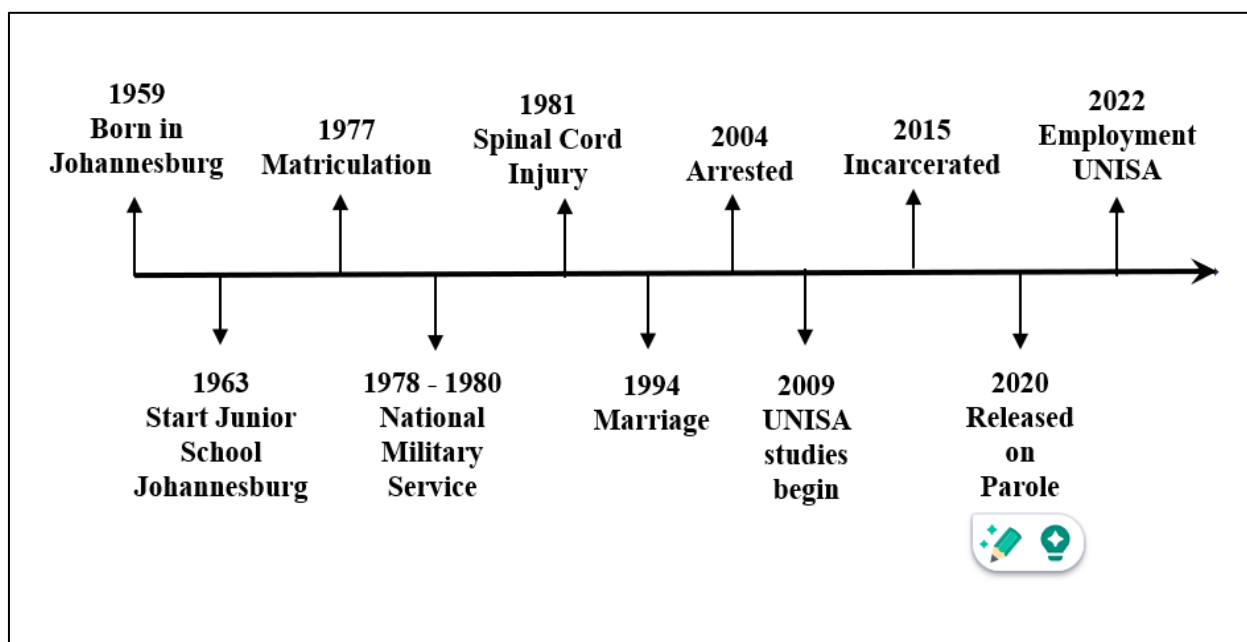


Diagram 1: Life Timeline

Below is a Diagram 2 of the main themes and sub-themes emerging from the qualitative analysis, which I will expand upon in the subsequent relevant sections and discuss individually.

4.3. Themes and sub-themes

Diagram 2: Themes and Sub-themes table

4.4 Early life and foundations	<p>4.4.1 Family background schooling</p> <p>4.4.2 Childhood memories, interests and hobbies</p>
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4.5 Military Service and Development	<p>4.5.1 Balancing childhood interests and adult responsibilities</p> <p>4..6.2 Mental strength and confidence building</p>
4.6 Rehabilitation and Independence	<p>4.6.1 Hospitalisation, Mobility, identity and self-Care</p> <p>4.6.2 Hospitalisation recovery</p>
4.7 Emotional Struggles and Acceptance	<p>4.6.1 Regrets (Fathers' advice, consequences of decisions)</p> <p>4.6.2 Feeling burdensome and struggling emotionally</p> <p>4.6.3 Acceptance of life's positives and negatives, building resilience</p>
4.7 Family and Relationships	<p>4.7.1 Support from family and building meaningful relationships</p> <p>4.7.2 Confidence to love</p> <p>4.7.3 Build a family and navigate intimacy</p>
4.8 Personal Transformation and Growth	<p>4.8.1 Transformation post-accident</p> <p>4.8.2 Adaptability</p> <p>4.8.3 Humour and personal growth</p>

4.9 Incarceration and Legal Challenges	4.9.1 Struggles with injustice 4.9.2 Self-Reflection and guilt 4.9.3 Self-representation in court and guilt 4.9.4 Challenges of incarceration and new Cultural perspectives 4.9.5 Time for reflection and reform
4.10 Education and Lifelong Learning	4.10.1 Early schooling and military education 4.10.2 Post-injury education and Unisa Qualifications 4.10.3 Benefits of lifelong learning

The diagram above includes all the main themes. The second column of the table discusses each sub-theme.

4.4. Early Life and Foundations

4.4 Early Life and Foundations	4.4.1 Family background and schooling 4.4.2 Childhood memories, interests and hobbies
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4.4.1. Family background and schooling

I was born in Johannesburg, South Africa and am the eldest of three children, followed by my sister (nineteen months younger) and my brother (ten years younger). Our family

represented the typical middle-class household where hard work and perseverance were emphasised and encouraged as essential values. My parents came from economically challenging backgrounds and instilled in us a sense of determination and belief that nothing was impossible if approached with dedication and commitment.

My father's upbringing was challenging in that he lost both his parents at the age of seven and was raised by his four eldest sisters, revealing how sibling relationship networks offset the absence of parental figures. These circumstances likely contributed to the strong work ethic he passed down to us and his emphasis on resilience and self-reliance.

According to family systems theory, families function as complex, interconnected systems where each member plays a distinct role, and any change in one part of the system affects the whole (Reiter, 2023). I recall family systems theory from my undergraduate studies, realising how my family adhered to many of the homeostasis, boundaries, rules and communication principles Reiter (2023) describes in her work, creating a balanced environment crucial for our development. My family system was one in which my parents played complementary roles, establishing structure and support that promoted individual and collective growth.



Figure 1: My father, Kenneth

My father was the one parent we, as children, never questioned. However, he was extremely fair, while my mother would be more accommodating in certain situations. My father did perform corporal punishment on my sister, brother, and me, and it was shortly before his death that he asked me never to do the same with my child. I will never know whether this was an admission that he had misused that form of discipline, but I regarded it as a form of apology.



Figure 2: Me, 1964 school.

My early schooling, at the age of four, was at a convent also in Johannesburg. Here, I began a journey of exploration into my Catholic faith. I was delighted to start school, and very soon, my first sports day arrived. A race was run, and prizes were awarded to the top three children. I was gutted and confused that I had been overlooked and received no prize. Little did I

realise that this was my introductory lesson to competitiveness. However, I also felt inadequate, which profoundly influenced my emerging self-worth. Although I gave my very best during the race, I realised that giving your best, in some situations, is not all that is required. My parents were very supportive, and I soon felt less sad, allowing me to navigate this challenge with a newfound resilience.

When I think of it from a theoretical perspective, this experience can be interpreted through the lens of developmental psychology, particularly Erikson's stages of psychosocial

development theory (Gross, 2020). At this stage (industry vs. inferiority), the failure to achieve success in athletics may have triggered feelings of inadequacy and frustration. Although my developing confidence was challenged, it highlighted the cultural emphasis on achievement and recognition that entered my childhood environment, as Kumar et al. (2018) revealed.

4.4.2. Childhood memories, interests, and hobbies



Figure 3: My sister, me consoling.

My earliest memories are of always being with my sister, holding her hand and pulling her close whenever she cried, as if this would protect her from the world. This photograph of us when I was two or three shows her little face scrunched up in tears and I, the protective older brother, trying to comfort her. That was my first role as protector, the one in charge, even if it was to

convince her to play cowboys and Indians and other roles that I required.

Of course, it was not always easy for her. I bullied her into being my playmate, pushing her into roles she did not want to play, but that is what older brothers do, right? However, when she was older and started to pull away, finding her friends, it felt more like a loss than a sign that I needed to expand my friend circle too. It was not as if I did not miss those days of simple companionship, but I also knew I had to let her go.



Figure 4: Sister and me.

Being the older sibling and having adopted the role of protector can be contextualised through the birth order theory of Adler (1928), expanded upon by Black et al. (2018), in which the eldest child is said to feel responsible for younger siblings. For example, my behaviour with my sister, such as beckoning her to participate in games I had already started, highlights dominance but also shows a degree of caring for her. According to Aubrey et al. (2013) and Black et al. (2018), their research also reveals that firstborn children tend to be leaders. These sibling dynamics, however, also reflect the very complex negotiation of social roles in childhood.

The fact that I insisted on being the leader of our games and the subsequent loss I felt when she began to have her own set of friends reveals a process of individualism as children grow older and establish identities independent of their siblings. In psychosocial development, the latter process represents the need to extend social networks beyond the family unit as part of healthy development (Erikson, 1950; Nijhof et al., 2018).

However, another significant memory of my childhood was when, at seven years old, in the sticky heat of a Johannesburg Easter, I was to be seen dragging a heavy wooden cross in the backyard of our home for over an hour. I had made a crown from the branches of a thorny hedge on my parent's property. The sharpness of the thorns biting into my scalp, I remember the weight of the cross on my shoulders. I was also unaware that my acting out of the Crucifixion made my family raise an eyebrow or two, as my grandmother would later ask my mother if something mentally inappropriate was happening to me. It was not about being an attention-seeker or impressing anyone; this was something deep inside me that drove me to understand suffering. I

have always suggested that my Catholic schooling and parental active commitment to the faith were contributing factors.

My Catholic upbringing, drenched in religious doctrine, was perhaps the main reason that I regarded dedication thoughtfully at that early age. Either way, that day under the sun, carrying that cross, was to be one that would never leave my life. I can feel my mother's palm resting on my head, her voice soft, telling me to be careful. Later, when I told them that I wanted to be a priest, it was to this same sense of commitment toward faith that those words were prompted, as indeed, it had led my hands to build that wooden cross.

The dramatisation of the Crucifixion that I performed at seven also speaks to the early internalisation of Catholic doctrine, highly informed by religious education and my parents' socialisation (Ekaningtyas & Yasa, 2022). I recall being very young and the Catholic priest coming to our home for meals regularly. This bears out in retrospect also as a function of Erikson's stage of industry versus inferiority (Gross, 2020), where children begin to take pride in their accomplishments and a sense of competence. My determination to carry the wooden cross, even in the heat, was probably an early manifestation of this psychosocial development stage in which I also tried to prove my religious commitment and establish a sense of personal achievement.

The very next year, my family relocated to Boksburg, near Johannesburg, South Africa. In the process, access to a Catholic educational system was terminated due to financial constraints. I now attend a public school. At this primary school, life would be different. I can still remember the sting of the nickname "Big Ears" from the rear of the bus by an arrogant fellow pupil from the same school. I felt small and invisible, except for my ears, which now

seemed more enormous every time he called me out. Weeks later, this same individual would move his focus from my ears to focus on the shape of my head.

Something was triggered inside me on a particular day after the first outburst. Something snapped when he shouted, “Hey, Egg Head” from the back of the bus. My heart pounding in my chest, I moved toward the back of the bus, and before I knew it, my fist connected with his face. The blood on his white shirt surprised me more than the punch itself. Fortunately, he did not retaliate. He just stared at me, stunned.

The bullying I went through, particularly the name-calling and social exclusion, is consistent with the findings of Nansel et al. (2013) and Beale (2001), who defines bullying as repeated aggressive behaviour aimed at asserting dominance and power. In my case, the bully’s use of the term “Big Ears” was a way to control the social situation and portray me as an outsider.

However, when I eventually physically retaliated, which was out of character for me, it can be viewed as an attempt to regain power and assert my identity. Research indicates that assertive responses to bullying can reduce its psychological impact (Recchia et al., 2019), and in my case, this is supported by the immediate end of the teasing and the change in how I was perceived socially. Additionally, this incident can reflect Erikson’s industry versus inferiority stage, as discussed in Orenstein and Lewis (2022), as standing up for myself helped me develop a sense of competence and self-efficacy.

Looking back on my childhood, it is evident that my interests were quite different from the ones my father tried to encourage in me. Despite his attempts to involve me in gardening and practical activities like building and repairing, I was more drawn to intellectual pursuits such as chemistry and chess. This difference can be explained by intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation,

with my father's desires representing external expectations, while my attraction to intellectual activities reflects my internal interests. At the same time, religion became a significant part of my daily life, further shaping my identity. This concurs with LeGault's (2020) and Locke and Schattke's (2019) research on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

Television was unavailable when I was a young boy, so I often pretended to be a keen reader, a behaviour I now realise was mostly to satisfy my parents' hopes for me. Their dedication to our education was evident in their decision to invest in a complete encyclopaedia, providing my sister and me with learning opportunities they had never had. While reflecting their unfulfilled aspirations, this investment also highlights the broader societal emphasis on education and self-improvement to move up in the world.

4.5. Military service and development

4.5 Military service and development	<p>4.5.1 Balancing childhood interests and adult responsibilities</p> <p>4.5.2 Mental strength and confidence building</p>
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Between 1967 and 1994, all physically fit white men in South Africa were required to complete national military service, a policy that reflected the broader sociopolitical context of apartheid (Callister, 2007). This two-year conscription often placed individuals on the border of Angola and South African-occupied Namibia or later within the South African townships during the intense mid-1980s political unrest. For many young white men, including myself, this was a life-altering experience that shaped our understanding of race, identity, and responsibility.

I received my call-up papers at the beginning of my final year in high school. These papers signalled that national service would soon consume my life for two years. The limited options from the South African Defence Force (SADF) provided either the navy, army, or air force, none of which appealed to me. Nevertheless, given the apartheid government's policies and societal expectations, I understood that national service was inevitable unless I chose to attend university directly after high school. I was allocated to the army, yet I remained unsure whether to study first and later complete my national service.

This period of life, as described by Arnett (2004), refers to a period of emerging adulthood. In this stage, individuals between 18 and 29 explore identities and life roles while lacking long-term commitments. The choice between military service and further education illustrates the broader sociopolitical pressures and personal challenges that young white men faced during apartheid. I was unprepared for the experience.

4.5.1. Balancing childhood interests and adult responsibilities

As a boy, I was never interested in war, soldiers, or tanks; my games included cowboys and Indians. Military service was not something I envisioned. However, given the social and political environment of the time, there was little room for alternative futures. Akram (2023) notes that intensely repeated practices and attitudes acquired from shared material conditions shape our choices. The repression by the Nationalist government and apartheid culture severely limited my ability to make meaningful decisions regarding adulthood.

Despite briefly attending the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg before my call-up date, I was to be found protesting on campus against apartheid and human rights. My immaturity and paternal advice made me consider military service a rite of passage. The choice to join the army, made reluctantly, would significantly shape my life. Althusser's concept of

ideological state apparatuses, Wolff (2020) describes how the military socialised young men like me who were forced to accept the state's ideologies on race, masculinity, and authority. Through the military, we were indoctrinated with apartheid values, including nationalism, white supremacy, and anti-communism. The first week of military service was a cultural shock for me.

The diverse socio-economic backgrounds of my fellow conscripts forced me to confront my limited interactions and the unconscious biases I had absorbed throughout my prior life. Implicit bias theory suggests that biases are often absorbed from societal norms (Brownstein & Zalta, 2019). In this case, apartheid's racial hierarchy had shaped my perceptions of Afrikaners. It was only through the forced interactions with other conscripts, both English and Afrikaans speaking, I began to question my assumptions and place them within the larger structures of white privilege.

4.5.2. Mental strength and confidence building

The early days of military service were marked by extreme psychological stress and verbal abuse from the military officers. This process, described by Foucault in the writing of Ingham (2018), suggests that as disciplinary power, it sought to break down individual personalities and rebuild completely obedient soldiers. Respect was demanded, not earned. As described by Doherty (2014) and Feinstein (2011), this approach is common in military training worldwide and is designed to produce soldiers who will not hesitate to follow orders in wartime. While this process was influential in moulding us into soldiers, it also revealed the military's deeper function as an ideological apparatus supporting the apartheid regime's narrative of external threats, particularly communism, and protecting South Africa.

One of the most significant aspects of my military service was the racial composition of my fellow soldiers. As a white man who had grown up attending Sunday Mass with Zulu-

speaking Catholics, coupled with my liberal upbringing, the absence of non-white conscripts was striking. This exclusion reflected the broader policy of exempting non-white groups from compulsory military service, a clear example of the systemic racism of the apartheid regime. Military service became a domain for white youths, both English- and Afrikaans-speaking, while Black South Africans were excluded. Later, during actual war operations, I would discover that Black men were indeed to be seen as trackers and specialised soldiers.

My biases against Afrikaners (Afrikaans-speaking citizens), inherited from my family's historical views rooted in the Anglo-Boer War, resurfaced. The cultural and class differences among my fellow soldiers initially heightened tensions, reinforcing the belief that I was 'better' than others—a belief the military would later challenge. The early days of military training were designed to break us down physically and mentally. However, I realised how the military built mental toughness and resilience over time. Bell et al. (2015) and Beattie et al. (2023) define mental toughness as coping with stress and adversity, a skill essential for military personnel. The military's systematic approach to developing resilience through physical exhaustion, emotional stress, and group cohesion instilled in me a sense of confidence and resilience that I would carry with me beyond military service.

I was selected for leadership training at Infantry School, which recognised the leadership qualities I had developed in high school. Kouzes and Posner's (2023) work on leadership highlights how military institutions use behavioural and cognitive psychology to train leaders to operate in extreme conditions. This training taught me resilience, leadership in adversity, and confidence, aligning with Bandura's (1997) concept of self-efficacy.

Arriving at Ruacana, on the then South-West African (now Namibia) / Angolan border, as an Officer, it became clear that South Africa was at war. The threat of communist invasion,

particularly from Cubans, Russians, and East Germans through Angola, was part of the apartheid government's propaganda, as outlined by Nel (2019). The state-controlled flow of information ensured that the public was kept in the dark about the realities of the war, instead fostering fear of communist threats. My deployment at Ruacana was a military operation and part of the state's ideological project. Smith (2015) notes that this indoctrination created a sense of independence and interdependence among soldiers, strengthening their bond with the collective. I also believe that our combined fears also provided adherence to each other as a whole.

The experiences I gained during military service, whether leading a team or navigating a war zone, solidified my belief in my abilities and reinforced my confidence. Looking back on my military service, these experiences were not just personal rites of passage but critical moments in shaping me through the sociopolitical processes of apartheid. My protests, briefly referred to in the following passage, focused on conscription, the state, and authority, which are integrated with my irrational thoughts, have been documented in Heitman's (1985) writing.

One evening in the Officer's pub, I was approached by a helicopter pilot of the South West African Water Electricity Corporation (SWAWEC) to embark on an illegal cross-border mission to close the sluice gates on the Angolan side of the Hydro-electric scheme at Ruacana. As my Commanding Officer was on leave in the Republic, I agreed. The following morning, the pilot, the SWAWEC Chairman's bodyguard, a SWAWEC engineer, and I flew into Angola and closed the sluice gates without military clearance. This resulted in power becoming available from the scheme. I can proudly state that I got a telex from the then foreign minister, Mr Pik Botha, announcing that I was sabotaging South African foreign affairs. We were unaware that the South African government was diplomatically negotiating the closure of the same sluice gates.

While I will never regret the decision, it was unfortunate that the pilot was deported to France and the bodyguard back to the United States. I was almost charged with treason. My national service only had six months until completion, and I was instead transferred to a very active neighbouring Battalion. I will never know whether the SADF decision hinged on the possibility that I might meet my maker at the new Battalion's local and active service. I often reflect on the sluice gate decision and confirm it was made with a caring heart, which also made economic sense to me. Rebellious, I was not. However, perhaps it was my way of creating a balance between being forced to partake in war, a decision within which my voice was silent, and a war that, at the time, had subsequently proved unnecessary. Once again, the power machine needed to be fuelled by a senseless war, negatively affecting thousands of young men and their families. In 2024, the then enemies' names are now offramp and street names, which is a reminder of how previously feared and revered ideologies may become acceptable within the same country over time.

Through a critical autoethnographic lens, I can trace how my narrative intertwines broader social structures of race, privilege, and power. While I am proud of my achievements within the framework of a flawed ideology, the positive benefits I received seem to outshine the negatives that have impacted other conscripts negatively. The military not only forged my mental and physical endurance but also indoctrinated me into the apartheid regime's ideological project, a legacy I continue to grapple with.

4.6. Rehabilitation and independence

4.6 Rehabilitation and independence	<p>4.6.1 Hospitalisation</p> <p>4.6.2 Mobility</p> <p>4.6.3 Identity</p> <p>4.6.4 Self-Care</p> <p>4.6.5 Post-hospitalisation Recovery</p>
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4.6.1. Hospitalisation

The 25th of January 1981 will forever be etched in my memory with a disturbing clarity. One moment, I was travelling well within the speed limit on my motorcycle, and the next, after a loud thud, everything changed. The impact of the car was not only physical; it was as if the world I had known previously had suddenly disappeared. As I lay on the road, the chaos around me, I felt a weird detachment, a fading away of life I had always known. Initially, I considered whether this detachment was indeed death. Why was a woman asking if I was alive? Was this all happening to me? Why is there a massive pain in my upper back? Why do my legs feel so heavy?

My arrival at the hospital in Pretoria the following day confirmed the worst news. The ambulance doors opened, and the building's 'Spinal Unit' sign was immediately visible. The various tangible emotions I experienced upon seeing the sign "Spinal Unit" were in line with Pickett et al.'s (2006) findings, which highlight the emotional upheaval that often follows a spinal cord injury (SCI). The feelings of confusion, loss, frustration, and decreased self-esteem, although present, were temporarily paused as disbelief clouded my initial reaction. The fact that

my diagnosis had not yet been communicated allowed the optimist in me to maintain some presence, a form of psychological defence mechanism against the enormity of my situation.



Figure 5: Me, Spinal Unit 1981.

My new accommodation was a rather large ward, a hospital bed, and a fellow bedridden patient, the result of a neck injury. Drips, beeping machines, the smell of antiseptic spray, and staff constantly checking up on me became a daily routine. Pain and wound management further confirmed that while the pain may become less and the wounds

would heal, my life would never be the same ever again. One wound would never heal. The pain in my upper back, shortly after the accident, was confirmed as an irreversible SCI. I remember the day my parents were called in by the medical staff to announce the final diagnosis. The disappointment and concern were evident on their faces. My father was so negatively affected that he found it extremely difficult to visit me on weekends and instead relied on my mother, sister and brother to perform that supportive role.

The focus on rehabilitation at the Spinal Unit was evident from the first day. The nursing staff reassured me that my future would be positive. While I did not doubt that my mangled right leg would heal, any additional damage would be of no concern, as this broken body did not need a functional foot in any case. The accident forced me to confront and deal with my limitations in a way I had never anticipated. I was not invincible. No amount of mental strength or discipline could undo the damage. For the first time, I had to let go of the idea that I could control

everything. That sheer willpower could fix anything. This was a humbling experience and realisation that would define and shape my recovery journey.

As the days passed, the questions emerged: How would I rebuild my life after this? What would it mean to be me in a body that did not work the way it used to? The accident, in a nanosecond, had changed the trajectory of my life. It was not just about healing; it was about rediscovering who I was in the middle of a wreckage, both physically and emotionally. However, slowly, I realised that the path forward was not just about regaining what I had lost—it was about converting into someone who could live fully and meaningfully, even in the face of such a profound change.

According to Kirshblum et al. (2017), physical therapy plays a pivotal role in the rehabilitative process. It focuses on strengthening muscles, improving coordination, and enhancing cardiovascular health through individualised exercise programs. My rehabilitation journey reflected this, with daily sessions that pushed my physical limits while gradually increasing my strength and mobility.

I appreciated that besides the physical strength needed for transferring and other activities, there was also a focus on the psychological aspect. Psychosocial support, as highlighted by Harkema et al. (2023), is equally important in addressing the emotional and mental health challenges that often accompany SCI. However, I did not partake in the counselling sessions on offer. Somehow, I believed that what I had experienced in the military had provided an advantage in dealing with my new reality. It was at this stage of my rehabilitation that I once again became aware of the disparity between individuals who seem to be able to cope with altering realities and those who find it extremely difficult. This had also

become apparent during my military training. I was fortunate in both situations that I could adjust while empathising with those who found the transformation difficult.

My occupational and physiotherapists provided the backdrop to potential positive outcomes, constantly providing reassurance that I would develop the necessary skills to lead a meaningful life. The tailored exercise programs were focused on restoring what was lost and finding new ways to move and engage with my environment, even with physical limitations. Occupational therapy, another critical component in rehabilitation, emphasises relearning daily tasks and utilising assistive devices to regain independence. Using assistive technologies, such as wheelchairs or adaptive devices, such as hand controls, for my car one day was an eye-opening experience. It illustrated how rehabilitation involves physical rebuilding and the employment of other innovations to improve my functional capabilities. These technologies helped me redefine independence while adapting to a new reality.

4.6.2. Mobility

Introducing the wheelchair into my life during rehabilitation was a life-changing moment. While initially a device of necessity, the wheelchair quickly became a symbol of freedom, a hint of independence, offering a sense of mobility that felt incredible after months in the hospital bed and ward. This newfound freedom, however, was met with comparison to others around me, particularly other wheelchair users. As I began to compare my capabilities with those who had lower spinal cord injuries, I realised the extent of my restrictions. The men with lower lesions seemed faster and more agile, prompting internal conflict.

According to Suls and Wheeler (2012), comparing oneself to others is typical behaviour, particularly in environments like rehabilitation, where progress is constantly measured against peers. My upward comparisons—those who were physically more capable—served as both a

motivator and a source of frustration, as the Upward and Downward Comparison Theory suggests (Helgeson & Taylor (1993). The downward comparisons I encountered significantly illuminated my attitude toward my limitations. Observing others with more severe spinal injuries, some with only slight neck movement, operating their electric wheelchairs with their chins made my relative advantages clear.

This realisation sparked a complex mix of relief and guilt, as Gerber et al. (2018) highlighted in their exploration of how upward comparisons can inspire while downward comparisons provide crucial reassurance. I developed a deep appreciation for the resilience of others, which in turn fostered a stronger sense of gratitude for my situation. This dynamic aligns perfectly with the Upward and Downward Comparison Theory, reinforcing that while downward comparisons can boost self-esteem, they also risk fostering complacency. I have confidently begun to acknowledge my limitations and possibilities in this new phase of my life, a perspective profoundly shaped by my interactions with others in the rehabilitation unit.

My command of the wheelchair, over several weeks, instilled in me great reassurance that my previous fears of not successfully transferring, navigating ramps, low inclines, or not being quick enough from point A to B were unreasonable. The relief was motivating as I appreciated that this now broken body could maintain a particular independence and be an alternate shade of the same previous colour.

4.6.3. Identity

The wheelchair, while a critical tool for moving around independently, also highlighted questions of identity. Despite being physically disabled, I still perceived myself as able-bodied. This dichotomy reflects Gifre et al.'s (2014) concept of biographical disruption in SCI, where a person's injury leads to disruption not only in their physical abilities but also in their life

narrative, motivation, and self-esteem. This biographical disruption left me with the dilemma between simultaneously accepting and rejecting my new reality. Michel Foucault's (1978) concept of identity, as interpreted by Urbanski (2011), suggests that identity is not fixed but mediated by external factors. This resonates with my experience, as my sense of self was constantly adapting, shaped by my environment and the people around me. Over time, my identity fluctuated to accommodate my new circumstances, reflecting Foucault's view of identity as a fluid construct rather than a rigid state.

I confronted significant challenges with my physical and mental self-perception, grappling with the reality of my disability while still seeing myself as able-bodied. This clash between my pre-injury and post-injury identities illustrates Davidson's (2000) assertion that perception precedes thought, shaping how individuals navigate life-altering experiences. My time in the Spinal Unit became a decisive reinvention phase, allowing me to reconcile my past identity with my new reality. This aligns with the insights of Smith et al. (2016) and Lynch and Cahalan (2017), who highlight the uncertainty that spinal cord injury patients experience when contemplating their futures.

Also, during my rehabilitation, I frequently contemplated the uncertainty of my future and what I could realistically achieve in my new condition. This reflection focused on what it truly meant to exist in this altered physical state, a concept shaped by society, medical professionals, and myself. Often, I felt as if my future were a blank space, difficult to predict and seemingly out of my control. A turning point came one afternoon when a man in a white shirt and black pants entered the ward, looking for "Keith." My roommate was asleep, so I replied, "That is me." He introduced himself as a brother from a local Catholic seminary, cycling around to visit Catholics in the hospital. Our thirty-minute conversation reminded me of the spiritual

support that had always been vital in my life, leaving me with a sense of comfort and connection, as discussed in the works of Ekaningtyas and Yasa (2022).

This encounter further highlighted the vital role of spirituality in my rehabilitation. Research confirms that spirituality aids in coping with life-altering conditions. Longo and Peterson (2002) note that religious beliefs foster resilience, providing purpose and community during tough times. Similarly, McCullough et al. (2001) emphasise the positive impact of spirituality on mental and physical health. In my experience, the church provided essential emotional support, helping me redefine my identity amid changes to my body. By integrating spirituality into my rehabilitation, I connected with something beyond my physical limitations, allowing me to view my situation not just in terms of disability but as a chance for spiritual growth. This reflection illustrates how faith can enhance resilience and well-being during uncertain times. I felt I belonged to a more significant entity, reassuring myself that I would never be alone.

Scholten et al. (2020) discuss the potential for maladaptive coping in SCI patients, where individuals may disengage from reality or prematurely accept their condition without fully processing the emotional implications. Initially, I may have been grappling with elements of denial, as I had yet to internalise the impact of my injury fully. However, the brother's visit cleared that mental fog. I began to acknowledge the importance of building psychological resilience, a concept echoed in Bryant et al. (2024), who examine the societal expectations placed on SCI patients to recover and re-establish their lives.

I appreciate that spinal cord rehabilitation is a multifaceted process that addresses the consistent physical and psychological needs of individuals with SCI. It is through this combination of physical therapy, occupational therapy, mobility aids, assistive devices, and

psychosocial support that rehabilitation programs seek to restore not only function but also a sense of identity and independence (Budd et al., 2022). Reflecting on my experience, I see how integrating these advanced technologies and holistic care approaches aimed to improve my physical capabilities and help me rebuild my sense of self and autonomy. This approach mirrors the broader goals of rehabilitation programmes, which strive to enhance the overall well-being and functional outcomes of individuals with SCI.

4.6.4. Self-care

Self-care may be defined as activities individuals undertake to promote their health, prevent disease, manage illness, and restore health as much as possible (LaVela et al., 2016). In the research literature, self-care is often part of the broader term self-management, defined as the individual's ability to manage the symptoms, treatment, physical and social consequences, and lifestyle changes (Van Diemen et al., 2021).

My desire and motivation to be able to care for myself, especially as far as bathroom activities were concerned, was critical. The feeling of independence was exciting, and the responsibility for self was also entering the fray. The self-care functions I had before the accident now took on a new approach and sequence.

During the rehabilitation process, caring for myself regarding washing, toilet function, and daily grooming was slowly becoming a routine. The hospital and medical staff continuously stressed avoiding skin damage while seated in the wheelchair or lying in bed. Therefore, during the day, I used my newly acquired strong arms to lift myself off the cushion to relieve pressure. I also, at night, turned frequently to avoid any pressure sores from developing while asleep. In a recent study by Chen et al. (2024), in their abstract, they state, "This study illustrates that, much like a garden requires water, sunlight, and care to flourish, our happiness is cultivated through

enhancing our ability to savour the good moments, rebound from challenges, and find deep significance in our lives (p. 1).” This study deals with striving for happiness, which resonated with me during rehabilitation. I was evolving emotionally and developing a sense of appreciation for the life I now needed to embrace. Self-care is part of that process.

Managing my bodily functions through self-care is a significant part of my daily life. The unpredictability of my bladder and bowel function has always been the most mentally challenging aspect of my injury. Anderson et al. (2018) have explored the psychological and social impacts of SCI in the light of neurogenic bladder or bowel dysfunction and reveal that a sense of frustration, anxiety and hyper-vigilance are common.

In public settings where I am enjoying an evening out with friends, it could abruptly end if my catheter or leg bag suddenly began to leak. While this has only occurred once in public at a funeral reception, the level of embarrassment and humiliation I experienced was highly unpleasant. Bladder and bowel dysfunction has occurred often in my private settings, and although alone or with significant others, the negative impact has a mental effect on me. Although bladder dysfunction is the lesser of the two evils when compared to bowel dysfunction, the cognitive impact has always been severe.

Studies by De Groot et al. (2016) emphasise that these disruptions contribute to a cycle of anxiety and frustration, where one becomes acutely aware of the possibility of accidents. Further studies by Hammell (2007) show that dysfunction episodes often magnify feelings of loss of control, which are already heightened by the loss of motor function due to SCI. I always feel that my dignity has been lost in the process. However, once the mess is cleaned up, I am again reminded of how fortunate I am to enjoy my quality of life despite these interruptions. I doubt whether the psychological effects will dissipate over time. However, I remain committed to

being aware of any source of nourishment that might disrupt my regular bathroom and bodily routines. This awareness gives me a sense of empowerment.

4.6.5. Post-hospitalisation recovery

While the rehabilitation process had prepared me for the transition from hospital to home, the reality of that experience came with a few surprises. Arriving home brought the emotional intensity that I was expecting. What was beyond impressive was the attention to detail my family had given to the accessibility of our house. Ramps had been built, furniture rearranged, and personal sacrifices were made regarding space and convenience, which I appreciated then and still do today.

As a result, the move from hospital to home was relatively seamless. Although I never received any psychological counselling while at the spinal unit, I was grateful for the advice I received from the occupational therapist, warning me that I would have trouble adjusting to the home situation. I must admit the weekdays were long as everyone was either at work or school, and I missed the human interaction I took for granted at the spinal unit. Family support is paramount to continue the rehabilitation process once the SCI patient is discharged from the hospital or any other institution (O'Dell et al., 2019).

One aspect of my disability that was not always front and centre in my mind during rehabilitation was my employment status. I decided to return to work even though I had no transport. Although I had arranged to be collected and dropped off by a colleague, my parents had made alternate plans. To my absolute surprise, I was offered my father's car, and he decided to finance a new car for himself. Once again, it was a huge sacrifice that I sincerely appreciated.

Self-care and independence after an SCI redefine resilience and adaptation, supported by the unwavering love of my family. I have confidently learned to manage daily routines, turning

challenges into opportunities that reinforce my autonomy and allow me to celebrate life's minor victories. My family's steadfast support, through home modifications and personal sacrifices, has ensured a seamless transition back to daily life. While I acknowledge that emotional and physical hurdles still exist, I am empowered and motivated to prioritise self-care as a fundamental path to well-being. This journey has strengthened my gratitude and commitment to fully embracing life.

4.7. Emotional struggles and acceptance

4.7 Emotional struggles and acceptance	<p>4.7.1 Regrets (Fathers' advice, consequences of decisions)</p> <p>4.7.2 Feeling burdensome and struggling emotionally</p> <p>4.7.3 Acceptance of life's positives and negatives, building resilience</p>
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4.7.1. Regrets (father's advice, consequences of decisions)

Reflecting on my emotional struggles and regrets, most internal conflict revolves around past decisions and their consequences. One of the most profound emotional burdens I carry is the regret of not accepting my father's advice. This choice has had lasting repercussions on my self-esteem and sense of responsibility. I believe we all harbour a feeling of regret related to aspects of our lives where decisions made, in hindsight, have proven incorrect (Bruch & Feinberg, 2017) suggests that, as humans, we all make bad decisions, which is part of life, and the best outcomes are achieved when the individual accepts responsibility for those bad decisions and continues with their life.

My rise to officer status and surviving an active bush war perhaps overinflated my confidence. I often wonder what motivated me to buy a motorcycle. In part, the reason was the

economic cost of travelling to university each day. However, there is a further aspect – I tried to prove to myself and others that I was an adult. This has always haunted me. I recall a man viewing motorcycles on the shop floor, warning me to be extremely careful on that motorcycle. I survived a bush war where others had not. I suppose the lesson is – if you do not colour within the lines, the artwork is simply a mess. Boundaries are essential, and critical thinking cannot be taken in tablet form.

Gardner and Garr-Schultz (2017) share that while most people assume they are right about most things, being wrong is essential to the human condition. Schultz also alludes to the lessons we may learn by embracing our fallibility experiences; through that process, we achieve a deeper understanding of ourselves. She concludes by suggesting that we should all celebrate our mistakes and never lose sight of them as opportunities for growth and change.

In his writings, the opportunity to turn regrets into a positive life change is a suggestion made by Pink (2022). Daniel Pink argues that a transformation begins once we recognise and embrace our regrets, leading to a more satisfying life. A further aspect of regret and the associated emotion is proposed by Connolly and Zeelenberg (2002), who propose that the self-blaming voice suggests that one should have done things differently. Therefore, the element of self-blame comes into focus, suggesting that an alternate decision should have been made. The sources argue that in situations where the opportunity lost is greater, the regret is more pronounced.

Autoethnographically, this regret is deeply tied to the role of family influence and societal expectations, where the failure to live up to these standards often results in feelings of guilt and inadequacy. A study by Anderson (2003) discusses this, confirming how regret

influences decision-making and highlighting the interplay between rational calculations and emotional responses in shaping decision-avoidance behaviours.

However, through autoethnography, I am learning to view these challenges as essential components of my personal growth. Engaging with my regrets has enhanced my understanding of resilience and the capacity for emotional healing. Admitting my limitations, although difficult, is also a crucial step toward self-acceptance. While not easy, this internal transformation is vital for moving forward and effectively navigating the emotional complexities that come with life's major transitions, as expanded upon in the writing of Boyle et al. (2020).

Finally, Higgins (2019, p. 12) states, "Regret is a powerful emotion that can lead to significant psychological consequences. Individuals who experience regret may dwell on their past actions, leading to guilt, shame, and a decrease in overall well-being". These times are associated with sadness and 'what if' scenarios, often playing out like a movie in my mind. However, I also have tools to mitigate those visits, rare as they may be. One mental response is to consider my achievements since the accident. Despite the accident, I often focus on my life and the many blessings I enjoy and will continue to benefit from in the future. Davis et al. (2016) advocate that individuals who consider positive aspects of their lives have positive psychological outcomes.

From an autoethnographic perspective, this tension reflects a broader cultural narrative of self-reliance and autonomy, which society often equates with success and worth. My emotional struggles stem not only from my personal experience but also from the societal pressure to reclaim independence as quickly and seamlessly as possible. I constantly compared my progress to idealised versions of recovery, further amplifying my feelings of frustration and regret, which is confirmed in the study by McRae et al. (2020).

My journey with regret clearly illustrates the complex dynamics of personal choices, societal expectations, and family influence. I embrace these feelings as growth opportunities rather than viewing them as failures. This approach has bolstered my self-awareness and resilience. While the weight of past decisions may occasionally resurface, I focus on my achievements and blessings, which effectively mitigate their emotional impact. This shift in perspective confirms that self-acceptance is essential for emotional healing. Regret is a part of my story, but I now see it as a valuable guide for positive change and developing a more balanced outlook on life.

4.7.2. Feeling burdensome and struggling emotionally

The emotional struggle of feeling like a burden to those around me adds another layer to this self-perception. One of the immediate negative thoughts I had after a few days in the spinal unit hospital was the burden I was going to be in the future. I recall being so embarrassed having to endure the emptying of my urine bag by the nursing staff or when calling the nurse whenever there was a stench because of a bowel movement. I felt inadequate and useless – a loss of control, dignity, and the inability to do anything for myself. The individuals' ability to release bodily fluid and fetal matter is directly compromised, which further affects the affected person's emotional, physical, and social well-being (Clifton, 2014; Lord, 2020). My seeming inability to control my fluid and fetal matter discharges caused me intense stress and anxiety.

The process of depending on family members for support during my rehabilitation has further amplified the internal tension between my desire for independence and my fear of being seen as a burden on their lives. This experience aligns with research that highlights the psychological toll of perceived dependency after a life-altering event such as an SCI. The weight

of these feelings can contribute to an ongoing cycle of self-doubt and internalised pressure to "make up" for my perceived shortcomings.

Lindemann (2010) shares how he experienced the spinal injury of his father. Although his father was active, involved in wheelchair athletics, employed and leading a positive life, he often needed to assist his father when the consequences of bodily function resulted in a smelly mess. I found that allowing another human being, apart from the nursing staff, to be responsible for cleaning up any bodily mess of mine was unacceptable. I believe the shame and guilt I experienced on each occasion, apart from the intense embarrassment, was severe for me.

Budd et al. (2022) reveal in their study how feelings of guilt and gratitude fluctuate from the vantage of the spinal injured individual. The SCI individuals are grateful for the assistance received, and simultaneously, they harbour feelings of guilt. Today, I am thankful for any aid received, but I have never requested assistance when a bowel action occurs. I am adversely affected because of the disgusting situation such an event presents. My coping mechanism is to disappear into the bathroom and get everything, including myself, cleaned up quietly.

The rehabilitation journey after a SCI is an emotional experience filled with gratitude, guilt, and a strong desire for independence. Many individuals struggle with feelings of being a burden, which can intensify self-doubt, yet they often find quiet resilience in facing challenges alone.

It is essential to accept support without self-judgment, as this openness is crucial for emotional healing. Balancing dependence and autonomy can lessen the pressure to compensate for perceived shortcomings. Ultimately, this balance promotes personal growth and fosters more profound connections with loved ones, enriching the rehabilitation experience.

4.7.3. Acceptance of life's positives and negatives, building resilience

Reflecting on the psychological constructs of acceptance and positivity, my journey toward understanding and integrating these ideas into my life reveals more profound insights into how these frameworks shape mental well-being. Acceptance and positivity are not abstract concepts but form part of the lived experiences that profoundly affect our approach to life's challenges. DeWall and Bushman (2011) emphasise how these constructs intertwine with various psychological theories, illustrating the significance of an individual's perception and response to life events. As I explore the acceptance stage of my reality, I aim to weave in the concepts of positivity and resilience, providing an autoethnographic lens into my evolution.

Acceptance, as discussed in therapeutic frameworks like Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), involves a conscious decision to acknowledge and embrace one's thoughts, emotions, and experiences without the impulse to alter or resist them (Grossman et al., 2004; Huang et al., 2021). The journey to acceptance has been one of coming to terms with my life's negative and positive aspects. ACT encourages individuals to remain open to uncomfortable feelings, allowing them to live in alignment with their values even in the face of adversity. This psychological flexibility resonates deeply with my experience, where I have had to confront life's uncertainties head-on.

Growing up, I became aware of my tendency to resist situations challenging my sense of security. My instinctual response to negative experiences was to seek immediate solutions. This reactionary thinking offered temporary relief but often obscured the deeper emotional currents. For instance, I struggled with the breakdown of relationships, perceiving them as failures that reflected a lack of commitment. Over time, I learned to protect myself by avoiding such commitments altogether – a coping mechanism to shield myself from emotional vulnerability.

Positivity, as defined in psychological literature, refers to the predisposition to focus on optimistic emotions and experiences, fostering psychological resilience and overall well-being. Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build theory posits that positive emotions expand our awareness, enabling us to explore new ways of thinking and acting. These emotions, when nurtured, lead to the development of personal resources such as emotional resilience and social connections.

From an early age, I recognised the power of positivity in shaping my worldview. My parents played a pivotal role in instilling this resource in me, and life's opportunities only strengthened my inclination toward optimism. However, this positivity was not without its challenges. As the eldest child, I often felt the pressure to be the source of positivity for my siblings, which sometimes became a burden. Nonetheless, I also found strength in my adversity, aligning with Greve and Staudinger's (2006) assertion that adversity can foster protective factors, or a form of "armour plating," that shields individuals from future negative influences.

As I reflect on my life experiences, resilience is a vital theme. While I have cultivated the ability to transform negative experiences into positive outcomes, there were moments when my resilience was tested to its limits. One significant instance was my exclusion from a school event presentation ceremony, which deeply affected me. This event and subsequent emotional challenges highlighted the need for resilience in overcoming personal setbacks.

I have also grappled with the complexities of relationships and family dynamics in recent years. Erikson's developmental theory (Erikson, 1950) suggests that our personality traits are shaped early in life but continually evolve through environmental and societal influences. This aligns with my experience of personal growth, particularly in relationships. I have realised the importance of choosing friends wisely, recognising that the people we surround ourselves with

can profoundly impact our lives. One friendship led me down a path of severe consequences, including financial loss and personal setbacks. However, this experience also taught me the value of discernment in relationships, echoing the wisdom of Socrates: “Tell me who your friends are, and I will tell you who you are”, as cited in Hulsroj et al. (2015, p. 63).

Reflecting on my life journey through an autoethnographical lens, I find that acceptance, positivity, and resilience are more than mere psychological constructs; they are lived experiences that shape one’s sense of self and the world. These elements, intertwined with personal experiences of adversity, have guided my approach to challenges, relationships, and self-growth. Acceptance has allowed me to confront life’s contradictions without judgment, while positivity is a cornerstone for building emotional resilience. Ultimately, these constructs continue to inform my path forward, offering a framework for living a more fulfilling and meaningful life.

4.8. Family and relationships

4.8 Family and relationships	<p>4.8.1 Support from family and building meaningful relationships</p> <p>4.8.2 Confidence to love</p> <p>4.8.3 Build a family and navigate intimacy</p>
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4.8.1. Support from family and building meaningful relationships

My family's support was an essential influence in my journey toward rehabilitation and independence. Their willingness to make structural improvements to the home environment and personal sacrifices highlighted the depth of their commitment, which instilled in me a renewed sense of belonging and purpose. Beyond these physical adjustments, their emotional support

alleviated loneliness and self-doubt often associated with significant life changes (Silván-Ferrero et al., 2020).

Research almost unanimously agrees that family support plays a pivotal role in the well-being of the spinal injured individual (Lynch & Cahalan, 2017; McKay et al., 2020; O'Dell et al., 2019). Indeed, for me, the support included a loving and accommodating attitude from the entire family, immediate and extended. No judgements were forthcoming, only a willingness to concentrate on my needs. However, although I held huge reservations as to whether I was going to be a burden to my family soon after the accident, my rehabilitation had eased those feelings considerably.

I remember my family's dismay when I prepared an evening meal without assistance. However, accessing the impact from only one perspective fails to focus on the challenges the family members navigate (Lynch & Cahalan, 2017). I was mindful of any difficulties I could identify that the family was dealing with and possibly not revealing. Apart from the difficulty all suffered in accepting the new reality, none were identifiable. However, family and friends initially pretended that my situation and its consequences were less severe. Many I thought predicted that I would successfully navigate this chapter in my life. I started to feel that life might be beautiful, that there was a chance for everything to be okay finally. What I found interesting was that I never sought affirmation for the progress in adjusting I had made then.

My extended family and friends also provided the opportunity to, together through a process of cautious exploration, begin to appreciate the person now in a wheelchair. The absence of a complete rehabilitation timeframe or expectations from them and I made the transition relatively seamless. Many answered questions reframed their understanding of disability, which was directly in line with the work of Mallett and Runswick-Cole (2014). My immediate family

had the advantage that they had journeyed with me during my hospital stay and rehabilitation, and many of their questions had either been addressed by me or the nursing staff.

Regarding personal relationships, I grappled with self-doubt about my ability to date or fall in love again. My experience with disability introduced new questions about intimacy and confidence in romantic connections. I worried whether others would find me desirable or look beyond my physical limitations. However, interactions with the rehabilitation staff, particularly an expanding attraction from my orthopaedic therapist, gradually helped restore my self-esteem. These subtle exchanges conveyed to me that my identity and worth extended beyond the visible signs of disability.

The rehabilitation period allowed me to reflect on the role of relationships in shaping my sense of self. Despite my initial hesitations, I gradually realised that relationships are not solely determined by physical ability but are founded on deeper connections, empathy, and mutual understanding. This insight, though not immediate, marked a pivotal shift in my perspective on relationships and my capacity to forge meaningful connections with others.

Adopting a critical autoethnographical perspective when considering my family and friends' expectations, I was reminded of the ableist ideology, which marginalises the disabled individual and frames them as fundamentally dependent or incapable of leading fulfilling lives (McKinney & Amosun, 2020). While these expectations are rooted in cultural norms, they are responsible for the marginalisation of disabled individuals. I needed to challenge these narratives, and I do believe I have thus far been successful. I am also mindful that each disability hinges on numerous factors which may contribute to achieving a good quality of life.

This quest to challenge societal views also entered the world of relationships. I was confronted with a dilemma. I was faced with a desire for a relationship and lurking in the

background were internalised biases against individuals. Before my accident, I had most definitely entertained certain biases concerning people with disabilities. Here, I was disabled, requesting that others holding these same biases change their stance. In retrospect, I recognised that implicit bias and stereotyping were also at play. Implicit biases are unconscious attitudes or stereotypes that affect understanding, actions, and decisions. They can be deeply ingrained and operate without conscious awareness. (Brownstein & Zalta, 2019). Was I unconsciously holding stereotypical views about disabled people and relationships with able bodies, viewing them as undesirable due to societal stigmas?

I also considered that I was downplaying the significance of my disability while highlighting perceived negative traits in disabled women. This justification might help me reduce dissonance by aligning my preferences with my attitudes. Individuals can reduce dissonance by changing their beliefs or attitudes to align with their behaviour (Beauvois & Joule, 2019).

In conclusion, family support has dramatically impacted my rehabilitation journey, giving me a renewed sense of belonging and purpose. Their sacrifices, from home adjustments to emotional encouragement, helped me adapt to life after the accident and built resilience against loneliness and self-doubt. This unwavering support diminished my fears of being a burden. I learned to redefine my identity through shared experiences with family and friends, realising that relationships can transcend physical limitations. My journey showcases the importance of compassion, empathy, and understanding in overcoming challenges and embracing hope.

4.8.2. Confidence to love, build a family and navigate intimacy

My father's suggestion to visit a sports club for wheelchair users marked a pivotal moment in my post-injury journey, as it was framed around my previous enjoyment of lawn bowls during rehabilitation. The visit, initially presented as a casual introduction to a recreational

activity, quickly transformed into an eye-opening experience that challenged many of my preconceived notions about life as a disabled person. Harnett et al. (2020) emphasise the importance of social integration in rehabilitation, particularly in finding activities that promote physical and emotional well-being. From this perspective, my father's encouragement to engage in sports post-injury was more than a way to pass the time. It was an essential step in reclaiming agency and identity through social participation.

On arrival, I witnessed wheelchair basketball for the first time, and the sight of men playing competitively despite their disabilities left a lasting impact. Rohwerder's (2018) concept of stigma helps frame the cultural perceptions surrounding disability, which often position disabled individuals as less capable or marginalised. Experiencing these players, fully engaged in a physically demanding sport, disrupted these stigmatised narratives and challenged my own internalised perceptions of disability. The warm welcome I received from the players, their partners, and their families reinforced Seligman's (2002) theory of positive psychology, highlighting the significance of community and supportive relationships in fostering well-being and personal growth. This experience represented a shift in my understanding of disability, from seeing it as a limitation to recognising the potential for a fulfilling, active life.

The introduction to individual players, including a medical doctor, an attorney, and a microscope designer, all disabled individuals, further solidified this shift in perspective. Sheldrick's (2023) studies within critical disability studies reveal that disability is not inherent in the individual but is created by societal barriers and attitudes. Meeting these professionals, who had not only overcome physical limitations but had also excelled in their respective fields, provided a real-world example of how social structures can turn individuals on or off.

Their participation in professional and athletic spheres demonstrated that disabled people could lead productive, impactful lives when given the right opportunities and support systems. This aligns with Barnes and Mercer's (2010) argument that removing societal barriers, such as physical inaccessibility or prejudice, allows disabled individuals to fully engage in work and leisure activities, contributing to their overall well-being and purpose.

4.8.3. Build a family and navigate intimacy

Somers and Bender-Burnett (2024) suggest that SCI men undergo an attitudinal change in their association with sexual activity. Previous sexual approaches and involvement are replaced by a physical and psychological adaption requiring input from the injured and subsequently affected partner. My first sexual experience after injury was so unique to me both physically and psychologically.



Figure 6: My daughter Tayla.

My lesion or spinal cord injury is relatively high along the spine at a level T2. The T indicates thoracic, and the 2 is the second vertebra in the thoracic section. I find the best description to be the level along my nipple area. I have no sensation at all below my chest area. The first sexual experience occurred soon after I arrived home from rehabilitation. It introduced alternate forms of stimulation I now needed to perfect to satisfy my partner. While always a unique

experience for my partners, I believe that if interviewed, they would reveal a level of satisfaction that any disabled man would be proud of.

At this very sports club, I met the woman I eventually married. From that relationship, one beautiful daughter completed what I regarded as a functional understanding family.

Sadly, my involvement with a man who would contribute significantly to altering the direction of my business and legal aspirations also influenced my wife negatively. We separated,



Figure 7: My wedding day.

and this had a significant negative impact on my self-confidence. Subsequently, a committed relationship has not been repeated.

My journey of self-discovery began with my father's suggestion to visit a sports club, which profoundly changed my understanding of disability,

identity, and agency. Observing other disabled individuals thrive in competitive sports helped me see disability not as a limitation but as a unique way of experiencing life.

Through this experience, I became more aware of the societal barriers that shape self-worth and possibilities. Physical limitations do not prevent fulfilling relationships but require mutual adaptation and openness.

The challenges I faced, particularly the loss of a significant partnership, highlighted the complexities of disability beyond physical aspects. While this affected my self-confidence, it also reinforced the importance of supportive communities in building resilience and purpose.

Ultimately, my time at the sports club transformed my identity and sense of belonging, teaching me that personal growth is defined by physical abilities and the strength to engage, adapt, and remain open to life's unpredictable journey.

4.9. Personal Transformation and Growth

4.9 Personal transformation and growth	<p>4.9.1 Transformation post-accident</p> <p>4.9.2 Adaptability</p> <p>4.9.3 Humour and personal growth</p>
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4.9.1. Transformation post-accident

The experience of rehabilitation after my injury was more than just a physical recovery; it represented a profound transformation in how I viewed myself and my capabilities. The accident and the subsequent rehabilitation process required me to adapt not only physically but also mentally and emotionally. This period of transformation involved re-evaluating my identity, which had been deeply tied to my physical independence and abilities before the injury. Suggestions in the work of McRae et al. (2020) state that re-examining one's abilities is a process experienced by many SCI individuals and requires an assessment process based on ability and degree of injury. This process is advised to be done with close family as support.

Admittedly, it was far from straightforward, with me needing to re-evaluate and reframe my previous expectations of my life. While I did, for the most part, pretend that I was coping with my new reality, there were moments where I felt desperate, afraid and confused. The accident marked a significant turning point, forcing me to confront my limitations and, at the same time, discover new strengths. I found myself in a continuous process of adaptability, learning to navigate the challenges of daily life in a wheelchair while also finding humour and growth in the situation. I gradually began to accept that my life would not return to how it had been, but that did not mean I could not create a new, fulfilling version of myself.

The support systems surrounding me, my loving family, loyal friends, dedicated rehabilitation staff, and even the fellow patients I met along the way were instrumental in my healing journey. Interacting with individuals bravely navigating their challenges opened my eyes to the diverse ways growth can manifest in the face of adversity. Their inspiring stories and unwavering resilience revealed that having a disability did not signal the end of opportunity; instead, it presented a chance to explore new paths of engagement with life.

Reflecting on my journey after my SCI, I realise it was a trek of self-discovery and emotional maturity. As I faced the daunting fears, uncertainties, and self-doubt that accompanied my situation, I found that these challenges became the pillars of my personal growth. What initially started as a battle for survival gradually transformed into a profound opportunity for change, leading me to a more prosperous and deeper understanding of myself and the intricate world around me.

4.9.2. Adaptability and humour

Throughout my rehabilitation process, I found that humour became a valuable tool for navigating the emotional and psychological challenges I faced. While adjusting to life in a wheelchair brought significant physical obstacles, it was the emotional hurdles, such as feelings of frustration, isolation, and uncertainty about the future, that often felt the most daunting.

Embracing humour allowed me to alleviate some of these emotional burdens. By laughing at myself and the situations I encountered, I was able to break the tension and reframe challenging moments as opportunities for growth. Whether I was adjusting my daily routines or navigating the inevitable awkwardness that comes with significant life changes, humour empowered me to reclaim a sense of control over my experiences.

In many ways, humour served as a bridge between my past self and the new reality I was learning to embrace. It helped me hold onto familiar aspects of my identity, like my ability to see the lighter side of life, even amid profound change. Drawing on Foucault's (1978) insights, we see that identity is fluid and can be shaped by external circumstances. Humour was crucial in reconnecting with my core sense of self, revealing that my physical circumstances had changed, and my spirit remained resilient.

Furthermore, humour enriched my interactions with others—family, friends, and rehabilitation staff. Sharing laughter provided relief and reminded everyone that I was more than just my injury. It helped humanise the experience and diminish the feelings of detachment or pity that often accompany discussions about disability.

Ultimately, humour evolved beyond a mere coping mechanism; it became an integral part of my strategy for resilience. By fostering a light-hearted approach, I was better equipped to face the challenges of recovery, which allowed me to greet each day with renewed optimism and hope. Humour in social interactions also tends to break through socially challenging situations when meeting new faces—an atmosphere of normality returns weirdly and wonderfully.

4.10. Incarceration and legal challenges

4.10 Incarceration and legal challenges	<p>4.10.1 Struggles with injustice</p> <p>4.10.2 Self-Reflection and guilt, self-representation in court and guilt</p> <p>4.10.3 Challenges of incarceration and new cultural perspectives</p> <p>4.10.4 Time for reflection and reform</p>
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4.10.1. Struggles with injustice, self-reflection, guilt and self-representation

The web of the criminal justice system in South Africa is complicatedly woven into a socio-political landscape shaped by a history of apartheid and ongoing efforts towards reform and equality. At its core lies the treatment and rights of the accused, a critical aspect that mirrors the country's dedication to preserving justice and human rights, initiated after the 1994 elections. This piece aims to delve into the framework through which I, as the accused, steered, the legal protections that were both granted or denied and the obstacles I encountered in ensuring fair and just treatment before incarceration.

My journey through the legal system following my injury was a tumultuous experience steeped in a profound sense of injustice that enveloped me from the very start. Soon after being arrested in 2006, I was represented by attorneys and senior counsel in court, but affordability became a problem after year three of the trial. My matter also continued for just under ten years. Once my attorney sensed my depreciating financial situation would prevent me from maintaining his services, he excused himself, stating a conflict of interest to the magistrate and me, and the

shocked client was discarded. I had become a victim of the legal system, which will represent you, the client, only if you can afford the representation. Dippenaar (2013 p. 251) remarks that “A man is innocent until proven broke” and states that to get a group of lawyers to smile for a photograph, they must just be asked to say “Fees”.

Now, totally on my own, it felt like I was navigating an intricate maze, where every turn revealed more complexities and indifference to the subtle nuances of my unique situation. Here, I refer to the nature of the allegations against me and not my physical disability. The most daunting challenge emerged from my choice to represent myself during the court proceedings. This decision was not born of confidence but was fuelled by necessity, leading to a whirlwind of emotional turmoil as I grappled with the nagging doubt about whether I genuinely possessed the legal skills needed to defend my rights effectively.

As I stepped into the role of my advocate, I was struck by the stark inequalities embedded within the legal system. While I strongly believed in my case's merits, the jumble of legal procedures soon became apparent, revealing that conviction alone was insufficient. I floundered in the face of specialised knowledge I could not access. My ability to cross-examine a witness or present my findings and proof to support my defence resembled a sailor attempting to navigate a ship through unfamiliar waters. This realisation gave birth to feelings of inadequacy and guilt, a sinking reminder that perhaps hiring a legal team might have paved a smoother path to justice. The weight of this guilt bore down on me, festering into a deep-seated belief that the obstacles I faced in court directly reflected my decisions.

This experience from an autoethnographic perspective illuminated the tension between personal agency and the systemic barriers looming over me. What initially felt like an empowered choice to advocate for me quickly unveiled the stark power imbalances within the

legal realm. In this context, Foucault's (1977) concept of power became profoundly relevant, highlighting how institutional structures often place those without resources at a disadvantage. As I sat in the courtroom, I felt the crushing sense of powerlessness envelop me—despite my best efforts to make my voice heard. This continued for a further seven years.

A heavy cloak of guilt further magnified the emotional toll of these legal battles. I bore the burden of not only the case's outcome but also the ripple effects my choices had on my life after the injury. The haunting presence of self-blame loomed large as I struggled with the notion that perhaps there had been different choices I could have made to alter the course of events. Shame and guilt, as Tangney and Dearing (2002) explain, often arise when individuals feel they have strayed from their standards or expectations. This guilt was rooted in the belief that I had betrayed my ideals by failing to secure competent legal representation, no matter the cost.

Section 35(3) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 108 of 1996 (the constitution) affords an accused a right to a fair trial. This right includes no less than fifteen rights addressing the procedure and process of a trial (Bekker, 2004). While hindsight is a great teacher, I felt my trial was far from fair. My representation of myself was, on its own, a violation of my rights. "In its narrower sense, the object of the right to a fair trial contained in section 35(3) of the constitution is to minimise the risk of wrong convictions and inappropriate sentences and a consequent failure of justice" (Bekker, 2004, p. 6). The right to a fair trial is one of the most fundamental rights that underpins the rule of law (Clooney & Webb, 2021).

Despite the weight of these feelings, I realised that my experiences of injustice were not merely personal failures but offered a reflection of the broader structural inequities entrenched in the legal system. This realisation compelled me to confront the limitations of individual empowerment when faced with institutional obstacles and systemic power dynamics that

overshadowed my efforts. In the end, even as the guilt lingered, I started to perceive my self-representation in court not as a defeat but as an act of resilience, a testament to my determination, even in the face of outcomes that fell short of my hopes. On the 15th of March 2016, I was convicted and sentenced to ten years for fraud. I was accommodated at Westville Correctional Centre in the KwaZulu Natal Province of South Africa.

4.10.2. Challenges of incarceration and new cultural perspectives

Incarceration, the state of being confined in a correctional centre, induces a range of psychological responses that affect inmates' mental health and behaviour. The corrections environment, characterised by social isolation, loss of autonomy, and exposure to potential violence, significantly impacts individuals' psychological well-being (Smoyer et al., 2019).

The literature of Brewin et al. (2000) highlights that individuals falsely accused of a crime may develop PTSD, characterised by flashbacks, severe anxiety, and intrusive thoughts



Figure 8: Me, in Unisa Hub, Westville, 1918.

about the accusation. Brewin et al. (2000) also suggest that prior military or civilian trauma may contribute to a diagnosis. Although I do not believe that I have any symptoms of PTSD, I certainly did have anxiety for several years, pre- and post-trial. Anxiety and anxiety disorder may be associated with a wrongful conviction, according to

both DeShay (2016) and Roth (2016). A false accusation is an accusation of illegal behaviour

that is factually false, regardless of the reasons or rationales for the accusation (Appleby & Kassin, 2016).

Although evidence was presented by the Department of Correctional Services (Westville) stating that their facility was accessible and suitable for disabled persons, the opposite became apparent on arrival. Apart from the verbal abuse, which reminded me of my first days in the military, the infrastructure was inadequate. Although housed in the hospital section, access to the showers was impossible. An aged, cracked bath without a drain plug was my only option. I recall entertaining cultural biases against the Afrikaans official who, in court, had confirmed under oath that the correctional centre was accessible and suitable. My rebellious mindset against a previous political regime resurfaced. Unfortunately, I labelled and despised the same official as one of those high school boys who had requested the then-Prisons Department instead of National Service. This association, I believed, was less than desirable.

These emotions were fuelled by each sighting of the man in passages or when he partook in beating offenders from other sections of the correctional centre, brought to the hospital section after overstepping the rules. The visible anger and harbouring of some form of frustration were evident as he repeatedly beat the now almost unconscious individual. At this time, I had completed my undergraduate degree in psychology. As such, I began to identify what I had been taught in the behaviours of the other officials, and my period of incarceration took on a new perspective.

I began using my knowledge of psychology to have the officials believe that I regarded them in high esteem, greeting them in their native tongue and subsequently, kind treatment towards me was the result. I was beginning to appreciate the survival segments within this hostile environment and needed all the intellect I could muster. Zamble and Porporino (2013) refer to

the survival and adaptation of offenders while incarcerated. The psychological need to maintain essential comfort and safety is a fundamental human drive. I believe that the fact that I was in a correctional setting, where my 'home comforts' were now denied, introduced resilience and the psychological need to survive. This aligns with perceived control and is associated with better psychological outcomes (Kołodziej et al., 2022).

The fact that I was facing a period without hot water evoked a need to resolve this issue. I had noticed that irons used for ironing clothes during unlock periods often malfunctioned. I contemplated that if I removed the earth wire from these units, they could be submerged in buckets of water. My pleasant surprise was that not only did I have the benefit of boiling water for every bathing experience, but I also benefited all my fellow offenders with me in the ward.

One very positive aspect of my incarceration, which I will hold dear in my heart, was the opportunity I was afforded to be exposed to other cultural, social and racial groups. These were groups of individuals with whom I would not normally interact socially on the outside. In most cases, these individuals would also not interact with someone of my racial classification. Together, we learned from each other, and the interaction enriched me. It reflects the sad reality of our political past in South Africa. It also exposed the moral collapse in some individuals, where, due to economic challenges, crime had become an option.

I had a very close relationship with a Muslim man. This relationship benefitted me richly, as on each visit by his family, he would share the produce his family had provided. I also benefitted from religious occasions such as Eid Al-Fitr and Eid Al-Adha. The correctional centre would allow special meals, such as lamb, to be brought in, which was an absolute treat, during Ramadan. He was a deaf offender and relied on me during periods when instructions from staff were not clear.

4.10.3. Time for reflection and reform

The concept of reform, particularly in correctional rehabilitation and the legal system, has been central to my experience. My interactions with both the healthcare system during correctional rehabilitation and the legal system in my struggles with self-representation have highlighted the pressing need for systemic changes. From an analytical perspective, these systems, which are meant to support and restore individuals, often function in ways that reinforce inequality and limit the potential for actual recovery and reintegration.

The medical model of rehabilitation, which emphasises individual recovery, often overlooks the broader societal factors that contribute to a person's success or failure post-injury. Foucault's (1978) ideas on institutional power suggest that systems, such as medical and legal institutions, exert control over individuals by defining norms and limiting the possibilities for genuine reform. Lawrence and Buchanan (2017) state that Institutional power shapes behaviour, reinforces norms, and influences the stability or change within organisational fields while interacting with individual and collective agencies.

In my case, the rehabilitation process, while designed to maintain the behavioural aspects, I felt constrained by a lack of focus on emotional and social reintegration. Harnett et al. (2020) stress the importance of comprehensive rehabilitation programmes should extend beyond behavioural adjustments to address the whole person, including social and psychological needs. However, the system I encountered often lacked this holistic approach.

Similarly, my experience with self-representation in court highlighted the need for legal reform. The adversarial nature of the legal system placed me at a significant disadvantage, as I lacked the resources and legal expertise to advocate for myself effectively. Adopting a critical legal theory perspective, Wacks (2020) highlights how the law can perpetuate power imbalances,

particularly for marginalised individuals. My case is an example of how the legal system, while ostensibly providing access to justice, often fails to accommodate those without formal legal training or adequate representation. The result was a personal sense of failure and a reflection of how the system limits true justice for those already vulnerable.

The idea of reform in correctional rehabilitation and legal contexts is not just about changing procedures but about challenging the structures defining success and failure. Reform, from this perspective, involves rethinking how we approach recovery, whether that is physical, emotional, or legal recovery. Correctional rehabilitation reform requires a more integrated approach that acknowledges the complexities of rebuilding one's life post-incarceration. In contrast, legal reform must address the inequalities that prevent individuals from accessing true justice (Bullock et al., 2018). These forms of reform require a paradigm shift from focusing on the individual's limitations to addressing the systemic barriers that inhibit their progress.

Reflecting on my personal experiences, it becomes clear that reform is not a singular act but an ongoing process that requires individual and institutional transformation. The systems that shape correctional rehabilitation and justice must be reimaged to empower individuals rather than limit them, ensuring that recovery and reintegration are possible for all, not just those with access to financial resources and, consequently, expertise.

4.11. Education and Lifelong Learning

4.11 Education and Lifelong Learning	<p>4.11.1 Early schooling and military education</p> <p>4.11.2 Post-injury education and Unisa qualifications</p> <p>4.11.3 Benefits of Lifelong Learning</p>
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4.11.1. Early schooling and military education



Figure 9: Early schooling, me.

As alluded to, my early schooling began at four at a convent in Johannesburg. My parents were staunch Catholics, and this was the logical option for their eldest child, a similar beginning my sister would also mirror later. Unknown to me at that tender age was the disparity between English and Afrikaans-speaking institutions. Apartheid-era educational policies favoured

Afrikaans-speaking schools, as revealed in the work of Christie (2018), highlighting how more resources, better facilities, and teacher allocations were superior to English-speaking schools. While I appreciate that these policies reinforced the state's cultural dominance and socioeconomic privilege, it remained an unfair advantage.

After the family relocated to Boksburg, a town near Johannesburg, South Africa, in 1965, affordability became an issue for my parents. I left the catholic schooling system for the public school. I immediately noted that the educational level had dropped. Later, when I arrived at high school, the disparity was once again immediately apparent. With larger classes and fewer teachers, absent laboratory equipment became an issue for me. These inequalities soon began to influence me academically. My motivation to excel academically reached an all-time low, which aligns with Eccles and Wigfield's (2020) Expectancy-Value Theory.

At that stage, my focus shifted to achieving a minimum standard rather than academic distinction. My attitude in school reflected a logical reaction to an environment that offered

minimal academic rewards despite significant effort; however, that changed dramatically when a friend and I relocated to Nigel High School, a boarding school.

At this school, I was pleasantly surprised by the smaller class size; each subject had a teacher, and sporting facilities were well maintained. What a welcoming change. Although the boarding school concept was initially difficult, I soon appreciated the benefits of being a senior. The relocation also introduced me to dramatic art and acting. Generally, the change to a well-managed school was beginning to produce positive outcomes.

My physical appearance and nothing more altered my English teacher's request that I audition for the annual school play. My somewhat withdrawn personality steered me away rather than towards the idea. Nevertheless, I did an audition, believing that when in Rome, do as the Romans do, new school, new philosophies.

I was eventually cast as Hamlet, the leading role, and my motivation transformed dramatically. The role represented a departure from the standardised academic environment and introduced me to creative expression and personal growth, which I had not explored previously. Once again, Eccles and Wigfield (2020) emphasise how personal motivation is often re-engaged when an activity aligns with an individual's values and interests. Before the year-end school holidays, I knew that looks alone would not be adequate in delivering a performance that met the school's high standards. I duly spent the entire holidays listening to long-playing records of the whole play. On returning to school, I knew I had uncovered the missing parts immediately apparent during the first rehearsal. The Director and cast were relieved that the lead had finally understood and appreciated the role's nuances.

Hamlet aligned with my intrinsic values, raising a sense of accomplishment and high personal satisfaction. My dedication to the role culminated in achieving school colours for



Figure 10: Me, Hamlet, 1978.

Drama, exceeding any previous academic success. My personal development here aligns with Bourdieu’s concept of “habitus,” as revealed in the writing of Akram (2023), highlighting that my engagement with the arts encouraged a shift in self-perception and academic

identity. The support at Nigel High School enabled me to obtain a university entrance qualification, validating the value of resources and institutional support in shaping students’ future trajectories (Christie, 2018; Gallagher et al., 2017). This sense of accomplishment was one of many attributes that later contributed to my military education.

My journey through Infantry School marked a fundamental shift in my self-perception and psychological resilience as an influential experience building the mental strength that has influenced much of my life. The military training was mentally and physically rigorous, serving as an initiation into resilience under high-stress conditions. Luthar et al. (2000) noted that resilience is the ability to act positively despite adversity. This concept resonated with my development during training, as the physical and psychological demands of Infantry School encouraged an adaptation to adverse conditions that reinforced my self-confidence and self-belief.

The selective nature of Infantry School training, where weaker candidates were sent back to their original bases weekly, emphasised a competitive standard that promoted my mental

strength. Previous cultural issues related to differences in English or Afrikaans speaking also faded during this period. This process aligns with Kouzes and Posner's (2023) work on leadership qualities, where structured support systems combined with psychological principles such as behavioural reinforcement and cognitive strengthening create an environment that bolsters leadership capacities.

Observing the gradual deterioration of weaker candidates underscored the military's emphasis on mental toughness (MT), which Beattie et al. (2020) describe as the capacity to sustain performance under pressure. This 'survival of the fittest' approach within the training reinforced my confidence as I realised that my developing mental resilience set me apart from many peers.

The inclusion of fieldwork in the so-called "Operational Area" or South West African border zone contextualised my training within the actual conflict, where the dangers of bush warfare highlighted the importance of resilience and cohesion. As Smith (2015) elucidates, the experience of Infantry School instils a blend of independence and interdependence, where soldiers learn to rely on each other as a cohesive unit. This collective resilience, vital for handling enemy contact situations, created a common framework for action and adaptation. My experience of resilience was thus intertwined with the collective values of my unit, reinforcing adaptability and responsiveness as essential components of military life.

The psychological scaffolding embedded in military training became particularly evident during my post-infantry School experiences when I was selected for elite training at the South African Army College (SAAC) in Tshwane (formerly Pretoria). Though less physically intense, this period challenged me intellectually as I was exposed to the psychological theories underlying leadership. Kouzes and Posner's (2023) concept of leadership as a learned skill

underpinned by psychological frameworks resonated here. The SAAC environment, with its rigorous intellectual standards and exposure to senior military leadership, elevated my understanding of structured authority and responsibility. This shift in perspective demonstrated how psychological resilience and cognitive adaptability contribute to effective leadership within high-stakes environments.

Reflecting on my military experience, the development of mental strength during Infantry School and subsequent operations has been instrumental in my personal and professional life. While the attributes of resilience as a psychological resource remain with me, they were planted within an educational environment. My journey through these challenging experiences illustrates the enduring benefits of structured resilience-building frameworks in military contexts and beyond.

4.11.2. Post-injury education and Unisa qualifications

The educational and psychological benefits I achieved during my national service experience benefitted me. This experience lingered until age fifty; 2010 I applied to begin my BA Psychology degree at the University of South Africa. My choice to pursue psychology at the University of South Africa (Unisa) was initially driven by personal curiosity. However, the journey through an educational route at this impressive institution has shaped my professional and personal life in ways I had not anticipated. My studies at Unisa provided academic knowledge and offered transformative opportunities to apply this knowledge practically, fostering resilience, self-confidence, and professional development.

One focal experience was volunteering as a Peer Helper at Unisa in 2010. This role entailed extensive training that equipped me to navigate various qualifications' structure and curriculum components and support fellow students during registration and admission periods.

Volunteering as a Peer Helper, as scholars like Shriram et al. (2017) note, is often linked to increased empathy, communication skills, and self-efficacy. The training I received helped me better understand student needs and support structures in a higher education context, which directly aligned with the student-centred approach valued by Unisa.

My subsequent one-year contract as a Peer Helper, stemming from the volunteering, came during a personal upheaval following a separation and relocation to Johannesburg. This role provided financial stability and bolstered my sense of belonging and purpose within the Unisa community. In this way, my academic journey and practical experiences reinforced the value of resilience and adaptability, concepts often explored in the psychological literature as essential components for navigating life transitions (Bonanno, 2008). The alignment between academic learning and real-world application fostered a profound sense of achievement and self-confidence.

In 2014, I expanded my engagement at Unisa by joining the electoral board of the Advocacy and Resource Centre for Students with Disabilities (ARSWiD). This centre embodies the principles of inclusivity and equal access to educational opportunities, aiming to support students with disabilities in their academic pursuits. Through my involvement, I observed firsthand the impact of institutional support on students' sense of agency and self-determination. Scholars such as Elder (2021) have long argued that support services in educational institutions play a crucial role in student retention and success, particularly for those facing additional challenges, like students with disabilities. Working with ARSWiD highlighted the importance of tailored support structures in fostering an inclusive educational environment, enhancing my understanding of how diversity and accessibility can be actively promoted in academia.

Having completed my undergraduate degree, I applied for BA Honours in Psychology in 2014. In March 2015, I was found guilty and sentenced to ten years in the Westville Correctional Centre in Durban, South Africa. While incarcerated, I learned of Unisa's Inside-Out Outside-In South African Corrections Interest Group (<https://sites.google.com/view/insideoutwikipage/home>). This project was initiated by academics and students interested in the communities inside and outside corrections (Fourie, 2015) to bridge the divide between incarcerated individuals and the broader society. The programme challenges stereotypes and facilitates dialogue that humanises the experiences of those within the correctional system. Becoming an integral part of this initiative during my incarceration and after my release has been momentous, as it allows me to apply psychological principles to community engagement, aligning with (Giroux & Bosio, 2021). Through community interaction and engagement with the Department of Correctional Services, I have utilised my education to advocate for reform and empathy within the justice system, furthering my commitment to social change.

My recent employment at Unisa in 2022 introduced remarkable opportunities, enabling me to contribute to the academic framework that has transformed my life. Working on tasks such as setting examination questions and marking assessments aligns with Smith's (2024) and Nixon's (2020) principles of good practice in higher education, particularly the emphasis on active learning and meaningful feedback. This role has allowed me to impact students' learning experiences, offering me a sense of fulfilment and purpose within academia that I had not foreseen.

4.11.3. Benefits of life-long learning

In sum, my educational journey through Unisa has facilitated a deeper understanding of my experiences and those of others. Each role, from Peer Helper to my current academic position, has underscored the transformative potential of education in promoting resilience, empathy, and social responsibility. The theoretical knowledge and practical experience, also attained by my qualifications, have empowered my professional pursuits and enabled me to contribute to a more inclusive and socially conscious academic environment.

Since my release, I have had the prospect of becoming actively involved in the practical aspects of the Inside-Out Outside-In South African Corrections Interest Group. Participation in workshops related to the project's focus on corrections has allowed me to be exposed to the academic work presently pursued by academics at the post-doctoral level and internationally. I have been fortunate to be included in workshops held at correctional centres in the Gauteng province of South Africa.

My incarnation and the many needs I identified during those five years have motivated me to pursue further academic qualifications in the corrections space. This study has beautifully exposed the numerous gaps in collaborative engagement with the Department of Correctional Services, which could be included in doctoral research. May my prayers be answered in this regard.

4.12. Conclusion

The findings and discussions presented in this chapter have traversed a profoundly personal yet broadly relevant exploration of identity, resilience, and transformation. Using the Anderson analytic framework, the study interweaves personal experiences with more extensive cultural, social, and psychological paradigms, offering a reflective lens on the profound impact

of lived experiences. Analysing early foundations, military service, rehabilitation, emotional struggles, family dynamics, and lifelong learning has illuminated how individual choices and systemic structures shape personal growth.

The chapter demonstrates how autoethnography, supported by psychological frameworks, can provide unique insights into resilience, identity, and the interplay between personal challenges and societal expectations. The findings underscore the importance of adaptability, emotional acceptance, and the pursuit of meaningful relationships and education in overcoming adversity.

The final chapter, which follows, will serve as the capstone of this study. It will synthesise the key findings, offering a comprehensive conclusion that ties together the themes discussed. Additionally, it will critically examine the limitations encountered during this autoethnographic inquiry, particularly those stemming from subjectivity and the scope of the analysis. The chapter will also present recommendations for future research and practical applications, including potential contributions to inclusive rehabilitation, legal reforms, and disability advocacy. These reflections will contextualise the study within a broader framework, aiming to inspire continued dialogue and research in related fields.

Chapter 5

Conclusion, limitations and recommendations

5.1. Introduction

This chapter discusses the summary of the findings, the conclusions, limitations and recommendations. Therefore, this introduction sets the stage for a reflective conclusion that ties together the key themes of the autoethnographical study. This study's profoundly personal nature, a feature of autoethnographic writing, allowed me to connect with the reader as I revisited and reflected on the main themes that have emerged throughout the narrative. Through the lens of my personal experiences, the narrative has uncovered the profound impact of early life experiences. The challenges of navigating a world defined by physical limitations and the relentless pursuit of meaning, understanding and identity in the face of adversity within various contexts.

This reflection is more than a conclusion of my narrative; it explores deeper considerations about how society perceives, interacts with, and supports those who navigate multiple layers of stigma, discrimination, and adversity. This chapter also combines the connections between the personal and the theoretical and offers final reflections on the broader implications of this study. It also considers the ongoing journey of self-discovery and resilience, acknowledging that my journey and the lessons learned continue while this study reaches its conclusion.

5.2. Overview of chapter

As I bring this exploration of my lived experience as a disabled man and ex-offender to a close, I find myself returning to the initial questions that shaped this journey: What are the lived experiences of a formerly incarcerated offender living with a disability? The research question

introduced the intersections of disability, incarceration, and identity, which define my understanding of self and society. Through the lens of autoethnography, I have sought to make sense of those deeply personal, socially constructed experiences, revealing the often-invisible challenges that disabled individuals face within society, the judicial system, the correctional system and beyond. In addition, I aim to reflect on the insights gained, the profoundly transformative moments encountered, and the implications of my story for the broader discussions on disability, marginalisation, incarceration, and rehabilitation.

The chapter also highlights the significance of vulnerability, emotional struggles, and the continuous process of identity reconstruction, offering insights into how these experiences contribute to a deeper understanding of the self and society. Integrating theoretical perspectives from influential scholars, such as Michel Foucault, provides a framework for understanding the complex interplay between societal structures, power dynamics, and personal identity in the context of disability and incarceration. I feel that I have colourfully answered this study's research question.

A summary of the study findings is also included. This will be followed by an interpretation and discussion, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research, which will have practical implications and applications. A conclusion will follow.

5.3. Summary of the study findings

Reflecting on my journey, I see it as a maturing river, beginning as vulnerable rain droplets high on a mountaintop, dependent on others to form the initial pond of life. In those early years, I was like a small stream trickling down, creating connections with family and others, some of whom stayed to shape my path while others moved on. As I grew, my stream widened into a young river, negotiating life's inevitable rapids and falls, marked by joy and

hardship. As my life meandered independently, I encountered tributaries representing diverse cultural interactions, languages, and worldviews, each contributing to the river's depth and character. Ultimately, like all rivers reaching the ocean, these tributaries and my experiences culminated in a worldview that reflects the confluence of these interactions and transformations.

The rapids I faced were particularly profound during the dual adversities of disability and incarceration, requiring resilience to navigate. My military training, rehabilitation efforts, and daily struggles to maintain autonomy equipped me with the mental toughness to persist. As Ungar (2008) describes, resilience is not a fixed trait, but a dynamic and adaptive process shaped by personal effort and environmental factors. I found this true in my life, as each new challenge demanded a recalibration of strength and determination. Richardson's (2002) resilience theory captures this dynamic process, emphasising how resilience evolves like a deepening river shaped by the convergence of life's streams.

One of the most challenging aspects of my journey was reconciling the identity I once held with the new self-imposed circumstances. Disability and incarceration reshaped my sense of self in ways I could not have imagined. Erikson's (1968) theory of psychosocial development helped me make sense of this fluidity, illustrating how identity evolves through life stages and experiences. Foucault's (1982) concept of technologies of the self, further illuminated how power structures and societal expectations influenced my identity reconstruction. My narrative reflects this interplay, revealing how societal forces constrained and empowered my sense of self.

Incarceration interrupted my life like a dam halting a river's flow, imposing significant psychological and emotional tolls. I found myself grappling with societal stigma, struggling to rebuild my self-worth and identity in the face of labels that sought to define me. Goffman's

(1963) concept of stigma resonated deeply with my experiences, capturing how societal labelling perpetuates marginalisation. The broader societal implications of incarceration for disabled individuals became painfully evident, exposing systemic shortcomings in legal and correctional systems. My critique of these systems, informed by lived experience, aligns with Wacquant's (2010) observations of structural failure and cycles of marginalisation.

The societal attitudes I encountered toward disability and incarceration revealed profound limitations within legal, medical, and social systems. Shakespeare's (2017) social model of disability was a revelation, helping me see how societal constructs, rather than physical impairments, define disability. Jeyathevan et al. (2019) further critiqued the exclusionary narratives of normalcy, highlighting how such constructs marginalise those who deviate from societal norms. My reflections on these constructs were a significant aspect of this study, as I sought to question and challenge the definitions of normalcy that perpetuate exclusion.

The psychological and emotional struggles were perhaps the most personal aspect of this journey. Coping with the physical and mental changes brought by disability and incarceration often felt like navigating an unrelenting current. Frankl's (1966) existential framework of finding meaning in suffering became a cornerstone of my approach to these challenges. His belief that adversity could be imbued with meaning guided me through self-doubt and loss. Loeffler et al. (2018) emphasised the importance of psychological support, a theme that resonated with my own experience of finding strength through self-reflection and the support of others.

Through it all, support systems were the tributaries feeding strength into my river. Family, friends, rehabilitation professionals, and the church were integral to my rehabilitation and ongoing resilience. Their presence provided both practical assistance and emotional encouragement, fostering a sense of coherence that Antonovsky (1987) described as essential for

resilience and meaning. O'Dell et al. (2019) underscored the importance of emotional support systems in mitigating adversity, a finding mirrored in my journey.

As I reflect on this study and its implications, aspects remain to be explored. The intersectionality of disability and incarceration, as discussed by Wacquant (2010), is an area ripe for further research. My journey highlighted the compounded marginalisation faced by those navigating these dual identities, and a deeper examination of these intersections could uncover additional layers of complexity and insight.

Equally important is the role of community reintegration programmes in reducing stigma and promoting resilience. Inspired by Putnam's (2000) emphasis on social capital in *Bowling Alone*, I believe these programmes are vital for rebuilding trust, relationships, and a sense of belonging for disabled ex-offenders. Research could focus on how these initiatives foster resilience and facilitate successful social reintegration.

Finally, longitudinal studies could provide valuable insights into the long-term effects of incarceration and disability on identity and mental health. By tracking individuals over time, researchers could better understand how societal norms and personal circumstances influence the ongoing evolution of identity and resilience.

Future research can explore these areas, building on this study's foundations and contributing to a deeper understanding of disability, incarceration, and the human capacity for resilience.

5.4. Interpretation and discussion

Adversity in life can involve wearing many hats and being present in various contexts. Reflecting on my journey, the metaphor of a maturing river feels more than fitting as it encapsulates a life shaped by resilience, adaptation, and evolving identity. This river metaphor

aligns closely with Bronfenbrenner's (2000) ecological systems theory, illustrating how individuals are influenced by and influence the systems around them, from family to society.

The primary research question aimed to explore the lived experience of a disabled man who also served a term of incarceration. The development of resilience within both contexts, disability and incarceration, and the flexibility of identity flows confirm that this study has answered this question.

The thematic analysis highlighted resilience as a dynamic process shaped by both internal adaptations and external influences. Drawing on Richardson's (2002) resilience theory, the findings align with the idea that resilience is cultivated over time, much like a river deepening its path. This process was supported by autoethnography, which enabled an in-depth exploration of lived experiences, revealing resilience as an evolving and context-dependent construct.

The integration of this study's methodology formed my river's ever-changing banks. The fluidity of identity underscores how incarceration and disability redefined self-perception. The interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) brought nuanced insights into the interplay between imposed societal labels and personal resistance to these constructs, echoing Foucault's technologies of the self, as discussed in the work of Lynch (2014). The findings emphasise that identity is not stationary, but a continuously reconstructed narrative influenced by life circumstances. My experience of disability, incarceration, and resilience repeats through this framework, highlighting how each layer, from my struggles to societal expectations, played a role in shaping my path.

Integrating narrative inquiry and IPA into this research was critical in uncovering the depth of the lived experiences. My lived experience story also provided the scaffolding to document the story of resilience and identity, focusing on the cycle of transformative events and

their implications. Through this process, a holistic approach and understanding contributed to the personal and social dimensions of the study.

On the other hand, IPA facilitated a closer examination of the subjective meaning behind these experiences. For instance, the method highlighted how incarceration acted as a "dam," interrupting the natural flow of identity development and creating opportunities for reflection and self-reclamation. These methodological tools acted as tributaries feeding into a comprehensive understanding of the research themes, allowing for a robust and multifaceted analysis.

As Ungar (2008) notes, resilience is not a single attribute but a complex interplay of internal and external factors that allow individuals to adapt to adversity. Like the young river navigating rapids, my resilience was not something I "had"; it was cultivated over time, moulded by military training, rehabilitation, and the daily struggle within society to maintain autonomy. In this sense, resilience is cumulative, affiliated with drops of rain converging into a stream, forming an ever-deepening reservoir of inner strength. The idea of resilience as a process rather than a fixed trait resonates with Richardson's (2002) resilience theory, which highlights resilience as an adaptive capacity shaped by one's experiences and environment.

My journey illuminated the fluidity of identity, a construct as changeable as water itself. Disability and incarceration acted as forces that reshaped my self-perception, demanding that I reconcile past and present identities. Foucault's concepts of power and identity in the work by Lynch (2014) come to mind here; as he argued, identity is not a fixed entity but one shaped by external forces, social labels, and internal resistance to those definitions. Foucault's (2019) piece on technologies of the self particularly resonates with my experience. I engaged in self-reflective practices to reclaim my identity, moving from a place of imposed stigma to a redefined sense of self-worth.

Incarceration created a separation in my life, a dam interrupting the natural flow of my journey. Goffman's (1963) concept of stigma, as discussed in Tyler (2018), provides a lens to understand the societal labels that compounded the psychological toll of incarceration. Being both disabled and an ex-offender positioned me at the intersection of two marginalised identities, each carrying its own societal biases and limitations. This duality impacted my identity and underscored the limitations within our social systems, particularly the corrections system. Wacquant and Wacquant's (2020) critique of the penal system in the United States of America is reaffirmed here, arguing that the correctional system often fails to rehabilitate and reinforces cycles of marginalisation.

This study has significant implications for societal understanding of disability and incarceration. By employing a social model of disability, the findings challenge the dominant "normalcy" narrative, advocating for inclusivity and systemic change. As shown through the narrative inquiry, disability is not merely a physical condition, but a societal construct shaped by exclusionary environments and perceptions.

Similarly, the study critiques the corrections system's rehabilitative capacity, highlighting its role in perpetuating stigma and marginalisation. Through the lens of Tyler's (2018) concept of stigma, the discussion underscores the dual marginalisation faced by individuals navigating both disability and ex-offender status. These findings call for societal attitudes and policy framework reforms to foster a more inclusive and rehabilitative environment.

The river metaphor is a central narrative element, illustrating the iterative nature of resilience and identity. The tributaries symbolise the diverse methodological approaches employed, each contributing to the overarching current of understanding.

Autoethnography establishes the foundational stream, capturing the flow of lived experiences. Thematic analysis deepens our insight into specific bends in the river, highlighting moments of psychological struggle and societal resistance. IPA functions as a channel, allowing for a detailed exploration of the undercurrents that shape the river's journey, including internal reflections and transformative epiphanies that emerge during incarceration.

This metaphor also powerfully represents resilience. The river's rapids signify the challenges encountered, while the reservoirs embody the cumulative inner strength developed over time. This imagery enriches the narrative and provides a cohesive framework for linking the study's findings to broader theoretical constructs.

This study contributes both to academic discourse and practical applications. Academically, it bridges the personal and systemic, offering a nuanced perspective on resilience and identity that challenges traditional constructs. By emphasising the interconnectedness of personal narratives and societal structures, the research advocates for a more inclusive understanding of disability and incarceration.

Practically, the findings underscore the need for reforms in disability advocacy and correctional policies. The study's emphasis on the importance of support systems highlights actionable insights for improving rehabilitation processes and fostering societal reintegration. Additionally, the narrative style invites readers to connect with shared lived experiences, cultivating empathy and a deeper understanding of marginalised identities.

My reflections on societal attitudes toward disability line up with the social model of disability, which views disability not as an individual deficit but as a societal construct shaped by inaccessible environments and limiting perceptions (Shakespeare, 2017). The "normalcy" narrative that dominates society, as Jeyathevan et al. (2019) discuss, excludes those who do not

conform, creating an “us vs. them” dichotomy that marginalises disabled individuals. This profound realisation made me question my place in society and the broader structures that dictate worth and ability.

The psychological challenges I faced were not just emotional ripples but an ongoing internal current, highlighted by Loeffler et al. (2018) when referring to Frankl’s (1959) notion of finding meaning in suffering. This existential perspective allowed me to confront self-doubt and loss with a sense of purpose, drawing strength from the idea that one’s life circumstances can still hold meaning. Frankl’s belief that resilience often comes from finding meaning amid suffering became a guiding principle for me as I navigated loss, disability, and the challenges of reintegration.

Throughout this journey, support systems were like tributaries feeding into my river, providing strength and sustenance. This idea of social support as essential to resilience is reflected in the work of O’Dell et al. (2019), who found that emotional support can shield against the negative impacts of stress and adversity. My family, friends, and the church provided practical help and a sense of belonging and hope, which played an instrumental role in my rehabilitation. This aligns with the concept referred to as a sense of coherence, which posits that having supportive relationships helps individuals view life as more manageable and meaningful.

As I reflect on my journey throughout this study, I see that the river metaphor remains an appropriate symbol for the path my life has carved out. As the water begins on a mountaintop, I have encountered and integrated various influences such as family, adversity, social expectations, community and support systems, each contributing meaningfully to my journey.

5.5. Limitations of the study

As I reflect on the journey of this study, I realise that limitations were not just methodological; they were deeply personal and woven into the fabric of my life experiences, emotions, and biases. My autoethnographic approach allowed me to research my story with a level of honesty and vulnerability that traditional academic methods might not accommodate. However, there were times that the study highlighted inherent challenges that shaped, and at times restricted, the scope of this study.

5.5.1. Subjectivity and Bias

By its nature, autoethnography is rooted in personal experience, and my journey is, without a doubt, subjective. My specific contexts and biases shape my reflections on disability, incarceration, and identity, and while I have sought to offer an authentic account, I recognise that my perspective is limited. I understand that my unique positionality informs my views on resilience, identity, and societal structures. In sharing my narrative, I may have accidentally increased certain aspects of my experience while understating others, driven by the human tendency to protect and preserve one's sense of self.

5.5.2. Emotional vulnerability and selectivity

The emotional influence of revisiting some of my life's most challenging moments may have influenced the areas I explored in detail versus those I approached with risk avoidance. As Ellis (2004) suggests, autoethnography requires a delicate balance between vulnerability and self-preservation. There were times when recalling, writing, and analysing my life journey became overwhelming, leading me to skim over or simplify specific experiences that may have added depth to this study. While necessary for my well-being, these choices may leave gaps in understanding the complexities of my journey.

5.5.3. Memory and retrospection

Memory is an inherently flawed and fluid construct, especially when dealing emotionally charged events (Ellis & Bochner, 2006; Freeman, 2015). Reflecting on life's past stages is like peering through a misted window; I see shapes and shadows of what happened, but not always with perfect clarity. My reliance on memory introduces limitations, as some details may have blurred or shifted with time. This retrospection is not purely factual; it is coloured by the personal growth, insights, and even biases that emerged since the events occurred. While I have aimed to be as accurate as possible, I recognise that some of my recollections might differ from objective reality.

5.5.4. Generalisability and transferability

Autoethnography is inherently personal, and while my story speaks to broader themes of resilience, adaptation, and societal marginalisation, it remains just that: *my* story. The experiences of disability and incarceration are diverse, and I am but one voice within a much larger story. Readers may find aspects of my journey relatable, but it would be arrogant to assume my path mirrors the experiences of others facing similar challenges. This limitation underscores the subjective nature of autoethnography. The aim is not a broad generalisation but to offer a window into one life, hoping others might glimpse pieces of their own.

5.5.5. Societal context and researcher positionality

Finally, I recognise and admit that my reflections are within specific societal, cultural, and legal contexts. My positionality influences the interpretations I have drawn as a person with a disability and a former incarcerated individual. These societal contexts constantly evolve, and readers from different backgrounds or eras may interpret my journey through entirely different lenses. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) note that the researcher's position constantly interacts with

the study, especially in autoethnographic work. My perspective, shaped by the systems and structures surrounding me, limits the study's scope.

Within autoethnography, I have honed both the strengths and vulnerabilities integral to my story. Through this lens, my life becomes a personal journey and a broader critique of societal structures, revealing the resilience required by those who navigate life on the margins. Ultimately, I hope this work will resonate with others who feel shaped by forces beyond their control, reminding them that, like a river, we all have the power to carve our independent paths.

5.6. Recommendations for future research

Several areas could attract future research, and I will discuss each briefly under subheadings for clarity.

5.6.1. Exploration of marginalised sectors

Future research could focus on resilience-building strategies which empower people with disabilities, ex-offenders and other marginalised groups. While the study highlighted personal resilience, I feel more is needed to understand the collective resilience in communities facing adversity. Studies could focus on how resilience is encouraged in institutional settings, focusing on research exploring alternative methods of support to aid in the mental and emotional recovery of individuals post-incarceration.

5.6.2. Identity reconstruction

Given the fluid nature of identity, longitudinal research could shed light on how individuals reshape their identities after major life disruptions like disability or incarceration. Such studies may reveal patterns in identity reconstruction, helping us understand how people reconcile their former and current selves amid changing societal labels. This research will focus more on the social model and less on the medical model.

5.6.3. Impact of support systems on rehabilitation and reintegration

This study emphasised the importance of support systems. However, limited research exists on the specific ways that family, community, and institutional support affect the rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-offenders. Studies focusing on evaluating different types of support interventions may reveal the most effective and the reasons for those outcomes. Policy and implementation of those practices would be highly beneficial in South Africa.

5.6.4. Cultural comparisons of disability and incarceration

Cultural interpretations of disability and incarceration shape how individuals perceive themselves and are perceived by others. Comparative research across cultures can reveal how societal narratives about these issues influence self-worth, identity formation, and the process of reintegration into communities.

5.6.5. The role of education in rehabilitation and reintegration

Future research might consider the role of both formal and informal educational programmes in developing the self-efficacy necessary to learn worthwhile skills and create a new sense of purpose and identity. Research may explore which educational models or curricula have served best to transition into independence and reintegration into society. This research's results may show how special education programmes are individually tailored in correctional and rehabilitation facilities. Education is one of the major drivers for change in oneself and social inclusion.

5.6.6. Critique of correctional and rehabilitation policies for disabled individuals

This study critiqued the DCS for its policies regarding disabled individuals. Future research could examine the effectiveness and inclusivity of correctional policies for disabled individuals. Studies might investigate how current systems address the needs of disabled

offenders against the backdrop of the Constitution of South Africa. Studies exploring policy improvements could better support their rehabilitation, rights, and reintegration into society. This research could contribute to advocacy efforts for systemic reform for both able and disabled individuals.

5.7. Reflections

The reflections from this study are insightful and multi-layered, stemming from personal and societal observations. I discovered how my story may bring visibility to those who have experienced disability, incarceration, or any form of marginalisation. My story helps challenge societal biases and offers a trustworthy lens through which the reader may better understand these challenges.

Life events such as disability and incarceration profoundly shape and reshape identity. Identity is also not static. It remains a fluid construct which adapts to personal and societal modifications. Recognising this fluidity allows for a less judgemental and more compassionate approach to those who have experienced life-changing events or exclusion.

The river metaphor reveals that experiences, environments, and support systems shape resilience. Therefore, resilience is not a natural attribute but is built and reinforced over time, often through adversity. Understanding this process can be empowering for individuals.

Societal systems such as the judicial and DCS often fail to support marginalised individuals. There is an urgent need for systemic reform in policies related to the marginalised. Without these reforms, rehabilitation initiatives are ineffective.

Finally, autoethnography as an academic research method allows the researcher to engage deeply with their own experiences, uncovering insights that may never emerge in traditional

research methods. Autoethnography facilitates personal growth, self-discovery, and advocacy. Individuals can critically examine and share their journeys with authenticity and depth.

This study has proven to be the most incredible growth instrument I have ever experienced in my academic career. May I prove worthy of reaching even higher peaks by embarking on further academic pursuits and uncovering further gaps within the structures that impact the marginalised and incarcerated. The journey shall continue, and I am enthusiastic.

5.8. Conclusion

This study has illuminated the interplay between resilience, identity, and societal structures through the lens of a lived experience narrative framed by the river metaphor. By employing a qualitative methodology, particularly autoethnography and IPA, the research has provided a nuanced exploration of the dual adversities of disability and incarceration. The findings have underscored resilience as an adaptive, cumulative process and identity as a fluid construct shaped by personal and external influences.

The river metaphor has proven to be a powerful unifying theme, encapsulating the iterative nature of personal transformation and societal interaction. Through this framework, the study demonstrated how resilience, much like a river's flow, is continuously shaped by tributaries of internal strength, external support systems, and lived experiences. Similarly, the damming effects of societal stigma and systemic marginalisation were critically examined, revealing how incarceration and disability intersect to redefine self-perception and social inclusion.

The study's integration of methodological tools allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the psychological, social, and cultural dimensions of these experiences. Narrative inquiry documented the journey, thematic analysis highlighted key turning points, and IPA provided

more profound insight into the subjective meanings of resilience and identity. These methodological tributaries converged to form a robust analytical current, advancing theoretical understanding and practical implications.

From an academic perspective, this research contributes to the discourse on resilience and identity, challenging traditional constructs and emphasising the interconnectedness of personal narratives and societal frameworks. It highlights the critical need to view disability and incarceration not as individual deficits but as phenomena shaped by societal constructs and systemic barriers. This aligns with the social model of disability and underscores the need for inclusive policies and practices.

Practically, the study advocates for reforms in the correctional and disability support systems, emphasising the role of social support in fostering rehabilitation and reintegration. By presenting an evocative narrative grounded in lived experiences, the research promotes empathy and a deeper understanding of marginalised identities, offering actionable insights for policymakers, practitioners, and society.

In conclusion, this study addresses its primary research questions and contributes meaningfully to academic and practical fields. The findings serve as a call to action for fostering inclusivity, dismantling systemic barriers, and empowering individuals navigating the intersections of disability and incarceration. The river metaphor remains a testament to the resilience and adaptability inherent in the human spirit, offering a hopeful and transformative lens through which these experiences can be understood and addressed.

This chapter, therefore, concludes by reflecting on the lessons learned from my lived experiences and the ongoing challenges. It situates the personal story within broader theoretical

and societal contexts, offering insights into the complex interplay between individual identity, societal expectations, and the realities of living with a disability and a criminal record.

As I look back on this exploration of my journey through the trials of disability, the isolation of incarceration, and the continuous reshaping of my identity, I see not just a story but a testament to resilience. Like a river carving its path, my life has wound through adversity, adaptation, learning and self-discovery, leaving an indelible mark on who I am today.

My river has occasionally been surrounded by mountain ranges, representing the giants I was fortunate to meet. This study has offered me a space to merge personal experience with theoretical reflection, bridging my inner world with the larger social forces that have shaped it.

My river has flowed persistently and ever adaptive through rapids, still waters, tributaries of influential connections, and oceans of cultural exchange. My life, just like a river, was not without challenges. There were sharp rocks, massive logs and unexpected turns, which moulded and shaped the river like my experiences with disability and incarceration have shaped my identity. As this river nears the ocean, it embraces change and new perspectives, merging with something much more significant than itself.

I, too, have come to embrace a complex understanding of resilience, identity, and the power of community. I pray for continued advocacy and research to address the systemic issues highlighted in the narrative, emphasising the need for greater understanding and support for individuals facing similar challenges. However, like life, my river flows shaped by each experience, reminding me that despite profound challenges, there is a purpose and beauty in each turn and bend.

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APPENDICES

1.1. Ethics Approval Letter



College of Human Sciences_CREC

Date: 30/09/2024

Dear: Mr Keith Scott

NHRC Registration # : (Rec-240816-052)
 Ref #: 0335
 Name: Mr Keith Scott
 Student #: 4850289

**Decision: Ethics Approval from 30
 September 2024 to 29
 September 2025**

Researcher: Mr Keith Scott

UNISA, Pretter Street, Tshwane

Pretoria

4850289@mylife.unisa.ac.za 0810721750

Supervisor: Dr Mbongiseni Mdakane emdakam@unisa.ac.za**Co-Supervisor:** Professor Mattheus Eduard Fourie fourme@unisa.ac.za**#Disabled and Incarceration: An autoethnographic Study of an Ex-offender****Qualification:** Masters (Psychology)

Thank you for the application for research ethics clearance by the College of Human Sciences_CREC for the above-mentioned research study. Ethics approval is granted for one year.

The **low-risk application** was **reviewed** by the College of Human Sciences_CREC on **30 September 2024** in compliance with the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics and the Standard Operating Procedure on Research Ethics Risk Assessment.

The proposed research may now commence with the provisions that:

1. The researcher(s) will ensure that the research project adheres to the values and principles expressed in the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics.
2. Any adverse circumstance arising in the undertaking of the research project that is relevant to the ethicality of the study should be communicated in writing to the College of Human Sciences_CREC.
3. The researcher(s) will conduct the study according to the methods and procedures set out in the approved application.
4. Any changes that can affect the study-related risks for the research participants, particularly in terms of assurances made with regards to the protection of participants' privacy and the confidentiality of the data, should be reported to the Committee in writing, accompanied by a progress report.

5. The researcher will ensure that the research project adheres to any applicable national legislation, professional codes of conduct, institutional guidelines and scientific standards relevant to the specific field of study. Adherence to the following South African legislation is important, if applicable: Protection of Personal Information Act, no 4 of 2013; Children's act no 38 of 2005 and the National Health Act, no 61 of 2003.
6. Only de-identified research data may be used for secondary research purposes in future on condition that the research objectives are similar to those of the original research. Secondary use of identifiable human research data requires additional ethics clearance.
7. No field work activities may continue after the expiry date (**29 September 2025**). Submission of a completed research ethics progress report will constitute an application for renewal, for Ethics Research Committee approval.

Additional Conditions

1. Disclosure of data to third parties is prohibited without explicit consent from Unisa.
2. De-identified data must be safely stored on password protected PCs.
3. Care should be taken by the researcher when publishing the results to protect the confidentiality and privacy of the university.
4. Adherence to the National Statement on Ethical Research and Publication practices, principle 7 referring to Social awareness, must be ensured: "Researchers and institutions must be sensitive to the potential impact of their research on society, marginal groups or individuals, and must consider these when weighing the benefits of the research against any harmful effects, with a view to minimising or avoiding the latter where possible." Unisa will not be liable for any failure to comply with this principle.

Note

The reference number 0335 should be clearly indicated on all forms of communication with the intended research participants, as well as with the Committee.

1.2. Turnitin Report



Turnitin Report
04850289.pdf