

**EXPLORING COLLECTIVE NARRATIVES OF VIOLENCE: INTERSECTIONS OF  
GENDERED 'SELVES' OF PLACE AND TIME AMONG MEMBERS OF AN AFRICAN  
WOMEN'S SUPPORT NETWORK**

**SAMANTHA VAN SCHALKWYK**

Student number: 2011155435

This thesis has been submitted in accordance with the requirements for the doctoral degree in the faculty of Humanities, Department of Psychology at the University of the Free State; on the 1<sup>st</sup> July 2014.

Supervisor: Professor Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	7
<b>Abstract</b> .....	8
<b>Chapter 1: Background significance</b> .....	9
Introduction.....	9
Rationale for the current study.....	10
Exploring collective narratives.....	11
<b>Chapter 2: Literature Review: Contextualising Gender-Based Violence and Migrant Subjectivities in South Africa</b> .....	14
Contextualising gender-based violence in South Africa.....	14
Gender-based violence in South Africa.....	14
Gender-based violence in countries of Sub-Saharan Africa	
-the extent of the problem.....	16
African migrant women: Subjectivity and Culture.....	17
Beyond gender, race, and socio-economic position.....	17
Migrant women and culture.....	18
<b>Chapter 3: Literature Review: Agency, Resistance and Woman Abuse</b> .....	22
Early theories of woman abuse.....	22
Literature on women’s agency: ‘Choice’ and leaving abusive men.....	24
Agency within the abusive relationship.....	24
Agency during the process of leaving an abuser.....	26
Leaving and shelters for abused women.....	28
The Landscape of memory: Social constructionist approaches to agency and identity.....	31
Feminist poststructuralist theory, gender-based violence, and women’s agency.....	31

Social Remembering: Imaginative expressions and narrative disruptions.....	34
Conceptualising resistance: Community-based initiatives and approaches.....	40
The ecological model and women’s resilience.....	40
Community-based approaches, collective agency, and resistance.....	41
Community psychology, identity, and narrative.....	42
Storytelling and resistance.....	43
The concept of agency used in the study.....	43
Conclusion.....	44
<b>Chapter 4: Methodology and Methods</b> .....	<b>46</b>
Background motivations and rationale for the current study	
-A reflexive narrative.....	46
Previous research experience.....	46
The Sisters for Sisters women’s group.....	49
Aims of the current study.....	
Research Paradigm: My Conceptualisations of “knowing”: Epistemological and theoretical orientations of the current research.....	52
A qualitative epistemological approach- ‘how do we know’? .....	52
Situating self as researcher and community engager-knowing through reflexive self-examination.....	53
Multiple positions in engagement: Knowing through reflections of self-in-interaction.....	55
Challenges to notions of a safe feminist space .....	55
Negotiating the role of researcher .....	56
A Feminist methodology: Through what means can we know? .....	58
Feminist assumptions.....	58

The need for an African gender perspective.....	58
Addressing the pitfalls of European and North American feminist scholarship.....	60
Knowing the Self: Ontological assumptions.....	61
Feminist poststructuralism, subjectivity, and agency.....	61
Research Design.....	62
Theoretical aims and practical feminist goals/ethics.....	63
The collective biography research approach.....	64
Brief overview of the practical implementation of the collective biography methods for this project.....	66
Rationale for the collective biography methodological approach.....	66
Participants.....	68
Access to participants.....	69
Data Collection.....	70
Data Gathering phase 1: collective biography workshops.....	70
Data gathering phase two: Focus group discussions.....	72
Data Analysis.....	74
Theoretical frameworks for the analysis.....	76
Narrative conceptual approach.....	76
Social remembering- An additional lens.....	79
Ethical Considerations.....	79
Participant Rights: Disclosure, anonymity, and confidentiality.....	79
Further ethical issues.....	81
Post data-gathering procedures.....	81

<b>Chapter 5: Results/Discussion: Culture, Femininity, and Woman ‘Abuse’: The Case of ‘Mubobobo’ Rape</b> .....	83
Introduction.....	83
African cultures, femininity, and sexuality: Setting the cultural context.....	83
Narratively cultivating “mubobobo” rape.....	86
The micro-context of the collective biography workshops.....	90
“You are not really sure who to trust anymore”: reflexively narrating embodied memories of abuse.....	92
A “whispering” return of sexual desire: Cheney’s voice.....	92
“It will always stay here in my head”: Akeyo’s voice.....	97
“You would never imagine touching them”: (Re)-creating ‘selves’ through narratives of the “mubobobo” perpetrator type.....	110
Constructing the “mubobobo” perpetrator type.....	111
Narrative purpose: “Mubobobo” as a metaphor for the “unspeakable”.....	116
Psychological dimensions of the “mubobobo” narrative.....	118
Conclusion.....	122
<b>Chapter 6: Results/Discussion: Crossing Borders in Africa: Collectively Narrating the ‘Foreigner Within’</b> .....	127
Introduction.....	127
“‘It was another chapter of my life’”: The encounter at the border post through a social remembering lens.....	128
Conventional socio-cultural dramas of ‘abuse’.....	130
Micro-context of the collective biography space.....	133
“‘It’s like another form of abuse’”: Narratives of transitions, power(lessness) and place.....	134
The world of transit.....	134

“You are desperate and you want to cross”: Collectively constructing ‘selves’ in the space of transit.....	139
“I just became another person”: Narrating the ‘pathological self’ in transit.....	150
The instinctual survival ‘self’ .....	150
Beyond survival: ‘You are just enjoying the life that’s around you’ .....	161
The psychological function of these reconstructions of memory.....	165
Managing negative emotions.....	166
Reclaiming the self.....	167
Managing a sense of belonging.....	168
Conclusion.....	169
<b>Chapter 7: Results/Discussion: Psycho-Social Borders and the “Imagined” Female ‘Other’: Collectively Constructing ‘Selves’ in the South African Context.....</b>	<b>173</b>
Introduction.....	173
The micro-context of the collective biography workshops.....	173
Collectively constructing the ‘inner world’ of the South African female ‘other’ .....	176
“‘They can’t do without their sex’”: Collectively constructing South African women’s sexual character.....	178
“‘Put some eggs where they can see...they will volunteer to spend the night’”.....	185
Narrating socio-cultural worlds: Collective constructions of ‘us’ and ‘them’.....	195
Constructing psycho-social borders: The collective ‘self’ and the “‘imagined” ‘Other’ .....	200
The narrative function of constructions of ‘us’ and ‘them’ .....	205
“‘The colours that I really feel’”: Fractures in constructions of ‘good’ collective ‘self’ .....	207
Conclusion.....	211

<b>Chapter 8: Conclusions and Recommendations</b> .....	213
Summary .....	213
‘Looking back’: Drawing on shared cultural resources of “mubobobo” .....	215
Narratives of space/place and the ‘foreigner selves’ .....	219
The shared South African ‘experience’ and the “imagined” female ‘other’ .....	222
Transformation of ‘selves’: The possibilities (and limits) of agency in the South African context .....	224
Methodological insights .....	227
Practical contributions .....	229
Limitations and recommendations .....	230
Conclusion .....	232
<b>References</b> .....	235
<b>Appendices</b> .....	253
Appendix A: Sisters for Sisters consent form .....	253
Appendix B: Participant consent forms .....	256
Appendix C: Participant biographical information sheet .....	258
Appendix D: Examples of workshop activities .....	260
Appendix E: Transcribing conventions .....	262

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

My heartfelt appreciation goes out to my thesis supervisor, Professor Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, for always believing me and for providing constant support and encouragement. You have taught me that anything is possible. You are a true mentor.

I would like to say thank you to the many women Sisters for Sisters members who supported me throughout the research process and who gave up their time to speak openly and honestly about their experiences of violence. I am truly indebted to you and you have been such an inspiration to me and at times I felt like most of you were second family to me. I hope that the group continues to grow and prosper in its work to help women who have experienced gender-based violence in the African context.

I would also like to acknowledge the Saartjie Baartman Women and Children's Centre and the Family and Marriage Association of South Africa (FAMSA) for their support in offering backup counselling services to women participants of my study.

To my partner Melvin Hayes who supported me through the last and most challenging lap of my journey. Thank you my love.

## ABSTRACT

*Research in the field of gender-based violence and agency is often very individualistically orientated, drawing on Western theories that may not be well suited to understanding the experiences of women living in the African context. This qualitative study is based on facilitated group dialogue and focus group interviews involving a women's support group that consists of migrant African women and South African women, all of whom are currently living in South Africa. All of these women have encountered a range of experiences of violence in their lives. The aims of the study were, firstly, to explore the co-construction of subjectivities among a sample of women drawn from the women's support group. Secondly, the study aimed to examine how the women construct meaning both in terms of their victimhood and their agency. The study focuses mainly on the collective dimension of the women's construction of meaning. Using the collective biography methodologies outlined by feminist poststructuralists Davies and Gannon (2006a), the first phase of the data gathering process consisted of four interactive workshops that were facilitated by the researcher, with a sample selected from the women's support network. The workshops used different methodological strategies including storytelling, role plays and group discussions to explore the women's views about gender-based violence. The themes that emerged from these workshops were then used as a framework for developing questions for the focus groups in the second phase of the data gathering process. Each of the focus groups was conducted with 6-8 women and explored the women's memories of experiences of abuse at different life stages. The analysis of the data followed a narrative discursive approach informed by feminist poststructuralist theories, through a social remembering lens. The results showed that the women transformed their past by collectively utilising narrative strategies that allowed them to work with socio-cultural discourses in complex and creative ways. In this way they were able to express certain 'un-narratable' experiences, mobilise 'hidden' residues of gendered abuse, and work agentically, co-creating new ways of imagining themselves as violated and sexual beings in the African social landscape. This study offers novel insight into the possibilities of a collective biography research approach for facilitating abused African women's resistance within the South African context.*

**Key Words:** Gender-based violence; subjectivities; collective biography; agency; social remembering; narrative strategies; migrant African women; African context

# CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND SIGNIFICANCE

## INTRODUCTION

Violence against women's bodies and minds is a strategy used by men to communicate to women that they are worthless (Hydèn, 1994). Often the aim of such violence is to strip women of their subjectivity and to render women with a sense of inferiority. Women often silently internalise misogynistic messages that may shape the meanings that they attach to their sexualised body (Bakare-Yusus, 2011). How then can women break free from such negative internalisations and claim a more positive sense of self in the world? What potentials are there for women's agency within impoverished contexts of the developing world where social resources such as women's shelters and other social service agencies are scarce and poverty a harsh reality of life?

This study examines the ways in which women transform their past abuse through memory and how through processes of group dialogue women may be able to manage their past in transformative and agentic ways. The focus is specifically on migrant African women from Zimbabwe, Kenya and Congo who are currently living in South Africa. All of the women have experienced a multitude of forms of gender-based violence across the temporal-spatial landscape of their lives and they are all members of a grassroots support network for abused women.

The motivations for this study were based on my previous research work in the field of gender-based violence during which I worked in poor communities and abused women's shelters in Cape Town, South Africa. I developed an interest in abused women's agency and I studied this agency through examining women shelter residents' process of disengaging from abusive partners. Throughout my engagement in the field I was struck by the limited resources and opportunities that poor women face in the South African context and I realised that there is a need to study the experiences of women who fall through the cracks, women who do not readily have access to such services.

During my research I found feminist poststructuralist theories to be a useful tool for studying women's agency in the sense that it allows one to theorise about the ways in which individuals construct their identities and make meaning about their lives by drawing on discourses of femininity and masculinity but also by resisting these discourses and finding alternative ways of making sense of themselves in the world. This is not just an abstract theoretical observation; one's self-narrations have material implications and influence the ways in which individuals experience themselves in the world (Gavey, 2005). However, work in the field has largely focused on isolated individuals and has not explored how the 'self' emerges in relation to others in one's immediate social sphere. The exploration of 'self' in relation to others is an important concept, particularly within the African context within which value is placed on collectivism over individualism (Macleod, 2008)

In response to these issues I wanted to explore women's agency in more naturalistic sites with an understudied group of women (African migrants who have not accessed shelter services) and explore how women in the South African context may be able to mobilise amongst themselves in dynamic and collective ways. On introduction to a community run women's support work, *Sisters for Sisters*, I realised that I had found the perfect opportunity to explore women's grassroots collective agency in a naturalistic form. An examination of such an alternative social site provides crucial insight into the way in which women can collectively negotiate agency within a context of a lack of social and material resources and limited opportunities for positive subject positions.

#### *Rationale for the current study*

Gender-based violence is now recognised as a human rights and public health issue and is on the agenda of both local and international non-profit organisations and governments. The Beijing platform for action in 1995 made a call to move beyond the acknowledgement of forms of gender-based violence and articulated the crucial need to engage in processes that empower women who are among the most marginalised in every society (Worthen, Veale, McKay, Vessels, 2010). South African has one of the highest rates of gender-based violence in the world and has been dubbed the 'rape capital of the world' (Naidu-Hoffmeester & Kama, 2013). Gender-based violence emerges in many forms in the country; including violence at the hands of an intimate partner, rape, emotional abuse and the every-day degradation of women.

Such experiences can have a long term impact on women's health and may cause chronic pain, gynaecologic problems, and depression (Dunkle et al., 2004; Lafta, 2008) and the negative impact of violence often extends directly or indirectly to future generations of children who are located within violent homes and communities (Sigworth, 2008). Abused women are also at an increased risk of HIV/AIDS infection (Jewkes, Dunkle, Nduna & Shai, 2010) and, at the most extreme, gendered violence can result in death. The cost to women, families and communities mean that gender-based violence results in severe obstacles to ensuring a peaceful transition for post-conflict societies such as South Africa. Thus, it is crucial to examine the myriad consequences of this sort of violence and to identify positive ways of healing within transitional contexts (Sigworth, 2008). This is of critical significance in the South African context which is characterised by poverty and a severe lack of social services for abused women. It is thus crucial to examine other sites, such as grassroots support networks, that can provide insight into alternative avenues for women's agency in this context.

### *Exploring collective narratives*

The broad aim of this study is to explore the way that the *Sisters for Sisters* members transform their past within through their collective dialogue in the research sessions. More specifically the study explores the co-construction of subjectivities among the members of the women's support group and how the women construct meaning in terms of both their victimhood and their agency. I focus mainly on the collective dimension of meaning making and how women gain strength through their shared narratives. The analysis is guided by three theory questions: 1.) In what ways did the women transform their past within this collective space? 2.) What kinds of identities were constructed through this collective process? 3.) What function did these particular ways of 'remembering' have for the women's sense of 'self' in the world?

Drawing on the work of feminist poststructuralists Davies and Gannon (2006a), I utilised a collective biography methodological approach. The data gathering comprised of two distinct phases. The first phase consisted of a series of workshops that were conducted with a sample of women from the women's support group. These workshops consisted of creative and interactive activities such as storytelling, role plays, and group discussions. The themes that emerged from these workshops were then used to frame the topics for the second stage of data gathering –the focus group interviews. Each focus group interview was structured broadly around a theme of violence that had occurred in a specific temporal moment and space within the women's lives.

The data analysis was guided by a dialogic-thematic approach to narrative analysis which is concerned with the interpersonal construction of narratives, co-construction, and positioning in relation to significant others and in relation to broader socio-cultural discourses. My analytical thinking was framed by feminist poststructuralist theory, through a social remembering lens. In other words, my ontological assumption is that ‘selves’ are constructed through language and these ‘selves’ are dynamic, multiple, and changing. Further, I assume that particular ‘selves’ are constructed through the ways in which subjects work with memory. I thus conceptualise memory as a reproductive and tactical tool through which narrators can achieve certain social aims.

This thesis is structured into eight chapters. The point of departure is a review of the literature. The first literature chapter provides contextual detail about gender-based violence in South Africa and theorises about African migrant subjectivities within this socio-political space. The second literature chapter provides a critical review of the literature in the field of gender-based violence and women’s agency and it unpacks the specific definition of agency that has informed the current study. Chapter 4, *Methodology and Methods*, outlines the epistemological and theoretical orientations of the study—the qualitative epistemology, feminist methodology, and the feminist poststructuralist theoretical framework. It also summarises the research design and the specific methods that I utilised to address the research questions.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 comprise of the results and discussion. These chapters convey the research findings according to dominant themes that emerged as central motifs in the women’s collective meaning making. Each chapter is structured around themes related to specific stages in the temporal-spatial landscape of these women’s lives from their home countries of Africa, travelling through the space of transit in Africa, and finally their ‘selves’ within the South African context. Chapter 5, *Culture, Femininity, and Woman ‘Abuse’: The Case of ‘Mubobobo’ Rape*, is a case study that explores Zimbabwean women’s stories of “mubobobo” rape, what they described to be a phenomenon by which men obtain magical powers that enable them to rape women ‘from a distance’.

The next two results chapters draw on the shared narratives of *Sisters for Sisters* members from Zimbabwe, Kenya and Congo. Chapter 6, *Crossing Borders in Africa: Collectively Narrating the ‘Foreigner Within’*, explores women’s constructions of ‘self’ while travelling through Africa

from their home countries to Cape Town, South Africa. The focus is specifically on women's 'memories' of encounters with men at border posts that physically separate African countries. The final results chapter, *Psycho-Social Borders and the "Imagined" Female 'Other': Collectively Constructing 'Selves' in The South African Context*, outlines the meaning that women make about themselves as 'abused' and sexualised beings within the socio-political space of South Africa. The concluding chapter offers a summary of the findings and the contributions that this study has made toward the study of abused women's agency in the African context and concludes with recommendations for further study in the field.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW: CONTEXTUALISING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND MIGRANT SUBJECTIVITIES IN SOUTH AFRICA**

This chapter provides contextual detail about the specific South African socio-political space within which African migrant women 'exist'. It begins by briefly summarising theories about the causes and impact of gender-based violence within this context. It then outlines contextual detail about the recent spates of xenophobic violence in the country. 'Xenophobia' refers to certain negative attitudes towards 'foreign' Africans who are living in South Africa that has resulted in acts of violence towards 'foreigners'. I end with a review of the main theories about the ways in which migrant women work with their culture in new host countries.

### **CONTEXTUALISING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN SOUTH AFRICA**

#### *Gender-based violence in South Africa*

Women's subordination exists worldwide, from Africa to the West, cutting across all cultures and classes. Aspects of patriarchy, however, manifest in poor developing countries of Africa in ways that are overtly oppressive to women (as do aspects of patriarchy in other third world countries) (Jaggar, 2000). For various reasons, violence against women has been found to occur most often in poor communities that lack resources (Heise & Garcia-Moreno, 2002; Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005) and among women who are unemployed (Hindin & Adair, 2002; Johnson, 2001). African countries are rife with poverty with women often suffering the worst in this regard. Pereira (2002) calls this the 'feminisation of poverty' (p. 14). Poor households are also more likely to be dependent on women for survival (Pereira, 2002). The context of poverty and deprivation within which many women exist as well as the entrenchment of deep seated gendered ideologies need to be examined as factors that shape the meaning that women give to their experiences of violence as well as their sense of agency in the world.

Despite having one of the most progressive constitutions in the world, post-Apartheid South Africa is a context of extreme power imbalances and poverty tied to race and class that echo the

previous segregationist apartheid policies. The country is beset with social problems such as interpersonal violence, HIV/AIDS (Franchi & Duncan, 2003), gang wars and other incidences of internal violence (Fish, 2006). Although many live in rich suburban areas of South Africa, the majority of South African's live on the breadline, with an estimated figure of between 40 and 50 percent living in abject poverty (van Niekerk, 2002, as cited in Franchi & Duncan, 2003). Residents of the sprawling townships struggle to gain access to safe water and other resources (Fish, 2006). The footprint left behind from the apartheid era of separatist and racist constructions is one in which complex anxieties about power and stability abide. Some even argue that South Africa has developed a 'culture of violence' stemming from the means of repressive governmental control, violent retaliations by the African National Congress, as well as the severe torture that thousands of people were exposed to (Goldblatt & Meintjies, 1997; Misago, Landau, & Monson, 2009). This is the backdrop within which gender-based violence is both legitimated and maintained in the South African context. Hegemonic discourses in the country function to condone this type of violence and such violence is often perceived to be a normal way of life (Michau, 2007).

South Africa has one of the highest rates of violence against women in the world. The problem has been described as endemic to the country in the sense that is 'widespread, common, and deeply entrenched' (Vogelman & Eagle, 1991: p. 209). Current national and cross-sectional data suggest a lifetime prevalence of anywhere between 10 and 25% (Dawes, de Sas Kropiwnicki, Kafaar & Richter, 2004; Jewkes, Levin & Penn-Kekana, 2002), with these figures widely speculated to be underreported. Violence experienced at the hands of an intimate partner is particularly silenced in communities with many women experiencing stigma and shame that is associated with an 'abused' status (Wood, Lambert, and Jewkes, 2008). The country has the highest figures of rape for a country that is not at war (Human Rights Watch, 1995). In their study in a Soweto township in South Africa, Dunkle et al., (2004) found that the prevalence of intimate partner physical/sexual violence was 55 % among a sample of 1395 women attending an antenatal health clinic. Moreover, Dunkle et al. (2004) found that 21.8 % of these women report experiencing multiple forms of violence simultaneously (sexual, physical, and emotional) within the 12 month period prior to the study. Furthermore, "While the Constitution and a range of equality-promoting laws have been passed since 1996, South African women have given testimony to continued pressures, discrimination and violence through 'customary' marital arrangements (including lobola, inheritance, levirate, sororate, and polygamy) (Kistner, 2003: p. 70).

Recently in South Africa there has been a shift towards discourses that focus on women's rights. This has been accompanied by a shift in gender roles and increased power for women (Shefer et al., 2008). These shifts have not, however, resulted in a decrease in violence against women. Studies in fact show that levels of gender-based violence are increasing. The Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (2005) states that violence against women in particular contexts reaches its peak at the point at which women begin to engage in non-traditional gender roles and enter the workforce; suggesting a transition of women's status that could threaten male sense of power. Thus, the current high levels of violence against women could be explained in light of these tensions and the overall sense of ownership over women. Hinting at these tensions, in their report on xenophobic violence in the country, Misago, Landau, & Monson (2009) found that South African male perpetrators of xenophobic violence often justified these attacks as being an attempt to defend access to 'their women'. Gqola (2007) highlights that discourses of women's empowerment in South Africa only apply to the public space of the workplace and that within 'private' spaces of the home and community women have to adhere to the limited rules of femininity, or what she calls 'the cult of femininity' (p. 116).

Fish (2006) contends that, the extremely high rates of crime and violence against women in South Africa, "seriously calls into question the nation's status as a "post-conflict" society" (p. 4). Such violence also make national notions of being at peace highly vulnerable (Bennett, 2010). There exists a striking contrast between South Africa's democratic ideology and the rights of women and the lived experiences of poor marginalised women in the country; reflecting contradictions between public change and inequalities embedded in everyday social relations (Fish, 2006)-including gender relations.

#### *Gender-based violence in countries of Sub-Saharan Africa-extent of the problem*

Studies show that violence against women is a significant problem in countries of East Africa and Africa in general. Research on gender-based violence in East African countries is scarce as most research in these countries have focused on issues of war conflict (Palmary, 2006). Available studies estimate that one in three women in rural Uganda experience domestic violence. Studies also show that in certain African countries such as Uganda (Sliep, Weingarten & Gilbert, 2004) and Morocco (Sadiqi, 2010) there are no specific laws that prohibit domestic violence. Large scale survey studies of physical abuse have found that 42% of women in Kenya report being beaten regularly by their partners (Raikes, 1990). In Uganda and Zimbabwe, 41%

and 31% of women respectively report intimate partner physical abuse (Blanc, Wolff, Gage, Ezeh, Neema & Ssekamatte-Ssebuliba, 1996; Watts, Ndlovu, & Keogh, 1996). Gender-based violence is one of the many problems that African migrant women face, including poverty, war trauma (including rape), and dislocation.

## **AFRICAN MIGRANT WOMEN: SUBJECTIVITY AND CULTURE**

### *Beyond gender, race, and socio-economic position*

Prins (2006) argues that an intersectional approach is most useful for capturing the complexity of identity. According to such ways of thinking, “Categories like gender, ethnicity and class co-construct each other, and they do so in myriad ways, dependent on social, historical and symbolic factors” (Prins, 2006: p. 279). Women’s experiences are shaped by a number of intersecting factors such as class divisions of a capitalist society, race discrimination, and gender oppression-what theorists such as Mason et al. (2008) and Mama (1995) have referred to as ‘triple oppression’. Then, when one is looking at the experience of African migrant women living in South Africa another dimension can be added to this triad of oppression –that of the status of ‘foreigner’ in South Africa.

Contemporary South Africa is plagued by a relatively new kind of violence-xenophobia-a form of violence that entails South Africans engaging in violent actions against black migrants and refugees from other parts of Africa (Harris, 2002). Here migrant Africans are treated as a homogenous category, as people who do not belong in South Africa and who are not deserving of a socially valued existence (Strauss, 2011). They are also treated as threatening entities who have come to the country to steal valuable resources such as jobs and housing (Sinclair, 1998). In the country ‘foreignness’ is often considered to be a crime in itself, a perception that is perpetuated by negative descriptions of foreign nationals in the media (Misago, Landau, and Monson, 2009).

Some have argued that xenophobic attitudes are a result of a change in the idea of citizenship and belonging from the idea of 'African ubuntu', or one-ness, an important principle in the nation building process of 1994 (Straus, 2011), towards a more exclusionary process that differentiates along the lines of South African nationals ('us') versus those seen as 'foreigners' ('them') (Hayem, 2013). Black migrants from other parts of Africa are portrayed as a threat to the success of the post-apartheid project (Strauss, 2011). They are the scapegoat, the contaminating 'Other', or 'outsider', who is often blamed for the lack of progress in post-apartheid society (Morris, 1998).

Xenophobic violence reached critical proportions in May 2008 and again in 2011. However, evidence suggests that xenophobic attitudes are still very much alive in South Africa (The South African Press Association, 2013a; Chigeza, De Wet, & Roos, 2013) and such treatment significantly shapes the subjectivities of Black African migrants who have made South Africa their home. According to Palmary (2002, as cited in Misago et al., 2009), 'foreigners' living in South Africa are not likely to report gender-based crimes due to the negative attitudes that are displayed towards them by police and other officials.

After having fled the horrors of conflict in their home country, many women are often faced with experiences of continued violence at the hands of their intimate partners and other men (Radan, 2007). In addition to having experienced conflict and the death of loved ones and political turmoil (Schijvers, 1999), women who escape political conflict and flee to other countries are often subject to forms of gender based violence in refugee camps (Sliep, Weingarten, & Gilbert, 2004) as well as in the new host countries (Muttic & Bouffard, 2008). Issues of dislocation, isolation and 'difference' are particularly pertinent to the experiences of African migrant women. These factors are exacerbated by the loss of social structure and support that is a common experience of women who have moved out of their homeland.

### *Migrant women and culture*

Research has shown that the culture of the new host country may have an influence on the way in which women respond to gender-based violence. Some studies have shown that women become acculturated into the new environment. For instance, in a participatory action, focused group based study of Vietnamese refugees living in the United States, Shiu-Thornton, Senturia,

and Sullivan (2005) found that women reported an ‘increasing awareness’ of psychological forms of abuse since coming into contact with the United States culture and that their responses to abuse became more active when they gained access to language tools that helped them communicate in the American context.

Some theorists have argued, however, that women act as ‘custodians of culture’ in the face of different values and beliefs. Muttic and Bouffard (2008), for example, used an attitude towards women scale as well as an inventory of beliefs against wife beating to examine the views of Bosnian women nationals living in Bosnia and Bosnian refugees living in the United States. They found that Bosnian refugees living in the United States displayed more conservative attitudes with regards to abuse than those living in Bosnia. This contradicts theories that immigrants are acculturated into the ‘more progressive’ Western discourses about women’s status and gender-based violence.

In their study of Cambodian refugee women living in North America, Bhuyan, Mell, Senturia, Sullivan, and Shiu-Thornton (2005) found that women experienced tension between their culture of origin and the ‘new’ culture with regards to their definitions and responses to abuse and that women’s responses to abuse in the host country are shaped by their experiences of dislocation. In their participatory action research study of Ethiopian refugees living in North America, Sullivan et al. (2005) found that women experience specific community related problems with regards to responding to abuse such as community silence, lack of respect for American laws, lack of education about abuse, and fear of deportation. Further, in a study of South Asian immigrant survivors of domestic violence, Kallivayalil (2010) found that women’s meaning making about partner abuse was shaped by specific cultural themes as well as by their experiences of immigration to the United States. Kallivayalil (2010) argued that women’s narratives were mapped onto entrenched gender roles, ideologies, and moral domains that were linked to the South Asian culture. For example, women’s self blame about abuse focused on culturally specific themes of one’s karma and actions in one’s past life.

As seen above, two main themes emerge from the work that has explored how migrant women engage with their culture. On the one hand it has been argued that women are acculturated and they take on the beliefs and values of the new country; particularly Western cultural views that

are often valued as being more liberal in terms of ideologies of women's worth and the unjust nature of abuse. These views are consistent with those of the 'melting pot'; referring to women's assimilation into the dominant culture (Yuval-Davis, 1994). On the other hand, others argue for a theory of multiculturalism by which different cultures are seen as static and mutually exclusive and that women are 'custodians of culture' keeping culture alive in their families and communities (Yuval-Davis, 1994).

Much of this work takes a rather polarised view; women are seen to be either 'acculturated' or 'not acculturated'. Some such as Bhuyan et al. (2005) suggests a tension between the new and old cultures but they do not engage in further exploration of this complexity. By portraying a simplified view of women's engagement with culture, these theories do not allow space for the exploration of the ways in which women may engage with both cultures, negotiating their identities according to differing social, political, and geographical circumstances. Such views do not consider the varieties and morphing of different cultural expressions, even within the same culture, and the different ways in which women take up these changing hybrids and cultural values. Women engage with their cultural of origin in different ways and this engagement could depend on a woman's geographical location, education status and exposure to the dominant culture. Women may construct themselves according to the values of a particular culture but in certain instances and social locations they may challenge other aspects of this very same culture (Narayan, 2000). Many African women are able to negotiate agency from within and in opposition to certain cultural strictures (Tamale, 2005; Thompson, 2011).

Tamale (2005), for example, studied the Ssenga practice of the Baganda tribe in Uganda. She described that this was traditionally a cultural practice by which older women verse young women into feminine roles and rules about how to conduct themselves sexually. Tamale (2005) argues that what Ssenga's teach has evolved over time and that in the current day women are taught ways in which to use their sexuality as a manipulating and empowering tool that can be subversive. She argued that the evolution of the Ssenga cultural practice allows Baganda women to negotiate agency, autonomy and self knowledge about their own sexuality. In this sense an understanding of the meaning that African migrant women make about abuse could be better informed by exploring subjectivity and the processes of identity construction. Such an exploration could provide meaning into the complex weaving of multiple cultural threads and the moments at which women may position themselves in relation to alternative discourses to that

offered by their culture.

Research on migrant women's experiences in host countries have focused mainly on Asian communities living in parts of North America. There is a scarcity of studies that address the experiences of migrant women living in other countries and very little is known about the experiences of African migrant women who are living in South Africa (Kiwanuka, 2008). Kistner (2003) says that, "from the international literature, we know that women migrants and refugees are highly vulnerable to both gender-based violence and HIV/AIDS, however, little is known about the situation of refugee women in South Africa" (p. 71). This field of study could also be enriched by more community orientated approaches that explore women's interactions in their specific communities and the role that the micro-community context may play in shaping women's responses to violence. Studies of this nature should focus on the complex ways in which women of different social positions engage with culture.

In sum, the South African context is characterised by high rates of violence and, particularly, violence against women. African migrant women living in South Africa may experience themselves as more vulnerable due to their 'foreigner' status in a context within which 'foreigners' are often treated as deserving of less respect and dignity and where xenophobic violence has been rife. Research that focuses on the experiences of migrant women in host countries has largely focused on immigrant communities living in the United States and there is a need for work that explores the experiences of African migrants who are living in South Africa. Theories about women's engagement with their culture often portray static views of women as either being acculturated and taking on the culture of the new country or as being conservative 'custodians of culture' who maintain their culture view within their new environment. Such theories do not capture the complex ways in which women may work with culture. Finally, there is a dearth of studies that address the agency and responses to violence of African migrant women living in South Africa. Research on women's agency within the field of gender-based violence has, however, been considerably better established among non-migrant populations. I examine the literature on abused women's agency and resistance in the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW:**

### **AGENCY, RESISTANCE AND WOMAN ABUSE**

This chapter outlines different ways that women's agency has been conceptualised in literature on gender-based violence. It begins with a brief summary of early theories of woman abuse in which women were represented as passive non-agents. It then moves on to a critical review of literature of women's 'choice' and agency during the process of managing violence and leaving abusive men. It provides a review of social constructionist approaches to women's agency, with a particular focus on the ways in which abused women's agency has been conceptualised by scholars working with feminist poststructuralist theories and social remembering approaches. Finally, it outlines the ways in which collective identity and resistance has been conceptualised within the broader field of community psychology. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the particular pitfalls and possibilities of the existing literature of abused women's agency and suggests areas that should be addressed in future work in the field. It also outlines the specific concept of agency that is adopted in the current study.

#### **EARLY THEORIES OF WOMAN ABUSE**

Early in the twentieth century, the attention that was focused on woman victims in general aimed to determine what it was about their character and disposition that brought about the problem of woman abuse (Ronai, 1999). These views are encapsulated by Freud's representation of the 'masochistic woman' who liked abuse. Initial family perspectives of woman abuse functioned to depoliticise the issue by situating it within the rhetoric of 'family violence', thus disconnecting the issue from the broader political context and rendering invisible the fact that this violence is most often directed towards women (Proffit, 2000b). In their attempt to make unequal power relations visible, early feminist theorists deeply entrenched dominant understandings of the 'battered woman' that position women as static victims of male power (see Dobash & Dobash, 1979). For example, concepts such as Walker's (1979a; 1979b) 'battered woman syndrome', Dutton and Painter's (1993) 'traumatic bonding', and Herman's (1992) 'captivity' all tend to

focus on the passive and helpless qualities of abused women that fit neatly into existing stereotypes of 'femininity' and depict women as passive non-agents (Shefer, 2004).

While it is important to acknowledge the extent of women's challenges and their sense of powerlessness in the world, an analysis that is driven by the victim perspective often engages in a 'reification of suffering and victimhood' (Gready, 2008: p. 141) whereby alternative ways of knowing the self in the world may not be readily available to abused women. A static victim perspective also contributes to reifying dominant discourses of male active roles and female submission, running the risk of, 'perpetuating the dynamics of rigid heterosex' (Gavey: 2005: p. 196). Literature that focuses on women as 'pure' victims reinforces notions of women as passive and somewhat parasitical objects who live on terms that are dictated by men (Vetten, 2000) and may confirm the very systems of domination that as feminists we set out to critique and transform (Bakare-Yusuf, 2003) .

By ignoring an in-depth exploration of the meaning that women give to abusive relationships in different contexts, the victim perspective ignores the fact that women are often able to enact resistance in their lives even within the context of imbalanced social relations of power (Proffit, 2000b). Discourses such as these run the danger of pathologising and othering women as 'mad', 'bad' or as 'deserving' the abuse. These theories often extract the abusive relationship from the broader cultural and social environment that is crucial in understanding the meaning that women give to violence (Boonzaier, 2005; Yoshioka, 2008). Approaches that focus on women's strength and agency are crucial as they acknowledge women as social agents that are able to challenge ascribed positions in multiple and complex ways (Bakare-Yusuf, 2003). That said perspectives that focus on women's agency should not do so at the expense of obscuring aspects of women's powerlessness. Sokoloff and Dupont (2005), for instance, have argued that agency and victimisation should not be treated as mutually exclusive categories. Abused women's sense of self in the world is characterised by threads of 'power' and 'powerlessness', which manifest in different ways according to women's geographic, economic, and cultural location as well as the social resources that women have at their disposal (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005).

Culture provides vocabularies of understanding, motive, and significance on which individuals rely, however unconsciously, to construct the meaning of 'personal' experience (Wood, 2001: p.

241). Individuals make meaning about abuse by drawing on threads of discourses (patriarchal or alternatives) that are made available by particular socio-cultural contexts and these discourses shape women's perceptions about violence and of course the ways in which they think about themselves as 'abused women' (Yoshioko, 2008). The acceptability of violence is shaped by dominant cultural discourses about violence (Wood, 2001) and women's place in the world. Thus, any exploration into women's subjectivity as 'abused woman' cannot ignore the particular socio-cultural environment within which women 'exist'. Research should focus on the ways in which different factors such as race, class, religious identification, sexual orientation, ability, geopolitical location, and other such factors intertwine to frame identity, affect access to power, and shape experiences of discrimination and violence (Crenshaw, 1994, as cited in Mason et al., 2008).

## **LITERATURE ON WOMEN'S AGENCY: 'CHOICE' AND LEAVING ABUSIVE MEN**

Research on women's agency has largely been of a feminist orientation that has reinterpreted certain behaviours of abused women as holding agentic value (as opposed to being negative consequences of the abuse). This work has largely focused on two areas; agency exerted within abusive relationships and the agency that women display during the process of ending a relationship with an abuser. Research on leaving abusive relationships has centred largely on the role that shelters play in facilitating this process. These studies attempt to move away from work that pathologises abused women and that represents their passivity in the abusive relationship; therefore rejecting the notion of women as static victims.

### *Agency within the abusive relationship*

Lempert (1996) used a grounded theory approach for the analysis of in-depth interviews in her study of women's agency in abusive relationships. Her participants included members of an outreach support group. In this study, Lempert defined agency in terms of certain 'face saving' strategies that women adopted to cope with the violence in their lives. She interpreted processes of rationalising the violence, minimising the violence and self blame as strategies of agency. She says that these strategies function to contain the violence and that they help the women to

preserve positive identities in the face of the contradictions of love and abuse. This interpretation is, however, problematic. These ‘strategies’ could instead be interpreted as negative aspects of the women’s meaning-making as they are focusing on problems of self, positioning themselves as the cause of the violence and explaining away violence as a normal part of married life. While agency is inextricably tied to the choices that one has about self and identity, when these ‘choices’ and ‘strategies’ entail the maintenance of forms of identity that implicitly condone abuse, interpretations of agency are problematic as they fall within the confines of hegemonic power imbalances.

In her phenomenological study in the United States, Hage (2006) used in-depth interviews to explore marginalised women’s perceptions of factors that supported their agency while they were in an abusive relationship. She interviewed ten women (six African American and four European American women) who were all of low socio-economic status. Hage (2006) found that social support and spiritual resources impacted positively one women’s sense of agency in the abusive relationship. She argued that women utilise active strategies within the relationship that help them survive the abuse and minimise the violence. Such strategies to ‘survive’ abuse and minimise violence do not necessarily signify aspects of women’s agency. Rather they seem to suggest women’s strategies of coping in a patriarchal world in which they have very limited options available. I would argue that such strategies aid women in making sense about violence in ways that feed into dominant power structures in terms of accepting violence as a normal part of life; they are a means of coping and surviving in the world but not challenging one’s situation as disempowered woman.

In her ethnographic study, Baker (1997) outlined women’s resistance to dominant cultural scripts that encourage women to leave abusers. Baker describes economic factors and concern for children as structural phenomena that influence the women’s ‘choice’ to go back to the abuser. She states that, “these women *chose* to go back because they lacked viable alternatives”<sup>1</sup> (Baker, 1997: p. 7). Baker’s (1997) definition of agency is problematic. Women’s ‘choice’ to stay with abusers because they will not be able to cope financially on their own is not a choice per se but rather a means for *survival* in a world in which they would not survive economically without the support of the abuser. Thus, the women in Baker’s (1997) study may be resisting the cultural script that encourages women to leave but they are not resisting the abuse or the power of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Italics added for the purposes of the current argument.

abusers. Staying with the abusive men, lifting restraining orders, and refusing to co-operate with the police may be choices but they are choices of safety and survival made within the context of a lack of viable alternatives. A woman's 'choice' to stay that is made in the context of fear of harassment from the abuser, for example, seems more to point to the fact that the abuser is controlling the women's movements and the threat of harassment can be seen to lead to a *lack of choice* that the women have to leave.

### *Agency during the process of leaving an abuser*

Using a feminist grounded theory approach in Canada, Wuest and Meritt-Gray (2001) conducted research with women who had 'moved on' and left an abusive relationship and had managed to stay away from the abuser. The authors state that the reclaiming of self in social context and the stage of 'moving on' involve, "shedding the identities of 'victim' and 'survivor'", (p. 83) that includes stages of figuring it out, putting it (abuse) in its rightful place, launching new relationships, and taking on a new image. The authors found that women ultimately reached a stage (moving on) in which the concept of survivor is no longer appropriate. They argued that women 'take on a new image' (p. 91), and reach a point at which they no longer view the abuse as a central aspect of their existence.

In her ethnographic study of African American women in the United States, Taylor (2002) explored women's acts of resilience during the process of disengaging from abuse. She identified a three-stage process of disengaging from abuse; namely defining moments, moving away, and moving on. Taylor (2002) described 'defining moments' as pivotal events that prompted the women to leave their partner; these included listening to other women's stories, receiving encouragement from other women, and observing the impact of abuse on children. Moving away involved establishing physical and emotional boundaries between self and partner. Taylor (2002) identified a community code of silence that had an influence on the amount of agency that these women could exert. Racial solidarity was an important aspect of this code of silence in the communities in which women only called the police as the last resort in an attempt to protect their abusers from racial discrimination.

In her study, Mills (1985) interviewed women in two shelters in the United States. She identified five chronological stages that women go through in their relationships with abusive partners;

namely, entering the relationship, managing the violence, experiencing a loss of self, re-evaluating the relationship, and restructuring self. She described that women shift from 'compliant zombies' to 'reflective actors' whose decisions to leave their relationships are gained from insights that are caused by contradictions generated by the abuse as well as outside validation from others. Mills identified two types of women at the restructuring self stage- victims who focused on flaws that they had to overcome and survivors who had 'more positive identities and fewer negative identities to draw on in formulating a definition of the 'self'' (p. 118). In addition to categorising women in this way, Mills categorised 'survivors' by their ability to seek out social connections and support.

Interpretations of women's act of leaving the abusive relationships as an act of agency via which they 'move on' or 'gain' the identity of 'survivor' are problematic. Firstly, a distinction between 'victim' and 'survivor' should not be assumed as face value. The meaning of these terms is varied and complex and they can mean different things to women in different contexts (Lamb, 1999). Also, the transition from 'victim' to survivor is not as clear cut as some suggest. This transition is often not a smooth one, particularly for women of a low socio-economic position. The act of leaving an abuser in itself may mean that women may experience themselves as more vulnerable in terms of limited opportunities for survival and exposure to further abuse at the hands of other men. Women may also deal with their abusive past in complex and varied ways that cannot be neatly categorised into specific linear stages. Anderson and Saunders (2003), for instance, have shown that women continue to grapple with meaning about their abuse long after the physical point of leaving an abusive relationship. Various studies concur with this view.

In their study of women's process of leaving in Sweden, Enander & Holmberg (2008) extend on Dutton and Painters (1993) traumatic bonding theory and they conceptualised the emotions of love, fear, guilt and hope as creating a 'traumatic bond' that binds women to their abusers. They argue that the bonds of guilt 'break' last, sometimes long after a woman has left her abuser. Enander and Holmberg (2008) described what they called the 'process of understanding' when women comprehend what has happened to them is abuse and they perceive themselves as 'abused woman'. This process involved women relaying aspects of their past experiences and re-interpreting it in a new light (Enander & Holmberg, 2008). The authors argued that this redefinition and relabeling of abuse happens long after women have left the abusive relationship and when they go through this process of understanding then one of the last emotional ties-guilt-

can be 'broken'.

In another study Enander (2011) explored the emotion work that Swedish women engage in during the process of leaving. She found that women experience shifting conceptualisations of the abuser; conceptualisations of the abuser as 'good' (Jekyll) and conceptualisations of the abuser as 'bad' (Hyde). Enander (2011) found that the struggle to conceptualise the abuser as 'bad' was largely emotion work that happened 'post abuse' after women had left the abuser and thus she argues that the act of leaving an abuser in itself does not constitute a final move to the identity of survivor.

Complementing the literature on the complexity of the leaving process (within the South African context), Towns and Adams (2009) found that women experience certain dilemmas between intellectual ideologies and ideologies of their lived experience. They argued that these tensions stimulate 'internal debates' that are particularly prominent when women leave an abusive relationship and may eventually lead to resistance. They suggest that this active process of resistance is a personal intellectual journey. Such a journey is not simply or easily resolved when women leave their abusive partners; rather the debate about themselves as abused woman in the world may continue long after physical separation from the abuser.

### *Leaving and shelters for abused women*

The majority of the work that addresses the way in which women leave abusive relationships has drawn from samples of women who are residing in shelters. This area of work has centred on debate about the relevance of shelters for abused women around the globe. Studies have noted the support systems that shelters provide for abused women (Ham Row-Bottom et al., 2005; Machonachie, Angless, A van Zyl, 1993; Tutty, Weaver, & Rothery, 1999) and the psychological benefits that shelters residents exhibit (Gordon, 1996; Krishnan, Hilbert, & Newman, 2004; Oravo, Macleod, & Sharpe, 1996). Others have argued that shelters are not suitable for women of different cultures and races (Burman & Chantler, 2004; Haaken & Yragui, 2003), and that shelters can foster a sense of dependence and isolation (Park, Peters, & De Sá, 2000).

In her critique of the capacities of the shelter service arena for addressing the problem of violence against women, Lempert (2003) referred to shelters as 'short term safety nets' (p. 89) that do not provide any sort of long-term solution to the problem of violence against women. She argued that shelters deprive women of their homes, their families, as well as their daily support interactions. This may be a particularly pertinent issue for African women living in impoverished countries such as South Africa. In South Africa most shelters can only accommodate women for a maximum of three months and many shelters do not have any second-stage housing options. This means that after a short period of time women will have to enter the world again, often alone without any social resources, and many have no choice but to return to their abusers. The African values of the collective and family ties acts as a pernicious responsibility in the lives of many women of different African cultures (Mkhize, 2004). As such, going to a shelter where one is separated from their family may not be an option.

The focus on women shelter residents in the abuse literature has largely been due to the fact that studies often equate women's agency and resistance with leaving the abusive relationship. In addition, shelters are convenient avenues via which to gain access to abused women. Such a focus is, however, problematic. Women who are living in shelters are constructing their experience in retrospect from the perspective of their present life at the shelter. Shelters may facilitate particular interpretations of experience that draw on the broader social context of power imbalances (women come into contact with other abused women) and it may also make available certain scripts of empowerment through which women can articulate their experience (van Schalkwyk, Boonzaier, & Gobodo-Madikizela, 2014). In other words, women shelter residents may be speaking a certain kind of 'truth' and if we do not focus on women who utilise alternative avenues of support we may be neglecting various other 'truths' that are at play.

Thus, there is need for work that addresses the experiences of women who may, for various reasons, have not have utilised a women's shelter. In addition, in recognising that intervening and responding to women's material needs is only part of the solution in providing help to women, work needs to focus on programmes (particularly on a grassroots community level) that may provide the possibility of generating a critical consciousness among women (and men) and that will challenge notions of women's subordinate position in society as well as men's choices to resort to violence.

In sum, the literature on women's agency is problematic for a number of reasons. As I show, academics in the field of women's agency and leaving have largely worked with precarious interpretations of women's 'choices' that may, in fact not represent any kind of choice at all. Scholars that address the issue often conceptualise leaving as agentic and they categorise this process into specific stages. The demarcation of these stages may not be so neatly categorisable and ignores the complexity of women's subjective experience as well as the non-linearity of the process of developing a sense of agency (Worthen, Veale, McKay, & Wessels, 2010). Women do not, for example, take on a new powerful identity while leaving the old identity behind. They may negotiate a more positive self within the backdrop of the abused self and powerful and powerless identities may intersect and fluctuate in different circumstances and according to multiple factors of disempowerment.

Towns & Adams (2009), for example, drew on Billig's notion of ideological dilemmas, shedding light on the ambiguous and often contradictory nature of women's decisions that defies simple linear descriptions. Shedding the identities of 'victim' and 'survivor' are not definitive processes and a woman may shift back to these identities in different situations and in relation to different external resources. This transition may, for example, not be so clear cut in the case of economically disadvantaged women who cannot survive without the financial support from their abuser. It may also be complicated by various social pressures on women to maintain family structures, and particularly women of African cultures as many African cultures place an emphasis on the family collective (Mkhize, 2004).

Certain identity transitions and notions of what constitutes a survivor or a victim may be dependent on the specific context within which a woman is situated. Hydén (2005), for example, points to the fact that the category 'victim' is not fixed but rather it is a product of culture and language that means different things in different contexts. Similarly, Profitt (2000b) has outlined that the term 'survivor' may not unambiguously connote strength or agency. For example, in some contexts there may be discursive restrictions that shape what kind of person is 'allowed' to take on the status of 'survivor'.

A review of the literature shows that the work on women's agency is very individualistically orientated. While acknowledging the influence of the social sphere, the majority of the studies do not address the complex interactions that women may engage in while they negotiate levels of agency. Mills, for example, highlights the crucial role of outside validation, stating that other women's perspectives help an individual break away from old ways of defining abuse. She does not, however, elaborate as to how this process could occur with others in the abused women's lives. It can be seen that interpretations of women's choices or agency, such as those reviewed above, that do not take into account the ways in which women resist or work with *broader hegemonic discourses* of abuse leave open avenues for alternative interpretations of these acts as signifying forms of women's passivity. Finally, studies also need to be done with women who have not utilised shelters and who may have found alternative means of support in their social sphere.

In light of these issues, a research approach that explores the complexity of subjectivity, acknowledging the multiple, contradictory and context dependant nature of identity seems to be a particular suitable approach to the study of agency. What is needed is an approach that better represents the complexities and ambiguities that women may experience in relation to the positions of 'victim' and 'survivor' and what these positions may mean for women from different socio-cultural contexts.

## **THE LANDSCAPE OF MEMORY: SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST APPROACHES TO AGENCY AND IDENTITY**

### *Feminist poststructuralist theory, gender-based violence, and women's agency*

Critical feminist approaches have emerged from postmodern and postcolonial feminist orientations. These approaches have in common an acknowledgement that the person is political (thus dissolving the boundaries erected between self and society), a view that patriarchy is an organising principle in society, and the idea that knowledges are multiple, shifting and situated (Callaghan & Clark, 2006). These ideas transcend traditional psychological notions of the self and focus on the social embeddedness of identities.

This conceptualisation of identity offers useful understandings for the study of identity and violence (Callaghan & Clark, 2006). In particular, a feminist poststructuralist approach allows for an analysis of the way in which women resist abuse *in relation to* the broader system of discourses of male domination and oppression. The advantage of this kind of postmodern perspective of multiple selves lies in its capacity to represent flux and shifting positions of ‘self’ at particular moments. Moreover, feminist poststructuralist thought emphasises conflict as embedded in a complex nexus of social relationships and enables a view of conflict as power that is generated between certain members of a group, rather than attributing the causes of conflict to the perceptions or cognitions of individuals (Callaghan & Clark, 2006). Work in this field has offered valuable insight into the complexity of abused women’s subjectivities, particularly about the ways in which women may negotiate power in terms of their victimhood and their agency, and the ways in which such narrations are shaped by particular socio-cultural contexts.

In Stockholm Sweden, Hydén (2005) studied shelter residents’ break-ups via individual interviews with participants over a two-year period. She used a narrative approach informed by feminist poststructuralist theories, and identified agency in terms of the way in which women positioned themselves in their narratives. The different positions that the women adopted either fell in with or resisted dominant cultural discourses of abused women. She identified three positions; namely the wounded position, the self-blaming position, and the bridge building position. Hydén (2005) found that women fluctuated between different storylines in a non-linear fashion both across interviews and within one interview. She argued that the different positions from which the women spoke shed light on the ways in which the women situated themselves at certain moments as ‘powerless’ in relation to their abusers and at other moments as ‘powerful’ in relation to their abusers. Hydén (2005) provided insight into fragments of multiple subjectivities and illuminated the complexity of abused women’s subjectivities.

In South Africa, Boonzaier (2005) conducted narrative interviews with 15 women to explore the meaning that they make about their experiences of intimate partner violence. She showed that women fluctuate between conforming to and resisting dominant cultural constructions of femininity. Boonzaier’s (2005) study highlighted that women’s narratives of resistance are shaped by the material realities of their lives—such as their economic disempowerment but at the same time women have the capacity to exert agency through their talk. Boonzaier (2005) concluded that a ‘changing consciousness’ led to women negotiating more positive subjectivities

and an increased sense of power in relation to real and imagined abusers.

Also in South Africa, Boonzaier (2008) conducted a study with 15 heterosexual couples that were clients of two organisations that provided psycho-educational groups for male perpetrators of violence. In this investigation of the relational construction of woman abuse, interviews were conducted separately with each individual that that made up the couples. Boonzaier (2008) found that at certain moments the women constructed themselves as victim to a dominating partner and at other moments they were able to draw on discourses of power; indicating a blurring of boundaries and ambiguous, and often contradictory, constructions of victim and perpetrator. The women resisted traditional discourses of femininity (passive and submissive) by positioning themselves as active agents in their lives.

In Canada, Profitt (2000b) studied the relationship between women's changes in consciousness about oppressive social structures and their involvement in collective action. She argued that changes in women's self-understandings are accomplished by working through contradictions in subjectivities that exist from the coexistence of old and new assumptions (discourses) about the self and the world. Contradictions in subjectivities occur from the co-existence between society's givens and alternative visions of what might be. Profitt (2000b) calls this space a 'lacunae' (p. 92) in which a new subjectivity can begin to articulate itself. The women in her study drew on liberatory discourses, allowing them to analyse how they had taken up and lived dominant representations of femininity. Profitt (2000b) argued that the naming of experiences of abuse led to self-acceptance and refusal to carry the burden of shame among the women, and that this process of naming abuse led to women's investment in more positive subjectivities. Profitt's (2000b) work highlighted the crucial links between identity transformation, individual healing, and collective action. The focus, however, was on individual women's trajectory into participation in different types of collective action; representing a weaving together of pieces of stories of *unconnected* individuals. She did not explore the possibility of a critical consciousness that may develop among women who share common membership of a particular group and that co-construct 'selves' in relation to each other.

In the United Kingdom, Reavey and Gough (2000) drew on individual interviews with five survivors of childhood sexual abuse. They used discourse analysis to explore how women construct their own and others sexual identity in relation to their understandings of themselves as abused women. All of the women placed emphasis on the power that their past trauma has over their current 'self' in relationships. Reavey and Gough (2000) found that women placed blame on their childhood 'self' by mentioning aspects of sexual pleasure. The women also drew on psychoanalytic/therapeutic discourses to 'explain' the choices that they made in adulthood-this was largely structured around their 'choices' to engage in sexual or abusive interactions.

Reavey and Gough (2000) found that women's discussions around sexuality and femininity were closely linked to what they call 'shamed identities' (p. 335) and that their narratives of womanhood signified shame and blame. They identified that issues of gender, power and male coercion were absent from the women's talk; rather the women drew on aspects of the personal to explain their abusive experiences. However, from a discursive analytic point of view this says more about women's location within hegemonic discourses than it does about issues of women's culpability. Reavey and Gough (2000) concluded that a narrative-discursive approach to stories of abuse is useful as it treats subjectivity as defined by cultural discourses and cultural textuality, thus moving to the externalisation of apparent individual problems and acknowledging the social nature of such.

#### *Social Remembering: Imaginative expressions and narrative disruptions*

Social remembering approaches to the study of women's agency follow along the premise that memory is reproductive within the moment of the telling-similar to what Haaken (1999) has outlined as 'transformative remembering'. Here it is assumed that the 'truth' of memory does not lie in its factual content but rather in its narrative structure and the changing subject positions that emerge out of the landscape of memory. In other words, the ways in which one remembers has everything to do with the 'self'. Haaken (1999) refers to the past as 'another country', through which survivor's find their way by seeking landmarks, or culturally acceptable descriptions and explanations that provide for orientation.

In the United States Phillips (2000) utilised focus group interviews in her study of young women's first time talk about their gendered experiences. Phillips (2000) found that women engaged in narrative reconstructions that, according to her interpretation, display evidence of certain psychological strategies. She argued that the women used these strategies to cope with disturbing memory and manage it creatively within a collective context. She found that women expressed views about unequal gendered power dynamics but that they tended to not apply these abstract theories to their own experiences, Phillips (2000) called this 'strategising privately' (p. 193). The particular strategies were highly individualistic; this could have been a result of the methodology-individual interviews- or reflective of certain norms of the American culture (such as the individualised focus on the 'self'). However, her study showed that narrative was productive within this interview space and that the women used narrative strategically to achieve certain aims within the collective space.

In the African context, Thompson (2011) studied Zanbari women's talk about a phenomenon called popobawa. She described this as a belief in a witchcraft act whereby a bat like creature sexually violates women and men in areas around Zanzibar. Thompson (2011) framed her discussion around the culture of Zanzibar that is restrictive towards women and in which women's expression of sexual desire is taboo. She argued that the women's talk about this supernatural sex offers women a linguistic framework by which they can disrupt dominant ideologies of desire and break the silence about sex into which they are socialised. The women were able to narrate sexual information but at the same time they mitigated their violation of sexual ethics; they did this by introducing a sense of ambiguity in their accounts and this, according to Thompson (2011), allowed them to present themselves as sexual beings that have certain unfulfilled desires.

Importantly, Thompson (2011) argued that even though a minority of women in Zanzibar disclose that they have experienced such an act, the conversational resource was available to all women. Thompson (2011) argued that this talk was transformative in the sense that it allowed women to position themselves as discursive and sexual agents. This study highlighted the ways in which 'shared' cultural memory can be transformative in that women's 'memories' were instrumental in working towards the disruption of dominant discourses.

In their in-depth analysis of individual interviews with forty eight couples who in violent heterosexual relationships in Northern Israel, Eisikovits and Winstok (2002) explored the content and structure of recollections of violent events. They analysed the functional qualities of the ‘memories’; particularly what was included and omitted in certain memories, the frame of reference (past, present, future, and whether the event was described as happening to the narrator or someone else) and found that the content of men and women’s narrations differed with regards to how they constructed agency around ‘choice’ and violence. For example, according to Eisikovits and Winstock (2002), women manipulated the content of their stories to ‘explain’ why they stayed in abusive relationships. Eisikovits and Winstock (2002) concluded that memories are tactics that are used to manipulate occurrences in everyday life, to achieve personal, interpersonal, and social aims’ (p. 695). Their study is important within the field of social remembering and identity because it highlights the potentials of viewing memories as instrumental. Such a theoretical lens provides one with a richer, more contextualised understanding of what might be going on in stories of abuse.

In the United Kingdom, Reavey and Brown (2007) explored dilemmas of succession and change in the narratives of European women survivors of childhood sexual abuse. They situated their analysis within a cultural context where women experience certain demands of femininity as they try to manage their adult identities in the present (for example, a lack of agency in their past childhood abuse may necessarily be linked with a current lack of agency). Reavey and Brown (2007) argued that women narrated ambiguities about their past and managed particular dilemmas involved in narrating agency/nonagency by drawing on aspects of the material world (objects and space) within which the remembered abuse took place. The women transcended dominant cultural scripts that link the masculine with agency and the feminine with a lack of agency. Ultimately the authors concluded that it was through these narrative images that women were able to disrupt dominant discourses of power.

Similarly, in another study in the United Kingdom, Reavey and Brown (2009) used semi-structured interviews with survivors of childhood sexual abuse to explore the ways in which agency is formulated and reformulated by adult survivors. When the past that is being recalled is traumatic then the act of remembering becomes problematic because a lack of agency in the past has powerful effects on one’s present perspective (Reavey & Brown, 2009). Reavey and Brown (2009) argued that instead of adhering to dominant cultural scripts that link the masculine with

agency and the feminine with a lack of agency, the women experienced certain dilemmas about how to interpret self-agency and the agency of others. According to Reavey and Brown (2009) the women achieved ambiguity in their accounts by drawing on non-human participants (objects, spaces, bodies) that helped them to pose and dispose ambiguity where appropriate and in response to particular audiences. In other words, they found that ambiguity was mediated by the material aspects of the setting in which the abuse originally occurred. Ultimately, they argued that the acknowledgement of ambiguity in past episodes of abuse is central for the maintenance of a sense of agency in the present.

In a more recent study, Reavey (2010) reiterated that material locations (spaces) are central to how agency is constituted in individual's practice of memorial self-presentation. Reavey (2010) argued that to achieve self-understanding in the present one must 'return' to the landscape of the past to gain knowledge about the relevancy of the past. She conceptualised space as central to the movement between past and present and said that when women remember some of the places/spaces from which they had experiences leave direct and imaginary marks on memory. In other words, she says that spaces participate in the production of positions of agency within memory. These types of memory, says Reavey (2010), are structured by normative culturally labelling of certain spaces (such as public/private space) which carry particular meanings. Ultimately, Reavey (2010) argued that our 'self' emerges out of the relations we have with our material environment. Her work is important in that it raises an awareness of the location of individuals in public and private space, allowing for a more grounded/situated version of how agency comes to be realised.

In conclusion, I argue that feminist poststructuralist theories are useful for studying women's agency and identity as the understanding of multiple identities that are in flux provides for a useful tool to examine the ways in which women position themselves in certain ways by drawing on some discourses and resisting other discourses. Such theories define agency as women's ability to narratively disrupt dominant discourses and to position themselves in ways that are not necessarily in line with dominant cultural scripts. As the review of the studies suggests, this approach also offers the possibilities of exploring particular transformations of 'self' that may occur through the ways in which women position themselves in relation to dominant social scripts (of abused woman, for example).

Secondly the review has highlighted the usefulness of social remembering understandings of abused women's agency. All of these studies focus on the transformative potential of narrative to disrupt discourses and they work from the assumption that it is through the manipulation of 'memory' that women can work to position themselves in ways that do not necessarily fall in line with dominant socio-cultural scripts of masculinity and femininity. The studies highlighted that narrators work with memory in creative and imaginative ways, using narrative resources, to achieve practical purposes at the moment of telling. Along these lines, the focus is on the functional aspects of memory and the particular narrative strategies that women may make use of.

However, the review also shows that there are various related areas that can be developed further in the social constructionist work on the agency of women who have experienced abuse. This work describes shifts in identity and a negotiation of power among abused women but does not explore how these shifts could be facilitated as a result of interaction with others in the social environment, community context, or social group. In other words they do not study the emergence of 'self' in relation to others, according to certain interactions that happen with individuals in the moment of telling. Even the few studies that work with women in a collective setting, such as Phillips (2000), focus on individual narrative strategies that women use to manage blame within the collective context-not how the women may work together to co-construct these strategies from some sort of 'shared memory', for example. This ignores the social links that could facilitate an acknowledgement of oppressive social structures and thus women's resistance.

Davies (1990) outlines that the possibility of agency requires that individuals make sense of the discourses provided by a social group so that they can position themselves in different ways *and* it requires that they have access to interactive others who will legitimate the positioning of oneself as agent. This runs in line with Mahoney and Yngvesson's (1996) concept of recognition; that the motivation to resist must be understood in the context not only of an acting or speaking subject but also of a reacting or listening subject. When others recognise the 'reality' of one's experiences then this can open up possibilities for alternative subject positions. Weingarten and Cobb (1995, as cited in Worthen et al., 2010) also draw on the notion of recognition, stating that individuals foster a sense of empowerment (and thus a sense of agency) from experiencing another person as accepting and elaborating on what one has to say; here

empowerment and a sense of agency are conceptualised as processes that occur through discursive practices but also particular collective occasions.

While current feminist poststructuralist work in the field often acknowledges the salience of ‘shared identity’ between interviewer and interviewee<sup>2</sup>, work in the field does not address how ‘shared understandings’ could occur between participants that form part of a community and, as such, may generate specific collective repertoires of discursive ‘understanding’. The studies reviewed above often draw on convenience samples of women who have utilised formal social service agencies but the women’s testimonies are isolated from the group context and they do not focus on how women make meaning *together* within these specific micro-communities.

Women’s naming and the sense that they make of their experiences of violence are linked to the broader socio-cultural context within which the experiences occur (Boonzaier, 2003) but also to the micro-level community context and their interactions with others in the group setting (Mankowski & Rappaport, 2000). Feminist poststructuralist research on women’s agency also focuses mostly on decontextualized snippets of women’s talk that could be enriched by methodologies that provide more in-depth information about the lives of individual women. Another problem with these studies is that most are situated in the North with samples of white, middle class women. African women may work with agency and ambivalence in very different ways; their relationships to dominant cultural scripts may be different and they may have very different kinds of narrative resources at their disposal.

In sum, a pertinent question that is left unaddressed in the current feminist poststructuralist literature is how women’s interactions with others in their immediate social sphere could influence the meaning that they make about their experiences of violence. As Moane (1999) contends, “Without the support of other individuals, a subordinate who is questioning or developing new ways is under constant pressure from dominant discourse, and receives little support for defiance or development of new ways of thinking and acting” (p. 115). The dynamics of group interaction and the meanings that a particular social identity has for women are aspects that need to be acknowledged and understood to facilitate a deeper, more complex understanding

---

<sup>2</sup> Boonzaier (2008), for example, refers to ‘shared understandings’ (p. 187) that connotes elements of racial or cultural similarity between interviewers and interviewees.

of women's agency and healing, particularly within transitional contexts such as South Africa.

In the section that follows I provide a brief review of literature in the field of community psychology, collective spaces, and resistance (not necessarily in the field of gender-based violence) to show how the issues of 'shared' community narratives and identity have been conceptualised and to suggest ways in which such conceptualisations could supplement social constructionist work on abused women's agency and identity.

## **CONCEPTUALISING RESISTANCE-COMMUNITY-BASED INITIATIVES AND APPROACHES**

### *The ecological model and women's resilience*

Community psychology developed in the 1960's due to critiques of individualistically-orientated approaches to psychology. The aim of many community psychology approaches is to adopt social action methods that work with marginalised and oppressed groups to generate multi-level, community competent interventions (Harvey, 2007). The ecological approach, in particular, views individuals as living in certain ecosystems that provide resources and levels of social support in the form of interactions between community members. Such an approach highlights the beneficial nature of 'relational environments' in fostering women's resilience (see for example, Mendelsohn, Zachary, & Harney, 2007: p. 228). This work examines the links between social support and an individual's recovery from abuse (Pinnewala, 2009), community fostered resilience (Radan, 2007) and the co-existence of negative psychological symptoms and resilience (Lynch, 2007).

A common aspect of the ecological model from a trauma perspective is a focus on women's ways of coping in the face of debilitating symptoms. This coping does not, however, necessarily entail an analysis of women's *resistance* to abuse or the development of a critical consciousness about their oppression. Literature on women's agency often incorrectly equates 'resilience' with 'resistance'. It is, however, important to distinguish between the two terms as they are most often

used in the literature. Resilience has been defined as women's, "capacity for physical and mental *survival*<sup>3</sup>, their flexibility, and their potential to reconstruct their lives in conditions that reinforce their dependency" (Schijvers, 1999: p. 323). Resistance, on the other hand, involves a consciousness of being less powerful in a relationship of power and, 'openly challenging the givenness of situational power relations' (Ewick & Silbey, 2003; 1331) as well as the negotiations of self in relationship(s) and self in the world that occur as a result of this consciousness.

I would argue that both resilience and resistance are aspects of women's agency that can indeed be interlinked and in dialogue with each other. The exploration of women's resistance, however, highlights the possibilities of women making meaning about abuse and constructing themselves in ways that move outside the boundaries of hegemonic patriarchal discourses. When considered in this light resistance can then be seen to be closely linked with women's empowerment as described by Rowlands (1997) (the development of a sense of one's right and capacity for agency and power). Promoting resilience among women would involve integrating community interventions that offer levels of support to facilitate healing for women. Promoting resistance, on the other hand, would entail engaging in strategies that aim to facilitate the development of a critical consciousness about woman abuse; fostering new ways of thinking about this type of violence and new ways of thinking about the 'self' as a gendered being.

#### *Community based approaches, collective agency and resistance*

Profitt (1994) worked with community engagers who were part of a feminist women's collective in Costa Rica that were working to promote a critical consciousness about abuse among women victims of violence. Profitt (1994) highlights the fact that meaningful levels of resistance need to take place on a collective level where women are able to articulate resistance to gender roles. She says that "Without an articulated consciousness, individual and collective resistance will remain dispersed and undirected, and individual women's potential as actors in the process of individual and social change will not be realized" (p. 106). Similarly, Rowlands (1997) argued that the achievement of a certain psychosocial state in which a woman views herself as deserving of dignity and respect cannot be considered in isolation from the experience of being part of a collective group process. Here she conceptualized a kind of collective empowerment that is

---

<sup>3</sup> Italic emphasis added for the purposes of this discussion.

intertwined with personal empowerment and that feed off each other and argues that group processes and personal power are intricately connected.

Téllez (2008) conducted ethnographic research in Maclovía Rojas, a community situated on the Mexican border. She utilised individual narrative interviews and focus groups and analysed the link between women's experiences of social activism against land reform and their responses to oppression in their homes. She found that the women spoke about the links between being actors that challenged the state by forming a collective alliance, claiming their right to engage in activist activities, and negotiating the violence experienced at the hands of intimate partners. Téllez highlighted the beneficial nature of the connections that women were exposed to via their engagement in collective action. She argued that women's activism is characterised by an emerging political consciousness that provided a lens to critique other forms of oppression. The women in this study bridged the gap between structural and domestic oppression using their roles as mothers and providers as fuel for their social activism. According to Téllez (2008), they exerted agency through the generation of new, more positive women-centred subjectivities.

In her study on Mexican immigrant's construction of identity through narrative, De Fina (2003) found that individual narratives were spontaneously orientated towards collective subjectivities. She says that this happens in two ways; through the choice of representing an aspect of collective experience as an answer to a personal question and by the assimilation of an individual with the group. De Fina analysed reported speech acts in the individual narratives, mapping how what she calls, the "speaking space" was distributed as a way of representing agency. She argued that the immigrant discourse showed a shift from the construction of the particular to the general; indicating a shift from the individual to group level. The women represented their experiences as shared and moved towards a collective agency. She also found that aspects of the individual's narratives reflected collective frames of mind as the individuals identified with the broader group of immigrants.

### *Community psychology, identity, and narrative*

Theorists in the field of community psychology and narrative have distinguished between cultural narratives, community narratives, and personal narratives and have highlighted the interplay between community narratives and personal narratives, or the construction of personal

identities (for example, Mankowski and Rappaport, 2000). Units of identity are mediated through membership in social groups and are created and recreated through social interactions (Israel et al., 1998). Local narratives can function as a psychological resource for members of a social group, particularly when dominant cultural narratives fail to represent the lived experiences of individuals (Langellier & Petersen, 2004; Mankowski & Rappaport, 2000). Community narratives may offer alternative ways of understanding an issue, providing abused women with possibilities of transcending the shame that is often embedded in hegemonic cultural notions of 'abused woman'. The collective generation of meanings can thus contribute to the development of individual women's resistance.

### *Storytelling and resistance*

The importance of storytelling as a means of resistance has been highlighted by a number of theorists. Langellier (2001), for example, highlighted how storytelling allows narrators to construct their identity in dialogue with others in ways that allow them to embrace alternative identities to that of victim. Ewick and Silbey (2003) speak of the 'spiraling process' by which stories are collectively constructed via transcendence and interpretation, providing information to group members about how power operates through institutionalised structures. Others have argued that storytelling creates horizontal relationships and 'communal realities' among group members that allow individuals to situate their experiences within the broader social context (Langellier & Peterson, 1992; Langellier & Peterson, 2004).

## **THE CONCEPT OF AGENCY USED IN THE CURRENT STUDY**

In this thesis I draw on Davies (1991) definition of agency. Davies (1991) outlines agency as follows: 1.) the discursive constitution of a particular individual as having presence (rather than absence), that is, having access to a subject position in which they have the right to speak and be heard. 2.) The discursive constitution of that person as author of their own multiple meanings and desires (and also acknowledging the extent to which they have taken on as their own the discursive practices and moral commitments of the collective(s) of which they are members). Here an agent is conceptualised as one that can speak with authority. This ability does not stem

from individual qualities but rather from a discursive positioning that they and others sometimes have access to. 3.) A person who can exhibit agency through exhibiting a capacity to go beyond the given meanings in any one discourse, and forge something new, through a combination of previously unrelated discourses, through the (re)-creation of words and concepts. Davies (1991) says that such linguistic work captures a shift in consciousness that is beginning to occur, through the individual (collaborating with others) imagining what is not, but what might be. Of this, Irigaray (1985: p. 29) says, “one would have to listen with another ear, as if hearing an ‘other meaning’ always in the process of weaving itself, of embracing itself with words, but also getting rid of words in order not to become fixed, congealed in them”.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has outlined the various ways in which agency has been conceptualised in the literature in the field of gender-based violence. I have shown that conceptualisations of agency and ‘choice’ often fall short and certain strategies of women can rather be interpreted as means of survival in a patriarchal world in which women often have limited opportunities and resources. I argue that approaches to women’s agency need to examine the complexity of women’s identities within particular socio-cultural contexts. In particular I suggest that social constructionist approaches to identity are particular useful approaches through which to explore women’s agency in that they allow for an examination of the ways in which women negotiate agency by drawing on and resisting hegemonic socio-cultural discourses. Such approaches offer useful insight into the complex ways in which women of different socio-cultural contexts may position themselves in relation to the notions of ‘victim’ and ‘survivor’. I also argue for the value of an approach that looks at the functional aspects of ‘memory’ as this can provide for more grounded and situated understanding of what may be going on in narratives of abuse.

However, there are also particular pitfalls with social constructionist work in the field. This work has largely ignored women’s interactions in the context of significant others-the emergence of ‘self’ in relation to others. Most of the studies are based in Europe and North America and much more work needs to be done with women in the African context. This work also largely draws on convenience samples of women from shelters and other social service agencies and more work

needs to be done to explore women's collective agency in alternative social sites. I conclude the chapter by outlining Davies' (1991) feminist poststructuralist approach to agency that I draw on in this study-that women need to have access to subject positions in which they have the right to speak and be heard, the discursive constitution of that person as author of their own meanings and desires, and the exhibition of agency through going beyond given meanings in any one discourse. The next chapter, *Methodology and Methods*, highlights the particular theoretical and practical tools that I utilised to conduct such an exploration into women's collective agency.

## CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

### BACKGROUND MOTIVATIONS AND RATIONALE FOR THE CURRENT STUDY-A REFLEXIVE NARRATIVE

As a scholar in the field of gender-based violence in South Africa for many years I have accumulated particular insights and personal orientations towards research that stem from my experience grappling with the literature as well as with my own interactions with abused women from various underprivileged communities in South Africa. The specific lens through which I have conceptualised my current doctoral work has been informed by a number of factors; including my previous experience doing research in the field of gender-based violence and my volunteer involvement with *Sisters for Sisters*, a grassroots support network for abused women in Cape Town, South Africa. These engagements have informed my epistemological and theoretical choices as well as my specific choice of methods. I reflect on these choices below.

#### *Previous research experience*

I have been working in the field of gender-based violence since my honours project in 2006. This work looked at women in abusive relationships in an underprivileged community called Garden Village in Cape Town. During this project I addressed the question of why women stay in abusive relationships. As this research progressed I became interested in women's descriptions of their agency that they enacted in response to the abuse that they suffered at the hands of their male abusers. I carried this question through in my subsequent Masters research that looked at the question of agency with regards to women who had left abusive relationships and who were currently residing in women's shelters in low income areas of the Cape Flats in Cape Town. Here I conceptualised leaving as signifying women's agency in relation to their male abusers.

During the analysis of this data I became aware that my own interpretations of women's agency (as I identified through the women's talk about their actions) do not unequivocally represent acts of 'true' agency in all cases. Women's descriptions of their actions such as violent retaliation towards an abuser or the act of leaving the abuser do not necessarily represent agentic acts on the

women's part. These acts could be done in response to desperation or fighting for one's life. In addition, and particularly within the context of South African poverty and deprivation, the act of leaving an abuser could result in a woman having nowhere to go and therefore may put women in a position of vulnerability to further abuse and maltreatment. I thus began to look for a different means of theorising abused women's agency.

During the course of this Masters work I came into contact with feminist poststructuralist theories of identity. I found these theories to be useful tools as they helped me to theorise about how individuals construct their identities and make meaning about their lives by drawing on hegemonic discourses of masculinity and femininity *but also* by resisting these discourses and finding alternative ways of making meaning about their 'selves' in the world (Weedon, 1987). This theoretical approach 'spoke to me' and I interpreted it as a means of studying women's agency that moves away from conceptualising women as certain 'types' of people or as strictly defined by socially constructed identities of what it means to be an 'abused woman'. It provides a means of exploring how women may struggle within certain socially defined positions and how, through this struggle, they may find alternative ways of making sense of themselves as a social being. This is not merely an abstract theoretical observation. The meaning that one makes about the self (one's narrative self-constructions) has material implications and influences the ways in which an individual experiences themselves in the world (Gavey, 2005).

On completion of my Masters project I reflected back on my analysis of women's agency and began to question the pitfalls with the practical methods that I adopted. I also reflected on particular pitfalls in the ways in which feminist poststructuralist theory has been utilised in projects that address violence against women and women's agency. Firstly, my focus on individual narratives followed a dominant trend in violence against women research of being very individualistically orientated. Feminist research in general has followed this individualistic trend and this is problematic as it hinders such work from achieving some of its main aims-that is to fully situate the individual within the social and the political context-in terms of the exploration of 'self' that emerges in relation to others. Work of this nature ignores the collective nature of oppression and the possibilities of collective healing in the current African socio-political context. Individualistic research methods such as these are problematic as they 'dislocate' (Wilkinson, 1998: pg. 111) the person from others in their social context.

In addition, individual interviews do not address how women make meaning through dialogue with peers or others in their social world and, as such, they decontextualize participants talk and lack an examination of the meaning making processes that are most common and natural in the world (Frith & Kitzinger, 1998). This focus on individual narrations out of immediate social context runs along the lines of Western ideas of the individual self rather than relational subjectivities that may emerge through interaction. This collective dynamic, or the relational construction of subjectivities, is a particularly important concept in the African context within which many African cultures value collectivism over individualism (Macleod, 2008).

My previous research involved transient engagements with women who I had (mostly) not met before and with whom I did not have contact with again. Doucet and Mauthner (2008) rightly question what researchers can know about subjects with whom they share only fleeting research relationships. I realised that more meaningful relationships could provide for a level of trust as well as rich contextual details of each woman's life that would provide for more valuable interpretations about their meaning making processes.

Next, my Masters project utilised a sample of women shelter residents. This focus is problematic as a shelter is a specific site within which women may make particular kinds of interpretations about their lives (van Schalkwyk, Boonzaier, & Gobodo-Madikizela, 2014). In South Africa many women do not have the resources to access shelters or other organisations (lack of space in shelters is one of the main reasons). This means a focus on the voices of shelter residents has excluded many other types of women who do not have access to women's shelters. This focus on shelter residents is representative of a dominant trend in the literature on violence against women (for example, Haaken & Yragui, 2003; Ham Row-Bottom et al., 2005; Machonachie et al.). There is a critical need to examine other sites of meaning making that may stand as alternatives to shelters or counselling organisations. An examination of social spaces such as grassroots support sites may provide crucial insights into the links between women's healing and processes of political agency within the social landscape of the new South Africa. I began to realise that it would be beneficial to study other sites that may better reflect the experience of poor abused women in South Africa.

There are particular pitfalls with the feminist poststructuralist work on women's agency and gender-based violence, as seen outlined in the literature review above. Feminist poststructuralist work in the field (such as the work of Boonzaier, 2008; Hyden, 2005, & Proffitt, 2000b) acknowledges the social nature of identity by exploring how abused women draw on broader societal discourses to make meaning but does this by largely focusing on individual voices in isolation from dialogue with significant others. This does not address how individuals may construct their 'selves' in relation to others. Feminist poststructuralist orientated work has also tended to focus on decontextualised 'snapshots' of talk in that quotes of women's talk are compartmentalised into themes without much background information on the contextual biography of individual speakers. I began to realise that what was required to address the complexity of women's agency is a research project that engages closely with the participants and that provides for a rich context of their life trajectories as they are narrated in interaction with others in particular social spaces.

#### *The Sisters for Sisters women's group*

In November 2009, shortly after completion of my Masters work, a colleague invited me to a one year celebration of a small non-profit women's organisation for abused women called *Sisters for Sisters*. At this event I connected with the founder of the group who subsequently invited me to a small informal group meeting held at a hall in Cape Town. Upon my arrival at this group meeting she requested that I facilitate the group session. This immediate placement in a position of power within the group signified something about her perception of me as a researcher from the psychology department. The experience was very rich for me and hearing the women's stories during this meeting inspired me to maintain my involvement with the group.

This saw the beginning of my volunteer work with the group and the development of many close friendships with the women members. My exposure to this group was also my inspiration to embark on my PhD in psychology. For me, witnessing this environment of the open telling of stories and the group organisation made me realise that I had stumbled across a living example of a process and type of engagement that is absent in the woman abuse literature. It was the perfect opportunity to study such an alternative site-a site of women's agency where women organise together of their own accord, an initiative that is run by women 'on the ground'.

The *Sisters for Sisters* group comprises of women migrants from parts of Africa as well as South African women-all who are currently living in South Africa. As stated above, a review of the literature has shown that there is a need for work that focuses on the experiences of migrant women who are living in South Africa. The varied composition of the group meant that I could explore the subjectivities of a sample of women that has not been extensively researched in the area of gender-based violence and agency. I aimed to engage in a project that would contribute to this knowledge by exploring the dynamic ways in which migrant African women who have experienced various forms of gender-based violence engage with their culture within the context of South Africa.

### **AIMS OF THE CURRENT STUDY**

In this study one of my broad aims is to explore the nature of the women's process of transforming the past, as it happens through the collective dialogue of my research discussions. The specific aims of the study are, firstly, to explore the co-construction of subjectivities among a sample of women drawn from the women's support group. Secondly, the study aims to examine how the women construct meaning both in terms of their victimhood and their agency and how they may gain strength through their shared narratives. The study focuses mainly on the collective dimension of the women's construction of meaning.

The study explores the following questions: 1.) In what ways did the women transform their past within these collective spaces? Here I look at the content of what was remembered and the ways in which the memory was narratively structured. 2.) What kinds of identities were constructed through this collective process and, 3.) What function did these particular ways of remembering have for the women's sense of self in the world? This last question focuses on the practical uses of such ways of remembering within the context of the telling. The unit of analysis is identities (or the tracing of narrative subjects) as they are collectively performed in the space of my research. The specific object of study is the women's collective narratives of violence and the process of representing their 'experiencing selves' (see Davies, 2000: p. 41) within the context of the research sessions.

To achieve these aims I needed a research paradigm that would be compatible with understandings of identity as socially and interactively constructed. I required an epistemology that would allow me to examine how identities are constructed in accordance with micro social interactions as well as in relation to broader social discourses of gender-based violence in the South African context. I also needed an approach that would theoretically enable me to understand the role that my own subjectivity and social positions played during my interactions with the women members. In response to these requirements, I have adopted a qualitative epistemological framework as the grounding for my project. Such an approach acknowledges that identities are socially constructed, multiple, and constructed in response to particular contexts, tenants which are compatible with my research questions.

The practical motivations of my project stem from my feminist assumptions that I have developed throughout the course of my postgraduate academic work in the field of gender-based violence. I also draw on broad feminist methodological theories about ‘ways of knowing’ the world. These feminist theories have helped me to conceptualise particular challenges and opportunities that can result from my close interactions with the community of study as well as ways in which I can do work that will give back something valuable to the women who have taken part in the project. Finally, my work is grounded in feminist poststructuralist understandings of identity that has provided me with crucial tools for ‘knowing the self’. Through such a framework I conceptualise identity as something that is constructed through language and through complex engagement with socio-cultural discourses. I outline the research paradigm below.

# RESEARCH PARADIGM

## MY CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF “KNOWING”: EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND THEORETICAL ORIENTATIONS OF THE CURRENT RESEARCH

*A qualitative epistemological approach: ‘How do we know?’*

A qualitative epistemological approach has been found to be useful for generating data that challenges static categories of violence (Fox et al., 2007; Gill, 2004; Harned, 2005), and for providing in-depth information about the distinctive experiences of relatively understudied groups of women (for example, Bacchus, Meze, and Bewley, 2006). Thus, such an approach was deemed suited to the aims of the current study as its focus on multiple realities and contextual meaning making can facilitate an understanding of the complexity of identities. Qualitative work is also a useful means of gaining access to the production of novel, African centred and collective knowledge of abused women. By focusing on the social nature of subjectivity, such an approach can provide insight into how previously silenced aspects of women’s identities, such as their marginalised ‘foreigner’ status in South Africa, may uniquely colour their experiences of self as ‘abused women’.

In particular, I adopt critical theories of qualitative inquiry, through which I deconstruct traditional social categories. In this way a qualitative approach is also particularly compatible with feminist poststructuralist theories of identities in flux. In line with such an approach, I acknowledge that the participants and researcher come to the research process with specific perspectives that are a result of their social positions in the world. An acknowledgement of the ways in which different positions shape the interactions during the research process is central to work of this nature.

*Situating self as researcher and community engager –knowing through reflexive self-examination*

A focus on meaning through social interaction and researcher-participant intersubjectivity is a cornerstone of qualitative orientated work. My adoption of such an epistemological approach means that I need to reflect on the roles that my own subjectivity and social positions played throughout the research process. In other words, I need to practice reflexivity. Wright and Nelson (1995) define reflexivity as, “a process of continuously moving from the intensely personal experiences of one’s own social interactions in the field, to the more distanced analysis of that experience for an understanding of how identities are negotiated, and how social categories, boundaries, hierarchies and processes of domination are experienced and maintained” (p. 48). Reflexivity entails specifying the partiality of a particular account in order to take responsibility for it as well as to open space for other ways of knowing (Pratt, 2004). I must acknowledge, for instance, that my interpretations are shaped by my own assumptions about the world and, as such, they are but one possible interpretation out of many. In particular, as an academic, it is important that I am always aware of how my interpretations of data are shaped by particular discourses of feminism, science, therapy and other aspects of my life experience (Lykes, 1997; Reissman, 1993).

A prominent perspective that I have brought with me into the research encounter is my sensitivity to gendered abuse that stems from my lived experience as a survivor of childhood sexual abuse and as a witness of gender-based violence in my family while growing up. My own life experiences have shaped my interactions with the other women within the setting of the research project as well as my engagement with their narratives and my interpretations of their stories. Doucet and Mathner (2008) calls these life experiences autobiographical ‘ghosts’ of the past and these ‘ghosts’ or ‘shadow others’ matter in terms of the particular motives that one brings to a research project. My own experience of childhood sexual abuse for years at the hands of a neighbour was something I only consciously remembered during my early twenties. I have since struggled with complex reflections about the function that forgetting this memory played in my life as well as with questions about the different ways in which these unremembered events shaped my life and my consciousness about gender-based violations. My ‘ghosts’ of the past have harboured in me a personal and academic curiosity about the dynamics of how women deal with an abusive past.

I have also brought with me theoretical perspectives and knowledge (such as Western feminist theories of the self and Western concepts of agency) that I have acquired throughout my university studies. My challenge here is to maintain a grasp of the theories that have inspired me during the course of my research work but also to remain open to the participants' ways of knowing and their unique ways of making sense of the world. I had to delve into these frames of meaning making, situate them within the context of this particular research project, and leave myself open to very different kinds of interpretations.

Although I felt a strong sense that I was indeed part of the women's group there were significant moments throughout my research during which I felt fissures and breaks in this belonging that signified my difference from the women. My whiteness, my socio-economic status, my age, and my education status were all factors that influenced my location in the group. These are all factors that have been well documented in the qualitative research literature (for example, Parker, 2005). I was cogniscent of the many ways in which my social locations were influencing my engagements with the women. My role as a researcher affiliated with the department of psychology was paramount in the process, producing significant relations of power. As Davies and Gannon (2006b) have documented, I realised that as much as I wanted to include the women in the decisions made in my research process that our relations in this regard would never be completely egalitarian. I initiated the project and defined the parameters of the study. As the researcher I also had authority in deciding what accounts in the collaborative interactions that I will credit with the status of empirical evidence (see Pratt, 2004).

Hydén (2008) cautions that the interviewer is always at risk of being positioned as superior by the interviewee, particularly in cases when the research subjects have experienced abuse and are discussing experiences that may be constructed as shameful in the dominant culture (or their own culture). In the case of my research project these power imbalances were magnified when considering the participants' marginal status in society as 'abused women', poor women, and 'foreigner' women in South Africa. The critical significance of my 'powerful' positioning in relation to the women is that it can result in the women resisting to disclose certain types of information in my presence (see Hydén, 2008). Although I have developed significant levels of rapport with the women, power imbalances that stem from our differences will always play some role in influencing the research dynamics. However, such lack of disclosure also stand as important sites by which the analyst can make sense of the power dynamics that are at play

within a particular discussion (Davies & Gannon, 2006). I have conceptualised such avoidance to disclose as ‘narrative silences’. In my analysis section I unpack what these silences mean in terms of the women’s subjectivities and my own subjectivity as they interact in the space of the research.

*Multiple positions in engagement: knowing through reflections on self-in-interaction*

Doucet (2007) argues that reflexive knowing involves more than an exercise of self-centred examination and extends to other critical relationships that are central to how we know and write about others. Practising reflexivity in a collectively orientated project by which one has developed close relationships with the participants has unique dimensions that need to be considered. Such a project involves the exploration of the double perspectives that are common of the researcher role (Lykes, 1997; Wright & Nelson, 1995) and researching a sensitive topic means that the researcher needs to consider their emotions that have emerged during the process (Armstrong, 2012). Although at times I felt as if I was a member of the Sisters for Sisters group, at other moments my position as outsider came to the fore. Lykes (1997) posits that one’s understandings of multiple positionalities and power constantly change as the researcher negotiates their many different roles within the collective process. My role as researcher in such a project is one whose subjectivity is enmeshed with the other women, a self that has emerged through our various interactions during the course of the research. The power dynamics between us constantly fluctuated at different moments, generating complex and shifting ‘emotional geographies’ (Burman & Chantler, 2004) along the way. These configurations of our relationships as women had important implications for both the research process as well as for the resulting analysis.

Challenges to notions of a safe feminist space

One of the aims of feminist orientated research is to create safe spaces within which women can openly express their experiences of oppression and marginalisation. Clare and Johnson (2000) have mentioned, however, that issues of difference in a collective research group often produce particular patterns of misunderstanding that may threaten such spaces. I experienced complexities that were due to my position as a white researcher and the women’s positions as black African women. Doucet (2007) names these complexities between researchers and participants ‘race anxiety’. Race in South Africa is intricately connected to privilege (and

power), with white South Africans still having access to the majority of resources years after apartheid. One woman spoke about the racialised abuse that she suffered in the workplace at the hands of her white colleagues in South Africa. She explained that this type of abuse happened because white women were threatened by her presence as powerful black woman. She then immediately became aware of my 'whiteness' and she apologised to me for making such a generalisation. Here she was obviously aware of the ways in which her comments could make me feel. Although I felt that these comments about white women did not really include me. My race and (and difference) became visible during moments such as these.

### Negotiating the role of researcher

During the course of my data gathering sessions I had to carefully mediate the role of workshop facilitator and friend on the one hand and the role of researcher on the other. First and foremost the women saw me as workshop facilitator and group member, someone who was there to contain their painful stories and to support members of the group. I felt that my role as researcher took second stage to the women and that I often had to overtly remind them of the research process that was at hand. At these times I experienced anxiety in framing our relationship in academic terms as I felt that women may misinterpret this as being an example of my own private, or hidden, agenda that would make my position as being part of the group seem 'fake'.

During the research process I often provided support for individual group members. My role in the group extended beyond researcher and workshop facilitator as many women confided in me about their personal problems. On the one hand I realised that as a researcher I needed to draw boundaries and not go 'too far' in my engagement with the women. On the other hand as 'part of the group' I felt a sense of responsibility to get involved and, most of all, to give back to these women who had given me so much in terms of their support of my research and their open expression of their painful and private stories. My immediate goal when I began working with the women was to facilitate spaces by which women could gain connections, a sense of emotional support and come to different understandings about their violated selves. I wanted these spaces to have a transformative psychological impact for the participants.

During the course of my work many women sought help for problems in their lives that were related to the poverty and deprivation that they faced. One woman lost her job due to the continued abuse that she suffered at the hands of her husband. This meant that her primary concern was the fact that she had nothing to feed her children for dinner. Another woman was being repeatedly raped by her husband but she did not have the resources to leave him and she was ostracised from her extended family members. The women's material concerns of survival were central to their lives. I attempted to assist these efforts by providing the women with information about counselling centres and social workers. Practically, however, many were unable to utilise these resources due to a lack of resources. Thus, these issues most often went beyond my capacity to help the women.

While my research goals were compatible with the goals of the women's group as whole (the personal empowerment of individuals through the telling of stories), I wondered how compatible my goals were for the lived realities of the individual group members. How could these women exhibit agency or some kind of psychological empowerment when their material needs were not met? The reality of these women's lives mean that they focus on practical material issues while I, in a sense, was most interested in generating a critical consciousness about abuse and an increased *sense of agency* amongst the women. These concerns resonate with Mendoza's (2002) thoughts that the real divisions between women are not race, class, or nationality but rather the divisions between Western feminist theorists and the more material and practically based Third world activists.

Although my research provided the women with spaces to express their painful past, I am aware of the fact that so much more needs to be done. I began to question the realities of how far one can go in work of this nature. I continue to feel a heartfelt sense of connection with the group that stems from my intimate experiences with group members. My concerns in this regard tie in with my own 'feminist' assumptions that I have cultivated throughout my work in the field of woman abuse.

## **A FEMINIST METHODOLOGY: THROUGH WHAT MEANS CAN WE KNOW?**

### *Feminist assumptions*

The word feminism has come to represent a vast array of politically conscious ways of thinking that uncover unequal power imbalances and try to change dominant power structures. I drew from De Lauretis (1987) to provide substance to my understanding of the aims and social function of feminism. Feminism is, “A critical reading of culture, a political interpretation of the social text and of the social subject, and a re-writing of our culture’s master narratives” (De Lauretis, 1987: p. 113). I believe that the most central aspect of feminist work is that it should provide spaces within which women can express their voices through their own meaning frames in a context that they are familiar and comfortable with. When I reflect back on my previous research I feel that women were not really inspired to engage with the question and answer format that I utilised. This can be seen the women’s brief answers that often seemed preoccupied with speaking about what they thought I wanted to hear about (brief narratives that were led by my questions). Thus, I wanted to utilise more natural sites of meaning making.

Another central tenant of feminism that ‘speaks to me’ is the aim of feminist research to empower the individuals and groups that take part in the research. I feel that the reason why I have focused on this particular aim in my current doctoral work is that in the past I have felt a sense of incompleteness in my research doing interviews with women who I have often not met before and who I will most often not have contact with again. I questioned what significance my research has for the lives of the individual women involved in my research. I wondered how I could create new avenues for knowledge generation that can contribute directly to participant’s lives. My research goals for the current project were also informed by broader feminist debates, which will be discussed below.

### *The need for an African gender perspective*

In this project I aim to contribute specific indigenous knowledge about agency and identity constructions of Black women from various parts of the African continent who have experienced a myriad of forms of gender-based violations. International feminist literature has predominantly

been driven by North American standpoints that conceptualise the ‘common oppression’ of women, leading to a lack of exploration into other pertinent dimensions of women’s social inequality (Fish, 2006; Pereira, 2000). More specific to my concerns for the current project, African voices have largely been neglected in feminist poststructuralist work on women’s agency and gender-based violence. This is significant because individualistic approaches may not be useful tools for understanding the experiences and meaning making of Black women from various parts of Africa (Macleod, 2008). Below I draw on two main points that have been developed in feminist literature.

Firstly, it has been argued that African women living in Africa face very different kinds of oppressions from white women from First world countries. African feminisms have very different intellectual roots that are largely tied in with nationalism, political struggles and deep seated oppressions (Pereira, 2002). Gender issues for Black women living in developing countries are deeply intertwined with other problems that are connected to poverty, conflict, racism, and displacement. In the case of the unique nature of the oppressions that African women face, hegemonic Western discourse from the developed West are not suited to explain the multiple and complex challenges that women deal with on a day to day basis in Africa (Macleod, 2008). With these debates in mind I aimed to conduct a project that engages with the women’s own ideas and frameworks so as to move away from any pre-given (Western) theoretical ideas about what it means to be an agentic being in the world.

Secondly, many black African women adhere to cultural philosophies that strongly value social and community connections (Mkhize, 2004). This means that they may have different ways of resisting oppressions and negotiating agency in their lives. Macleod (2008) argues that certain Western technologies such as self-management and the focus on internal struggles and individual self-improvement are not suitable frameworks for understanding the ways in which many African women deal with their experiences of violence. Many African women may enact their agency through their connections with others in families and communities and, as such, a focus on such collective elements could be more useful for studying the agentic strategies of these women.

### *Addressing the pitfalls of European and North American feminist scholarship*

Dominant Eurocentric feminist scholarship has been critiqued for providing interpretations of African women's experiences that are shaped by certain biases and Western ideas about knowledge. A shift away from acknowledging the commonality of women's experience, or gender essentialism, has largely resulted in a focus on women's diversity. However, diversity is often categorised according to different cultures and women of the same culture a 'lumped together' as if they are homogenous (Bohler-Muller, 2000; Narayan, 2000). This constitutes a kind of cultural essentialism, which is theoretically problematic.

There is not one 'African culture' and women of African origin differ with regards to their specific cultures of the East, West, and South Africa. Women also differ with regards to their current exposure to their culture of origin, education level, and socio-economic status. A focus on the stark differences of another (or an 'Other') culture can also result in a kind of cultural imperialism by which dominant modes of Western thought are compared against aspects of African culture; often situating the African culture as inferior or drawing on cultural values to 'explain' why abuse occurs in that specific culture. Work of this nature can result in certain representations of African women that echo dominant patriarchal discourses. An example is scripts that represent African women as weak and passive objects who are not able to negotiate agency on their own terms. While it is important to acknowledge that African women may have different experiences of abuse, it is important that we do not engage in cultural imperialism by 'othering' cultures and blaming abuse on aspects of culturally-based beliefs or practices. This kind of othering constructs certain cultures as 'non-civilised' (Okin, 2000; Solokoff & Dupont, 2005) and often situates Third World women as politically immature (Yuval-Davis, 1997).

In line with my own feminist assumptions, I find it disturbing to acknowledge the fact that much research from Europe and North America has resulted in deeply unbalanced power relationships between researchers and the researched. Much of this work has benefited the researcher's development and the benefits for the participants are transient, if there are any benefits at all. During my current project I aim to address these pitfalls in the following ways: 1.) acknowledging the nuances of different African cultures, 2.) respecting the validity of indigenous cultural knowledges, 3.) conducting methods that will empower the participants in some way, and 4.) engaging in representations of the participants that do not fall in line with dominant structures of power that oppress women.

## “KNOWING THE SELF”-ONTOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS

### *Feminist poststructuralism, subjectivity, and agency*

A feminist poststructuralist theoretical approach departs from notions of a rational unitary, fixed ‘individual’ self and embraces the idea of dynamic, changeable, and multiple ‘selves’ (Pereira, 1997). Theorists that adopt this approach argue for a recognition of subjectivity as relational and as constructed through positioning in multiple discourses (for example, Davies et al., 2006a; Gavey, 1989; Pereira, 1997) and thus reject the notion of language as a transparent tool through which experience can be expressed (Weedon, 1987). I have chosen this approach due to its usefulness for studying the complexities of women’s agency. I find it particularly valuable as it provides theoretical tools for working towards redefining scripts that align abused women as static victims and provides new ways of thinking about the ‘self’/ ‘selves’ in context.

A number of scholars concur with regards to the benefits of this approach. Mama (1995) says, “If we start with the premise that people are not rigidly fixed by a single identity, then we can study the ways in which they are able to change, to resist and oppose dominant discourses, either by taking up positions outside these discourses, or by developing alternative one’s, or both” (p. 112). Davies (2000) concurs by saying that feminist poststructuralist theory creates the possibility of a new kind of agency. According to this view, agency is conceptualised as a matter of location within or in relation to discourses (Davies, 1990). By recognizing subjectivity as fashioned in particular cultural and historical discourses/conditions, the commonalities and differences among women (and men) can be explored in a way that is neither reductionist nor universalist (Imam, 1997).

An exploration of the interactive contexts within which women construct themselves can facilitate an understanding of the collective and discursive processes through which women are able to generate alternative understandings and practices (Davies, 1990). In this sense feminist poststructuralist understandings, when applied to the Sisters for Sisters group storytelling sessions, can provide for a means to explore how individual identities are constructed in relation to others and in relation to broader strands of meaning that emerge in the collective setting. As women come into contact with other women’s stories the dominant masculine structures may

become visible to them. They may then be able to find new ways of thinking about themselves in the world by breaking free, discovering new storylines and reinventing old structures and discourses (Davies, 1992). In this way insight can be generated into the process by which the Sisters for Sisters members work with discourses in new ways and find alternative streams of agency in their lives. One can then theorise about the political implications of such a collective process. It is in these ways that a feminist poststructuralist approach served as a valuable underpinning of my study.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

In the section that follows I give a brief outline of my chosen methods and I expand on how these methods have helped me achieve my theoretical and practical aims of the project. I then review how I implemented the research methods and conclude with an examination of the ethical considerations of the research.

In this study I explore women's subjectivities as they are constructed through collective stories about their *lived experience* of gender-based violence within the micro-context of the research space. To reiterate, my broad aim is to explore how women transform their abusive past within this space. This study addresses the following questions: 1.) In what ways did the women transform their past within these collective spaces? 2.) What kinds of identities were constructed through this collective process and, 3.) What function did these particular ways of remembering have for the women's sense of self in the world? This kind of collective agency/power has not been extensively researched. Broadly I was looking for a research design that would help me to investigate new ways of thinking about women's agency as it manifests through women's shared narratives, and how such processes relate to women's political power in the broader South African sphere. I required methods that would capture the unique *process* that emerged in these spaces. I also needed a method that would achieve my practical feminist aims and that would be suited to exploring identity as it is understood through my epistemological (selves constructed through talk) and ontological understandings of the self (multiple fragments of identity

constructed in context and in relation to others).

### *Theoretical aims and practical feminist goals/ethics*

I explore the processes through which the women make sense of their experiences of abuse together; exploring the meaning that is constructed through lived experience-with a focus on an exploration of the social and political impact of these processes of collective engagement. Thus, I needed to adopt particular methods that would help me to gain access to *both* the individual and collective dimensions of the women's meaning making. Firstly, I needed a methodology that would allow me to access the construction of relational subjectivities/ 'selves' constructed in relation to others. So, I needed to find a way of translating my epistemological assumptions about the self into my research practice, through adopting methods that would make this collective process amenable to study. At the same time I needed a method that would give me access to the individual construction of lived experience.

With regards to the epistemological and ontological theories that I drew on in this study, I required methods that would be fitting with the ways in which I wanted to engage with feminist poststructuralist theory (the construction of selves in relation to broader social discourses). And a methodology that would be fitting with my theoretical understanding of subjectivities as emerging through storytelling, providing a focus on relational *narrated subjects*. I also wanted to adopt methods that would help me to achieve my feminist theoretical goals of exploring the women's ideas without any preconceived notions and my aim of generating information that is not confined to the frameworks of Eurocentric discourses that perceive women's oppression as "collective".

At the beginning stages of my research I planned to engage in a research design that consisted of individual interviews that were followed by a series of focus group discussions. I soon realised (partly in response to feedback that I received during my research proposal presentation at the University) that these methods would not capture the full complexity of the collective dynamics that I wanted to explore, particularly because they would yield data that would largely be based on individual voices in isolation from any kind of interaction. My previous research with women who have experienced gender-based violence has also shown me that traditional qualitative methods (such as semi-structured interview) are not suited to answering my particular research

questions. The actual practice of such traditional methods was not going to help me achieve my broader feminist goals of participant/group empowerment. I wanted to find a method that would help me capture the essence of the *Sisters for Sisters* group and the dynamics of my engagements with them.

### *The collective biography research approach*

I eventually came across a methodology that is well suited to addressing my theoretical and practical concerns. Collective biography is a postmodern research methodology that draws on the methods and epistemological assumptions of memory work research<sup>4</sup>. Collective biography has been described as useful means of investigating connections between individuals and as an, “Invaluable way of attempting to recover past experience as well as of suggesting ways in which this was shaped by the broader structures in which it was situated” (Cowman, 2012: p. 97).

This method was first used by Bronwyn Davies and colleagues in academic settings. In their book *Doing Collective Biography*, Davies and Gannon (2006a) outline this fluid and emergent method. The collective biography group first conducted workshops by which they engaged in activities such as art and narrative in order to get their ideas flowing. The academics then drew on the themes that had emerged from these workshops as a starting point for them to engage in a long collaborative writing process during which the meaning was shaped and re-shaped by all of the participants. These writing sessions were based on feminist poststructuralist examination of the emergent selves through writing.

This was the way in which collective biography was initially used, however, scholars in the field suggest that these methods should be adapted and reinvented anew in ways that suit the specific group of study. The current study has drawn on these collective biography guidelines offered by Davies and colleagues whilst tailoring the methods to suit the specific group of women involved; a group of non-academic, economically disadvantaged women who have, mostly, not been versed in discourses of feminism or feminist poststructuralist theory. The epistemology of

---

<sup>4</sup> Memory work is a social constructionist method that works with visual imagery (usually photographs) to stimulate the process of remembering. One of the main scholars in the field of memory work is Annette Kuhn. Kuhn describes memory work as, “an active practice of remembering which takes an inquiring attitude towards the past and the activity of its (re)construction through memory” (2000: 186).

emergence and the collective development of voices over time are the main conceptual threads that I drew from this work. I began with no specific structure of the ways in which I was going to implement these methods. The structure for my research implementation developed over time and it was informed by my experience and observations within the *Sisters for Sisters* group setting.

Collective biography methods are often confused with participatory action research as some of the central tenants of these approaches overlap. It is therefore important for me to distinguish between these types of methodologies. Participatory research privileges a community's knowledge but is still often driven by the goals and frameworks of the researcher (the assumptions of the researcher coming in and improving the community's systems/knowledge in some way). During collective biography work, on the other hand, the researcher immerses themselves in the community of study, becoming part of the group. This approach follows from the assumption that it is not possible to write as if the author is not or were not present as they are always present at each stage of the 'discursive constitution work of research' (Davies et al., 2006c: p. 89). According to this view, "Studying collective identity means redefining the relationship between observer and the observed because we are dealing not with a thing, but with a process continually activated by social actors" (Melucci, 1995: p. 62). Here Melucci implies that we cannot assume that we can privilege the study of the distinctive reality of a specific community, rather reality is conceptualised as constructed in a circular interaction with the research participants (via collaborative work which shapes the research topic).

Participatory orientated approaches posit that we should enrich the community's already existing strategies; the process of collective biography, on the other hand, creates new strategies within the very moments of collaborative work. I have, however, drawn on certain theoretical aspects and particular PAR methods in my project. I also drew on the epistemological and theoretical strands of the memory work method and a social constructionist narrative approach to identity. I will now give a brief outline of how I practically approached the study before moving on to explicate the ways in which the collective biography methodological approach is the most useful tool for examining my theoretical questions and practical goals for this project.

*Brief overview of the practical implementation of the collective biography methods for this project*

I began by conceptualising my study of the women's collective meaning making about abuse on broad terms. The research question as well as the process of data gathering was continually shaped throughout the course of my work. The first stage of my data gathering comprised of four interactive workshops with the Sisters for Sisters members. These workshops were based on broad themes of gender-based violence. The workshop activities were drawn from various participatory methods such as dramas, role plays, violence against women scenarios and group discussions, as well as visual methods that are common of collective memory work.

The purpose of these workshops was to facilitate the women's active engagement with issues of gender-based violence. These sessions were used to set the scene and to stimulate their initial ideas and frameworks of meaning. I broadly analysed the workshop data and documented the groundwork themes that emerged during these interactive sessions. These themes were then used to structure the topics for the second stage of data gathering-the series of focus group discussions. A total of eight focus groups discussions were conducted. Each of these discussions was based on broad themes that had emerged from the workshops. I conducted the in-depth analysis after completion of the second stage of data gathering. This analysis was conducted by myself. The research process involved talk only; the women did not engage in written narratives as many of the women were not equipped on an educational level to conduct such written work.

*Rational for the Collective Biography methodological approach*

The initial workshops and the focus group discussions of the data gathering procedures were not structured according to semi-structured questions, rather the women were given an opportunity to openly explore the themes through stories of their life experiences and what was meaningful for them. The women's involvement in many sessions across time meant that I could piece together parts of their stories across the sessions and theorise about individual life trajectory. My close engagement with the group and my relationships with the women in my study (a central feature of collective biography methods) provided me with a rich contextual background of each woman and thus I gained crucial insight into the women's individual *lived experience*. The individual women's continuous participation throughout the data gathering sites meant that I could also piece together threads of their personal stories and trajectories of experiences that

happened at different temporal moments and in different geographical places in their lives. Such demographic and contextual information of each woman was also particularly important in informing my theorisation of the women's construction of identities in relation to certain cultural practices.

At the same time such methods are particularly suited to studying aspects of the collective or intersubjectivity (Stephenson, 2001). The collective biography spaces were interactive sites in which the women engaged in dialogue, connected their 'experiences' to the stories of others and were stimulated by points in each other's narratives. The fact that the women knew each other and that their relationships were strengthened over time during the course of my data gathering sessions meant that these were sites of rich interaction. Women extend their own imagined experience from knowing the particularity of the other (Gonick, Walsh, and Browne, 2011). As such, I was also able to explore the emergence of relational selves within this context. The collective biography methodological approach thus allowed me to explore both the individual and the collective dimensions of the women's meaning making.

The epistemological assumptions of the collective biography approach also helped me to contextualise these relational selves and how I was going to study these selves within the dynamics of the women's network. In collective biography work researchers are interested in understanding the process of 'selving', rather than to discover particular details about individual selves (Davies & Gannon, 2006a). During the collective biography project the women's stories no longer signify individual identities. This collective process of theorising makes visible the ways in which understandings of lived experience are discursively constituted (Davies & Gannon, 2006a). Selves are constituted in concert with others through the taking up and resisting of certain discourses (Davies et al. 2006b: p. 87). Thus, this methodological approach makes it possible to explore the dynamic links between the individual and the social. It provided a means of examining the ways in which women make sense of their individual experiences of gendered violations by situating these experiences in relation to the reflections of other women participants and according to broader social discourses.

The collective biography methods allowed me to achieve my theoretical and practical feminist goals. Firstly, the methods provided a means of collecting data that would privilege the women's

voices. The research process was not regulated by me as researcher but rather unfolded in a naturalistic setting and in response to the women's voices and what was important to them. My power (over the women) was limited in the data collection stage, although I did have power of the analysis and write up. I did not use any semi-structured questions-only topic guides for the focus groups. The creative methods such as the roles plays and dramas of the workshops allowed the participants to generate imaginary, hypothetical and generalised ideas about woman abuse. In this way women were able to express certain things that may be 'unspeakable' in other contexts. I also had access to their own viewpoints and different ways of creating meaning that did not necessarily correspond with Western concepts of gender-based violence and women's agency.

Thus, these methods facilitated unique meaning making spaces and a different type of knowledge that may not be voiced via other, more traditional qualitative methods. The topics of the focus group discussions (the second stage of data gathering) were shaped by the women's own ideas and frameworks that emerged from the initial interactive workshops. Thus, the topics of the research emerged along the course of our engagements and were led by the participants own voices. This provided insight into what agency means *for the women* concerned.

Ultimately, the adoption of the collective biography methodology was crucial for helping me to answer my research questions and to achieve my research goals. These emergent methods challenged everything that I knew about doing traditional research work and 'writing academically'. I was forced to go beyond the boundaries of what I was familiar with as well as accepted styles of academic writing and embrace other alternative, creative and intuitive ways of working towards my project goal. I will now expand in detail on how I implemented the collective biography methods in this research project.

## **PARTICIPANTS**

This study draws its participants from members of a grassroots women's support network called *Sisters for Sisters* that is based in Woodstock, Cape Town, South Africa. As stated in my reflections above, it was through my prior volunteer work with the organisation that I identified

the group as the target of study. This support network is run by the women members themselves and works to, “holistically strengthen, develop, and empower destitute and abused women by helping them to regain their rightful place as independent members of society”. The group aims to provide spaces within which women can gain support and network among others, with the goal of strengthening women’s opportunities in the social sphere. The aims as well as the function of the group meant that the organisation was a suitable target for my research into the collective aspects of women’s agency.

The group was founded in 2008 and continues to run today. The group is made up of South African women as well as migrants from various parts of Sub-Saharan Africa; including Kenya, Zimbabwe, and Congo. The majority of the group members reside in low income suburbs in Cape Town with some living in surrounding areas of the Western Cape<sup>5</sup>. Most of these women come from disadvantaged social economic backgrounds characterised by extreme poverty. Their current social location is one in which they experience the realities of social deprivation and unemployment in the South African context. Apart from the shared experience of group membership<sup>6</sup> as well as their shared experiences of abuse, the women have a variety of different backgrounds/cultures/countries of origin.

#### *Access to participants*

Initial access to the participants was arranged by setting up a meeting with the founder of the group. I have been involved with the group on a volunteer basis since October 2009. During this time I conducted workshops with the women and I was involved in other group activities. I feel that I generated significant levels of trust, rapport, and friendship with the women during this time. Davies and Gannon (2006a) state that collective biography research should include participants that are committed to the project as the continuous participation of the same individuals enriches the emerging group process. The insight that I gained from my extended involvement with the group meant that I could identify particularly motivated individuals for

---

<sup>5</sup> These include black townships in the areas of Strand, Belhar, and Langa.

<sup>6</sup> The term ‘*shared experience*’ that will be utilised throughout the study refers to the women’s experiences of being part of the specific community of the women’s action group. As per Israel et al. (1998), the term ‘community’ need not refer to a geographically set out area but may rather refer to a community of individuals who are part of an ethnically diverse group who share a common identification, emotional connection, and shared values.

participation in the research. My volunteer work with the community has also given me crucial insight into the workings, attitudes of group members and the relationships between group members.

I utilised a convenience sampling approach (Adames & Campbell, 2005) with some use of snowballing when the core group members introduced me to other members over time. My inclusion criteria for the participants were that they self-identified as a member of the *Sisters for Sisters* group and that they had experienced some form of gender-based violence. Access to the participants and workshop/focus group discussion times were arranged telephonically with the individual group members.

## **DATA COLLECTION**

The data gathering process consisted of two distinct phases. Phase one involved four interactive workshop sessions that were broadly based on the topic of gender-based violence. The second phase of data gathering comprised of a series of focus group discussions that were based on themes that emerged in phase one of the research.

### *Data gathering phase one: Collective biography workshops*

Three of the four workshop sessions took place in a private and secure room on the premises of a church hall in Cape Town. The hall was made accessible by the pastor of the church. At the beginning of each session the participants were asked to sign a consent form (Appendix B). With permission from the participants, the workshops were audio taped using a digital Dictaphone. Two group members, Chadamwari and Akeyo, acted as co-facilitators. They assisted me in planning and implementing the workshop activities.

The first workshop was based on my own narrativisation of an incident that I had witnessed whereby a friend of mine was subject to emotional abuse. The participants were asked to reflect on my story and to relate the scenario to their own experiences of abuse. The women responded to my story and they engaged in an emergent dialogue as they drew on themes and issues that

were raised by others in this setting. Six women took part in this workshop. The group consisted of three South African women, two Zimbabwean women, and one Kenyan woman.

The second workshop comprised of nine women. There were four South African women, two Zimbabwean women, two Congolese women and one woman from Kenya. The first activity for this workshop was a picture memory exercise. A variety of photographs of women and girls in various scenarios were presented to the women (Appendix D gives some examples of these photos). They were asked to select a picture and to provide their own interpretation of the image as well as to comment on the relevance of the scenario to their own lives. The second activity involved the co-facilitators reading a factsheet about violence against women. This was followed by an open ended conversation among the participants. The women were then divided into groups and asked to report back on a gender-based violence vignette. These responses were then used to stimulate further discussion among the participants.

The third collective biography workshop consisted of seven *Sisters for Sisters* members. Three Zimbabwean women, two South African women, one Congolese woman, and one Kenyan woman attended this session. During this workshop the women engaged in group dramatisation during which they created their own skits about violence against women. One of the co-facilitators then engaged in storytelling about her life as a woman in the Zimbabwean context. She spoke about the phenomenon of the “small house and the big house” whereby men have many ‘secret nests’ or ‘small houses’ where they sleep with different women outside of their main homes. She spoke about the multiple incidents that she has witnessed in her community and, particularly, about the links that this phenomenon has to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The women in the collective biography group were then given a space whereby they could engage with her story and talk about their own experiences or exposure to such issues.

The last workshop was held in a small hall in one of the Black townships where some of the members live. This workshop comprised of eight women. Five women were from South Africa, two women were from Zimbabwe, and one woman was from Kenya. The session took place in a secluded container in the community. During this workshop the co-facilitators read out a factsheet about violence against women. This was followed by an open storytelling session whereby the participants had a chance to narrate their experiences of abuse.

The main goal of the collective biography workshops was to provide spaces within which participants could tell their stories with intimacy and complexity. Andrews (2008) says that in order to transcend our ability to understand people's views of their traumatic experiences we need to be able and willing to follow the speaker into 'unanticipated places' (p. 25). My choice to begin with such workshops was so that I would not impose my own ideas about woman abuse onto the participants. I wanted to gain insight into the women's own concerns and theorising, something which would not have been achieved if I had begun the research process with focus group interviews that consisted of structured pre-set questions. The open ended approach of these initial data gathering sessions led to the voicing of new kinds of concerns/issues, unexplored themes of women abuse that show a multitude of complex experiences of GBV and interacting factors that shape women's sense of self as 'abused woman' in the African context.

I then engaged in a preliminary analysis of the workshop data during which I identified groundwork ideas and broad themes about gender-based violence. Significant themes that emerged were the accumulation of violence by which the women voiced multiple experiences of gender-based violence that have occurred in different places and at different life moments. During my preliminary overview of this workshop data I also identified place and time as significant elements of the women's narratives. These themes were then used to structure the second stage of data gathering and to stimulate the women's stories/memories in this subsequent series of focus group discussions. Such procedures are common of collective biography work in which researchers describe the initial sessions (here my workshops) as spaces that produce 'something in common' (themes) before the subsequent collective work sessions (see Davies & Gannon, 2006a).

#### *Data gathering phase two: Focus group discussions*

Phase two of the data gathering consisted of eight focus group discussions. The average length of each discussion was one and a half hours. Approximately eight women took part in each of these discussions. Seven of the focus group discussions were held in the Cape Town church hall. This room offered a safe and private space for the women. The sixth focus group discussion was held at the home of one of the group members.

Drawing on the memory-work research of Stephenson, Kippax, & Crawford (1996), these discussions followed a process of memory-telling. Themes that emerged from the initial workshops of phase one of the research were used as cues/triggers to stimulate the women's engagement with their memories of abuse. As discussed above, place and temporal moment emerged as significant markers of the women's narratives of abuse. Each focus group discussion was structured broadly around the groundwork themes and a specific type of abuse experienced in different places and in different temporal moments of the women's lives.

Such data gathering methods allow one to observe the interactions between group members as well as the process of collective brainstorming (Shillingford, 2006). The women were given the space to engage with these themes and construct their identities in novel and creative ways. The aim was to facilitate an emergent space within which the possibilities of subjectivity could be explored and struggled over and the 'storying of subjectivities' (Davies, et al., 2006a: p. 18) could occur in relation to the above-mentioned themes of abuse. Focus group discussions give the participants the power to take control of the topic (Morgan, 1997). They also provide a means of studying shared memory (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Thus, such data gathering sessions provide a means of studying the dynamic negotiation of meaning in context and they provide insight into the relational aspects of the self (Wilkinson, 1998). Particularly with regards to my focus on collective agency and empowerment, Mkandawire-Valhmu and Stephens (2010) say that focus groups are a forum through which poor women can provide support to each other and reinforce (or create) a common sense of agency, and are also well suited to produce talk that conveys a sense of capacity for praxis.

As the collective biography discussions proceeded refined themes and topics developed along the way as the women were stimulated by their own recollections as well as the memory telling of others. Davies & Gannon (2006a) describe this collective space as one in which those who often arrive with 'no memories' are amazed at how quickly stories begin to emerge once the storytelling begins. In this sense each memory is, "threaded onto the last" in a collective weaving of memories and reflection (Davies & Gannon, 2006a: p. 10). As each woman tells their story others listen carefully probing for details and images that help participants imagine and bring to life others remembered stories. At the same time the women remember new stories of their own that take off from points in the discussion or from moments in other stories. Spontaneous storytelling begins with an implicit comparison in which one experience is eloquently pitted

against another (Haug, 1987).

The focus group discussions were audio-taped with the use of an electronic dictaphone and then transcribed verbatim. There was no translator employed as all of the women participants had a good English proficiency. In instances when the women switched briefly into other languages such as French, Swahili, or Xhosa, other women in the session often stood in as ‘informal interpreters’ in the moment. In some cases I was left with longer paragraphs where the women spoke in foreign languages. One of the *Sisters for Sisters* members translated these passages of recorded speech into English for me. She was able to elaborate on the spoken data and she provided me with a rich cultural context for certain words and phrases. This better equipped me to explore the subtleties of meaning of the women’s language and it ultimately enriched my understanding of the women’s stories. Finally, the told memories were then used as the texts out of which the in-depth analysis was generated.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

Researchers have to practice accountability while doing research. This means that they need to ensure that they follow an ethical process. I needed to ensure that the outcome of my research is beneficial for abused women in the African context. I also needed to make explicit the ways that I transformed individual subjective accounts into social science ‘theory’ during the analysis stage of my research (see Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). So while I engaged in my own very specific interpretations of these women’s stories, I tried to keep their words and silences central to my analysis. Below I outline the practical methods and the theoretical tools that I used to analyse the collective narratives.

I did not adopt a collaborative writing procedure for this study but rather an on-going collaborative process of memory-talk that informed the emerging research process and the preliminary analysis. The in-depth analysis took place at completion of the series of group discussions and the analysis was done by me. The data analysis involved repeated readings of the transcripts during which I have looked for recurring themes across the recorded data. The coding

process of the group discussions was more complex than that of semi-structured interview data due to the fact that the group discussions did not follow an outline of set questions. During my preliminary analysis I identified a number of complex themes as well as broad linking themes. I then categorised these themes according to inclusive/exclusive content. Over time I refined and collapsed the themes.

The analysis focuses on both the individual and the collective dimensions of the women's talk. Drawing on the two-fold definition of narrative offered by Taylor (2010), in this study narrative is defined as 1.) a construction in talk and 2.) a resource for that construction. Firstly, I analysed the patterns of talk that occurred within the narratives of one speaker and I have enriched this analysis with the contextual detail that I have about each woman. Secondly, the analysis has addressed patterns across the larger body of data-the collective dimension of the analysis. These collective patterns within the data are indicative of a certain 'common sense of society', they are part of the shared resources that people draw on to understand the world and themselves (Taylor, 2010: p. 12). This part of the analysis sheds light on the common socio-cultural resources that the *Sisters for Sisters* members drew on to construct their remembered experiences. Following Taylor (2010), both the content of what women say (the events) and how they tell it (the words/language) were considered. Throughout my written analysis I have chosen extracts of meaning from different speakers and presented these extracts as they have occurred consecutively within the discussions. If the extracts are not consecutively displayed, I outline the spoken context for each particular extract of meaning. I focus on the language that emerges in the collective biography sessions; including words, imagery as well as the *silences*.

Collaborative storytelling requires researchers to focus on group interactions as the unit of analysis, exploring shared storytelling rather than a dyad of speaker and audience (Langellier and Peterson, 1992). As Squire (2008a) states, "the notion of 'story' always entails 'audience' as well as 'storyteller'" (p. 7). In the analysis that follows I place an emphasis on the immediate context of the collective biography discussion and the ways in which women's stories are co-constructed with the participating others. I also theorise about the ways in which my own presence shaped the women's tellings. Here I follow the recommendations of Melucci (1995) who says that we should not assume that a narrative adequately reveals the meaning of an action beyond the relationship with the researcher in which the narrative is produced. He says that if attention is not paid to the conditions of production of a text, and to the reception and interpretation of it by the

researcher, then one is practicing a new kind of objectivism under the guise of ‘subjective sources’. The researcher and the participants are reflexively interdependent and interconnected and these connections need to be made explicit during the analysis (Mauthner & Doucet, (2003). Thus, I followed a triangulated model of analysis. I analyse the content of individual talk, the interactional dynamics of the collective talk, and I draw on my own emotional memory of what it felt like during my participation in these sessions.

### *Theoretical Frameworks for the analysis*

Methods of data analysis are not neutral techniques because they carry the epistemological, ontological, and theoretical assumptions of the researcher who developed them and are infused with a different set of assumptions of the researcher who utilises these tools (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). The broad frameworks that I draw on in this project are feminist poststructuralism and a dialogic-thematic narrative approach. These theoretical approaches have shaped my understanding of identity and the way that I approach the analysis. More specifically, they have led to my focus on relational subjects that are discursively and materially located, and my understanding of language as an interactive resource via which identity is constructed.

Throughout my analysis I adopt ontological assumptions that run in line with social constructivist theoretical frameworks and, more specifically, critical discursive psychology and feminist critical discourse analysis (Lazar, 2005). Broadly, such theories propose that identity should be understood as, “what people do rather than what they are, as practice, process and performance” (Taylor, 2010: p. 48). In such a project the details of someone’s talk is understood not as an expression of an already formed identity but rather as a dynamic work in progress. It is part of an on-going construction of ‘who I am’ (Taylor, 2010: p. 21). Thus, identity in this project is examined via a focus on the women’s language and practices that occur with others. Such a poststructuralist view looks, “*at* rather than *through* the linguistic surface” (Levine, 1991, p. xvi, as cited in Davies, 2000: p. 134).

### *Narrative conceptual approach*

In terms of narrative theory, my analysis was informed by a blend of a dialogic-experience centred theoretical approach. A dialogic approach is concerned with the interpersonal construction of narratives, co-construction and positioning. Here the focus is on the social patterns and functioning of stories (Squire, 2008). My use of the dialogic perspective was done with the aim of questioning the role of myself as expert and to open up dialogue and plurality of voices with the focus on the women's collective transformation of their trauma experiences. The result was spaces of dialogue within which the participants could work in their own ways as agents of their own transformation.

Experience centred work assumes that representations vary over time and across circumstances and a single phenomenon may produce different stories from the same person (Squire, Andrews, & Tamboukou, 2008). The interest in reconstruction and co-construction within experience-centred narrative research, leads some researchers to view any personal story as just one of many narratable 'truths' (Squire, 2008b.). In my work I do not attempt to distinguish between "true" and fictional stories. I adhere to the view that all stories are fictions (creative manipulations of 'memory') that provide the substance of lived reality as they are means by which life is interpreted and made tellable and livable (see Davies, 1991). Experience-centred narratives have been defined as sequential and meaningful, as 'representing', reconstituting and expressing experience, and as displaying some form of transformation or change (Squire, 2008a); thus it often becomes a project of 'improvement as well as understanding' (Squire, 2008b: p. 25). Throughout the analysis I draw on socio-cultural scripts of femininity to make sense of the participants' stories.

I utilised a blend of a thematic analytical approach and a dialogic approach to practically analyse the data<sup>7</sup>. A thematic narrative approach is concerned with the content of speech and it attends to the broader social discourses that shape the accounts. Here the importance of a theme is not the frequency with which it occurs but rather its significance or its centrality to meaning and identity (Mankowski & Rappaport, 2000). Primary interest is generating thematic categories across

---

<sup>7</sup> In her book *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*, Reissman (2008) highlights the usefulness of working dynamically with emerging approaches to narrative. She particularly encourages researchers to utilize novel blends of approaches that best fit a particular research project.

individual cases even as the individual stories are preserved. Recent studies have shown that a thematic approach to narrative analysis allows for the exploration of the ways in which women position themselves in various ways through their language and in relation to certain ‘violent’ events (Boonzaier & van Schalkwyk, 2011).

The emphasis on the analysis of the thematic elements of narrative is particularly useful for examining how individuals construct themselves in relation to categories of power such as race, class, and gender (Reissman, 2008). A dialogic analytic approach emphasises a process of communal interaction between individuals; signifying the fluidity and contextuality of meanings (Reissman, 1993). It provides the possibility of exploring the collective dimension—namely the co-construction of narrative, communal meanings, and ‘shared understandings’ that are generated among individuals. As other academics in the field of narrative suggest, narrative is not only a way of talking about the self or constructing an identity by drawing on broader social discourses, it is also a way of, “practicing certain types of identity in specific interactions with others” (De Fina, 2003: p. 5).

This blend of approaches offers the potential for a rich analysis that illuminates the collective process of subjectification (Davies, Browne, Gannon, Hopkins, McCann, & Wihlborg, 2006e). Collective biography runs with a central paradox— a detailed attention to individual selves and their memories in order to arrive at new understandings that do not take as their central focus those individual selves (Davies et al., 1997). My analysis does not focus on extended individual biographies but rather cross sectional shots of memories. I contextualise these pieces of memory within the socio-cultural context and in relation to dominant discourses. I also enrich these pieces of memory with contextual information about each woman’s life story.

The weaving together of these memory fragments, or narrative threads, involves a dynamic interaction between the individual and the social. Memory, according to Kuhn (2000) embodies union, or fusion, as well as fragmentation. Fusion results from a search within the collective of a common imagining of a shared past but remembering is also often a site of cultural differences and conflict (Kuhn, 2000). Keeping in line with the aims of collective biography work, this study closely examines issues of silence, power, and collectivity (Davies & Gannon, 2006b) and these concepts are used as frameworks to interpret the meaning that is generated about woman abuse.

### *Social remembering- An additional lens*

I also analyse the data through a social remembering lens. A transformative approach/social remembering approach to memory is one that acknowledges that a survivor's relationship to their past is not immediately settled; rather identity and agency are managed in the present moment of telling (Haaken & Reavey, 2012). The past is actively shaped as it is narrated in the present moment for particular purposes (Reavey & Brown, 2007). As Eisikovits and Winstok (2002) argue, "Memories become tactics for manipulating occurrences in everyday life to achieve personal, interpersonal, and social aims" (p. 695). An integral part of the function of narrative is that one constructs the 'self' in certain ways that shape the moral judgments which others can make about you, the storyteller. So along these lines, I analyse the construction of 'selves' through the various ways in which the women retrospectively examine their past experiences and the ways in which the women give these experiences significance in the present moment (see Reavey & Brown, 2007: p. 11).

## **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

### **PARTICIPANT RIGHTS**

#### *Disclosure, anonymity, and confidentiality*

Prior to my data collection a consent document was signed between me and the founder of the Sisters for Sisters group. This agreement outlined the planned process of research, the expected outcomes and contributions that the research will make, and the core ethical considerations of respecting the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants (Appendix A). At the beginning of the research process I conducted an introductory session during which the participants were informed about the expected processes of the research. They were told what my research was about, what the data will be used for, and what their task in the research project will be.

Due to my prior work with the group I also distinguished the ways in which my data gathering sessions would differ from the workshops that we had done before during my volunteer work with the group. I informed the women that the data gathering sessions would be audio-taped and transcribed and that the talk will constitute the data that I will use to write up my final project. The women were informed about why the study is important and the impact that the results of the study could have for other abused women in Africa. The women were also told that their participation in the study is voluntary (see Kvale, 1996). They were told that they have the right to refuse to answer any question and that they also have a right to request that certain sensitive or emotional parts of the group discussions not be recorded. None of the participants requested that the Dictaphone be turned off at any time during the discussions.

The participants were ensured verbally and in writing about the fact that every attempt will be made to maintain confidentiality. The women's identities were kept anonymous with the use of pseudonyms. In addition, any names of non-participants that were used throughout the course of the participant's stories remained anonymous (also through the use of pseudonyms) so as to protect the identities of these individuals. The name of the group "*Sisters for Sisters*" was used with the goal of giving the group visibility in the public sphere<sup>8</sup>.

Particular issues of confidentiality arise when researching communities or individuals who know each other (Boonzaier, 2008; Hollway & Jefferson, 2002). Here confidentiality cannot unequivocally be assured. The consent forms contained a written section about upholding other group members' rights to confidentiality. I also addressed issues of confidentiality with the women in the introductory session and I made a call to the participants to abide by these rules and expectations as far as possible.

---

<sup>8</sup> The fact that the name 'Sisters for Sisters' is utilized in the research project (informed consent was obtained from the founder of the group in this regard) was communicated to each woman before their participation. I informed the women that this could compromise their confidentiality and they were given space to evaluate their participation in light of this information.

### *Further ethical issues*

A burning issue that is common of work of this nature is the women's economic situation. Involvement in the research project may have benefitted the women in some way but has not changed their economic position-a position that plays a crucial role in shaping the women's sense of agency in the world. Many benefits of a participatory model of research remain 'invisible' in women's day to day lives (Nelson & Wright, 1995). I was very aware of the tensions between the tangible benefits (economic rewards) and intangible benefits that the workshops have provided for the women. I communicated to the women from the outset that my presence as a researcher will not involve spurious financial rewards but rather my time in terms of my support and volunteer work.

The participants were advised that talking about one's experiences of abuse can be positive and healing but at the same time it can generate negative and distressing emotions. I told them that if they experienced any negative emotions either during or after the group sessions then counselling sessions will be arranged for them. The Saartje Baartman Women's Centre in Manenberg agreed to provide a series of 8-10 free counselling sessions through their intake program. Women who were unable to attend the full series of counselling sessions in Manenberg were offered the alternative of a once off counselling session at the Family and Marriage Association of South Africa (FAMSA) in Cape Town. The services at both centres were offered free of charge.

The women were briefed that the results of the study will be disseminated in the form of a PhD dissertation. They were told that my supervisor and I will be the only people who will have access to the raw data. They were also informed of the fact that the data may be utilised for alternative purposes in the future such as conference presentations or in the form of articles that are prepared for publication.

### *Post-data gathering procedures*

All of the women who participated in this project were provided with reimbursement for their transport costs to the research site. At the end of each session they were also provided with a monetary gratuity for their time. A formal written appreciation of the women's participation can

be found in the *Acknowledgements* section of this thesis. The *Sisters for Sisters* members will also be formally acknowledged in any other write up that draws from this research data.

Msimang (2002) raises the issue of how researchers who take poor women's stories of tragedy become powerful in their positions of retelling the stories in different spheres. She questions what relationship the stories that we tell have to the women who are left back home in their communities. With this in mind, it was my aim for the dialogues to be directly beneficial for the women involved. Throughout the study I have attempted to provide the women with resources and information about services that are available. I was very cognisant; however, that giving women information about these resources did not necessarily result in the women receiving support. Long waiting lists and overworked staff at such service sites mean that women often do not utilise these services. Also, many of the women do not have the financial resources (such as transport money) or time to utilise these services. Despite these very real challenges; I feel that participation in this project was, on some level, beneficial for the women.

The analysis chapters that follow are structured around three broad themes that emerged as central motifs of the women's collective memory. These themes were discussed continually and consistently throughout my research work (like persistent 'symptoms' of their collective imagination) and, as such, I had to pay attention to them. The first analysis chapter, *Culture, Femininity, and Woman 'Abuse': The Case of 'Mubobobo' Rape* unpacks women's descriptions of a type of 'rape from a distance' that happened 'back home' in their countries of origin. In the second chapter, *Crossing Borders In Africa: Collectively narrating the 'foreigner within'* I explore the women's construction of 'violated selves' while crossing physical borders during their travels from their countries of origin to South Africa. In the last analysis chapter, *Psycho-Social Borders and the "Imagined" Female 'Other': Collectively Constructing 'Selves' in the South African Context*, I analyse the African women migrants construction of a collective 'self' within the space of the South African context.

# **CHAPTER 5: RESULTS/DISCUSSION**

## **CULTURE, FEMININITY, AND WOMAN ‘ABUSE’: THE CASE OF ‘MUBOBOBO’ RAPE**

*“None of us know much about ourselves. We are all blindly trying to construct realities by the seats of our pants, all using the resources we have to the best of our abilities”*

*(Ronai, 1999: p. 155)*

### **INTRODUCTION**

*African cultures, femininity, and sexuality: setting the cultural context*

Sexuality, like gender, race and class, is a system of power in which the socio-political structures of power define what acceptable sexual behaviour is for women and men in our societies (Tamale, 2011b). Across most cultures and geographical locations (North and South) what is deemed ‘appropriate’ sexuality for women and ‘appropriate’ sexuality for men is strictly mediated through hegemonic sexual and gender ideologies (Mama, Pereira, Manuh, 2005). With few exceptions, throughout the African continent male promiscuity is valorised as a component of virility and competent masculinity. The open expression of sexual desire is a central feature of the social repertoire of a ‘powerful African man’ (Tamale, 2011b). On the other hand, women are taught that to be ‘good’ feminine sexual subjects they need to be sexually passive ‘objects’ who do not publically express sexual desire.

In most African cultures female sexuality is interwoven with ideologies of reproduction, domesticity, and heterosexual marriage arrangements (Gwandure, 2012; Tamale, 2011b); anything that falls within these frameworks is considered ‘good’ female sexuality and anything else is considered ‘bad’ female sexuality. For example, female sexual restraint-that is the reservation of sex for within marriage and for procreation- is promoted and this falls in line with ‘good’ female sexuality. Culturally women are taught that their bodies are objects that should serve the sexual agenda of their husbands, i.e. that they should prioritise their husband’s sexual satisfaction over their own sexual pleasure. In the Shona culture of Zimbabwe, for example, girls

are initiated sexually for the purpose of preparing them to find a male partner (Gwandure, 2012). Female expression of sexuality and desire, especially the expression of sex for enjoyment of sex, is rendered taboo and often highly stigmatised (Kambarami, 2006).

Akeyo, a Shona woman from Zimbabwe, says the following.

**Akeyo:** In my culture they used to say we need to get some medication for you to tone you down because your feelings are too high. It's not normal you know. It was like taboo. It will be like shocking like, "You started with a man what! [You initiated sex with a man!] You know. So it was a big deal. So if you are with a man, you expect him to start.

(Focus group discussion 5, page 34 of research transcript).

Akeyo conveys a sense of what it is like to be a gendered subject in the Shona culture of Zimbabwe. She uses past tense ('used to', 'was') as she is speaking about her culture in her home country of Zimbabwe from her current position living in South Africa. She conveys meaning that for Zimbabwean women to be considered as 'good' sexual subjects they need to practice sexual restraint. Akeyo says that in the Shona culture people will be shocked if they see a woman making a sexual advance on a man. She explicitly states that such behaviour is taboo and that in her culture the man is expected to be the agent who makes sexual advances. Akeyo suggests that women who act on their sexual desires by flirting with a man or by making sexual advances are not considered 'normal' ('their feelings are too high'), and that the common cultural view is that such women need to be controlled (They 'tone you down'). She also says that female sexual agents are considered pathological and in need of 'medication' that will control their feelings/hormones. Ultimately, through such discourses, Zimbabwean women are taught that to be considered 'normal' or 'appropriate' feminine subjects they should play ignorant about sex and that they should not openly express aspects of their sexuality (Mupotsa & Mhishi, 2008).

Broadly, women's sexuality is categorised according to two dichotomies- the 'good', sexually poor 'Madonna' that stands in contrast to the binary of the 'bad' sexually deviant 'Whore' (see MacDonald, 1995). When women step 'out of place' and behave as sexual agents or embrace

aspects of sexual pleasure ('Whore') then this often creates certain social anxieties on the part of powerful others (Tamale, 2011a). The sexuality of women who transgress cultural boundaries is often constructed as "bad", "filthy" or in some way as "morally corrupt/deviant" (Oakley, 1996; Hollibaugh, 1996). Such negative ideas about women's sexuality are deeply associated with an array of damaging emotions and reactions.

There are negative consequences for women who do not adhere to social rules of 'appropriate' femininity. In Zimbabwe women who move into certain male territories are often 'branded' with the label prostitute that connotes that they are 'unrespectable' women and they should not be trusted (Hungwe, 2006). At the most extreme social anxieties about women's sexuality translate into a visceral fear of women's agency and sexuality (Mama, Pereira, & Manuh, 2005). Such fear is evident when looking at the example of 'corrective' rape in Zimbabwe (Williams, 2010). This refers to the rape and mutilation of black lesbians by poor black males. Black lesbians are engaging active sexuality that challenges the dominant heterosexual norms and the men's actions signify a deep seated need to control women's bodies and sexuality as well as a 'fear' of women who do not conform to 'appropriate' sexual practices. It has been said that lesbians are raped in order to 'cure' them from their 'deviant' sexual orientation and, as such, these practices reflect an attempt to enforce dominant heterosexuality (Brown, 2012). In this way, women's bodies are also often treated as objects that need to be controlled.

It is through the negative consequences of going against cultural norms that women learn that their sexual desires are wrong and should not be expressed (Tamale, 2011b). McFadden (2003) aptly terms this process 'brutal socialisation' (p. 54). Through socio-cultural strictures and the threat of control/violence at the hands of males, women learn that it is safer to conceal what they know about their bodies and to lose touch with their embodied memories, especially sexualised memories. They learn that these sexual memories or desires are 'unacceptable' and they learn to consciously avoid such thoughts. Through a process of emotional osmosis many women may take on society's visceral fear of female sexuality as their own. As a result of this socially constructed fear of sexuality, many women suppress certain embodied feelings that are associated with sex, desire, and violation. Speaking about the African continent in particular, McFadden calls this the 'muting' (p. 50) of female sexual memory and instinct. The socially constructed fear of sexuality is often so insidious that it may shape women's conscious

memories-the content of what they remember about sexual pleasure or sexual violation, this in turn may shape a women's sexual subjectivity.

Women also often internalise the blame, unworthiness, and shame that are associated with the feminine body and these feelings/emotions may significantly affect the ways in which they experience themselves in the world (Herman, 1992). The suppression of the sexualised nature of their bodies denies women connection to their own bodies, and women become mere objects for men's pleasure. Such cultural scripts do not offer women much space to express the sexual nature of their bodies but at the same time within the context of such cultural taboos women *do* have knowledge about their bodies as sexualised vehicles. Women are aware of their feelings of sexual pleasure and desire and they are able to harness these embodied feelings in various ways (Tamale, 2005).

### **NARRATIVELY CULTIVATING "MUBOBOBO" RAPE**

During the initial collective biography workshops with the *Sisters for Sisters* members the women spoke about a phenomenon called "mubobobo" rape. They described this as an act by which men obtain special powers that enable them to have sexual intercourse with a woman without any physical contact. They defined "mubobobo" as a practice by which men use a magical muti which gives them the power to have sex with women from afar, without any physical contact. Muti refers to traditional medicine of Southern Africa. The substance is usually herbal in nature and it is prescribed by African traditional healers, known in the African language as 'Inyanga'. Many claim that certain types of muti can cure a variety of ailments and illnesses. There is also a dark/evil side of muti practice, or witchcraft, in Southern Africa by which muti is thought to be used to cause physical pain or even death. The women also referred to "mubobobo" as "rape from a distance" or "muti rape"<sup>9</sup>. The "mubobobo" storyline emerged as a central motif of the women's collective memory.

---

<sup>9</sup> The terms "mubobobo", 'muti rape', and 'rape from a distance' will be used interchangeably in this chapter.

I also gained information about “mubobobo” via the Zimbabwean media (accessed through online publications of community newspapers) and informal discussions with Zimbabweans at the University of the Free State<sup>10</sup>. “Mubobobo” is a topical subject in the Zimbabwean media, mostly in community-based publications. Reports highlight women accusing Zimbabwean men of the practice and informal acts of mob justice against male perpetrators. The fact that there are news reports about “mubobobo” incidents in Zimbabwean media and that Zimbabwean students at the University of the Free State spoke about such a phenomenon suggests “mubobobo’s” acceptance within the Zimbabwean culture. The Zimbabwean media has termed this violation the ‘African Bluetooth system’<sup>11</sup> and “The Bluetooth version of Rape”<sup>12</sup>. Others have described it as an electric current, “people can only see the consequences of mubobobo and not the electric current itself” (Gwandure, 2009: p. 77).

This “electrical current” or “wireless” metaphor suggests that “mubobobo” is characterised by some kind of elusive power or force, a connection between the male perpetrator and female victim that occurs across boundaries of space. This metaphor, however, conveys meaning that such a connection is not a mutually beneficial force for both parties. Rather, it suggests that the man controls this connection/force and the power moves in his direction; almost as if he is “drawing” something from the female victim.

The participants in my study described the act of “mubobobo” as occurring mostly in public spaces/places where anonymous people come together such as bus stops, train stations, market places, bathrooms where ladies do their laundry and other public ‘hotspots’. It is here, they say, that the “mubobobo” perpetrator observes different women and chooses a particular victim that suits his needs. “Mubobobo” has, however, also been described as happening to women in the privacy of their own home when they are sleeping in bed (see Gwandure, 2009).

---

<sup>10</sup> A Zimbabwean PhD student at the University of the Free State corroborated the fact that “mubobobo” is a recognised phenomenon in Zimbabwe. This conversation took place on the 4<sup>th</sup> April 2013 at the University of the Free State.

<sup>11</sup> My Zimbabwe.com. Binga man (35) arrested for using mubobobo (Bluetooth) (2011) Retrieved April 21, 2013, from <http://myzimbabwe.com/>

<sup>12</sup> The Financial Gazette. Mubobobo: The Bluetooth version of rape. (2014). Retrieved 26th February 2014, from <http://www.financialgazette.co.zw/mubobobo-the-bluetooth-version-of-rape/>

Interestingly, the women in my study discussed that a specific effect of this “rape from a distance” is that the female victim often experiences a pleasurable sensation in their body, as if they are having sexual intercourse<sup>13</sup>. These descriptions of “mubobobo” rape as characterised by arousal and feelings of physical pleasure sound contradictory. Scholars have made sense of this by drawing on the ways in which certain African cultures shape what women may know about their sexuality. Gwandure (2009), for instance, outlined that women from the Shona culture of Zimbabwe are subjected to dominant cultural discourses that restrict female sexuality and that convey meaning that sexual fantasies (such as ‘wet dreams’) can only be experienced by men. He argued that women rigidly take on such beliefs, and that this means that women are *unable* to make sense of their experiences of sexual pleasure or desire. As a result, says Gwandure (2009), women often interpret their experiences of sexual desire/pleasure as “mubobobo” (an unnatural occurrence due to some outside force).

Gwandure’s (2009) interpretation is problematic for a number of reasons. His views about women’s reflective capacity reflect a male perspective that resonates with misogynistic views about women. First and foremost, Gwandure’s (2009) argues that African women cannot interpret their sexual urges as sexual feelings and that women will always misinterpret their sexual feelings as something else (like “mubobobo”). Here he conveys meaning that African women are passive subjects who do not challenge the discourses of a sexually restrictive culture in any way. Such a view also does not take into account the varieties and morphing of different cultural expressions, even of the same culture, and the different ways in which women take up these changing hybrids and cultural values.

---

<sup>13</sup> **Chadamwari:** (during “mubobobo”) you can even dream of somebody having sex with you in your sleep. When you wake up, you find out your pants are wet or something like that. Jho, I have heard about it

(Focus group discussion 1, page 2 of research transcript)

**Akeyo:** You know (during “mubobobo”) your body would respond to the feeling it is nice like when you are having sex you are enjoying sex. It is nice, you like it even though you are not participating in the sex. But the feeling is good. It is not a bad feeling. It is a good sexual feeling and then when it is done you come. And you don’t know what is happening, you are still surprised.

(Focus group discussion1, page 36 of research transcript)

Furthermore, Gwandure's (2009) interpretation positions women as naïve about their own bodies and sexual and reproductive health matters. While this may sometimes be true, particularly in cultural contexts within which the expression of female sexuality is restricted and there is a lack of education about sexual and reproductive health, Gwandure (2009) does not leave room for an exploration of the multitude of other ways (such as intuitive and physical means) which women may find to make sense of these feelings. While we must acknowledge that some African women (and some women from other cultures) are bound by aspects of their culture which shape how they engage with their sexuality, it is also important to acknowledge that gendered and cultural subject positions are often very complex and women engage with their culture in very different ways. While cultural constraints limit women's ideas about sex and their exploration of their sexuality, many women are able to negotiate sexual agency from within and in opposition to certain cultural strictures (see Thompson, 2011).

The stories about the "mubobobo" phenomenon were completely outside the repertoire of my own cultural experience. Similar to what Rice (2009) has documented in her work on embodiment and subjectivity, my research process was shaped by aspects of my own subjectivity. My position of white, middle class women who is 'outside' of the women's African cultures meant that their stories of "mubobobo" ignited a spark of curiosity within me. I wanted to find out more about this 'strange' phenomenon. These stories emerged in the initial workshops and I shaped my data gathering methods in such a way that I could find out more about the women's perceptions of "mubobobo". I wove the topic of "mubobobo" into my data gathering topic structure and in the second phase of my data gathering I conducted a focus group discussion that was based solely on the topic of "rape from a distance".

It was difficult for me to make sense of their narratives as this "rape from a distance" is unlike any form of gender-based violence that I have heard about. My role vis-à-vis the participants was thus an exploratory one, rather than a co-constructive role that is common in collective biography work (see Davies & Gannon, 2006b). During my research I tried to understand the phenomenon that was new to me, and I asked the women questions that facilitated the generation of in-depth descriptions of the practice. Initially, due to my own experience of sexual abuse in childhood and also the bonds that I had developed with the women, I expected my role to be more co-constructive because of our shared experiences of violation. This was, however, not the

case and the difference between us, i.e. the fact that I am not located within an African culture and they were, was prominent throughout our engagements.

According to Campbell (2003), memory and the self are historically braided concepts. She warns that it is possible to fall into the trap of attacking the selfhood of others by invalidating what they remember and thus undermining them as rememberers. With this in mind, I wanted to interpret these stories along the lines of my feminist goals to privilege the knowledge and culture of the women and not be strictly guided by my own rigid Westernised ideas about femininity, the body and gendered violation.

#### *The micro-context of the collective biography workshop*

The narratives in this analysis chapter are drawn from one particular group discussion that was based on “rape from a distance”; participants included four black Zimbabwean women of the Shona culture (Akeyo, Chadamwari, Elinah and Cheney). These women are part of the *Sisters for Sisters* group because they have experienced a multitude of physical and sexual violence against their bodies. The discussion was held in a private room on the premises of a church in Cape Town and was one hour and forty five minutes in duration. The participants and I had established close connections during my research work and the atmosphere was open and comfortable.

Akeyo was twenty six years old and married with a small child of four years. At the time of the discussion she had been living in South Africa for eight years. Akeyo said that she came to South Africa because of the dire economic situation in Zimbabwe. She was working a part time job. She had been a member of the *Sisters for Sisters* group for two years and she was involved in the planning and implementation of many of the group’s activities. Akeyo frequently discussed the pain that she experienced from watching the physical and emotional abuse of her sister at the hands of her sister’s intimate partner.

Chadamwari was thirty one years old and divorced. Chadamwari was also one of the active group members and she had been involved with the group for two years. At the time of the discussion she was unemployed and actively seeking work. Chadamwari had been living in

South Africa for five years and, because of a lack of finances, she had to leave her young boy in her home country. Chadamwari described experiencing emotional abuse at the hand of her former husband back in Zimbabwe whereby he would go out drinking and philandering, leaving her alone to care for their small baby.

The other two participants were slightly older. Elinah was forty four years old and divorced from her abusive husband. At the time of the discussion she had been living in South Africa for four years and she says that she came to the country to look for a job. She had been involved with the *Sisters for Sisters* group for one year. She was employed earning a minimal wage as a domestic worker. During our discussions Elinah described in detail the many incidents of violation that she experienced on public transport, both at home in Zimbabwe and in South Africa. These experiences include acts of voyeurism and men touching her in inappropriate ways. She describes these experiences as being ‘psychologically damaging’ and as significantly affecting her sense of self.

Cheney was forty three years old and was also divorced. At the time of the discussion Cheney had been living in South Africa for three years and she had been a member of the *Sisters for Sisters* group for one year. She had three adult children and was also employed as a domestic worker. Cheney married when she was sixteen and by the age of twenty three she had three children. She says that she was not happy with marrying and having children so young but her financial circumstances meant that she was dependent on her husband. Cheney spent years with her husband who was emotionally and sexually abusive. She spoke about the fact that he used to bring girlfriends home to their house and when he did have sex with her he did so in an emotionally detached way, as if she was a mere object. She says that these experiences have left her hating sex and avoiding sexual intimacy.

Above I have outlined the various ways in which certain African cultural scripts may sometimes hinder the possibilities that women have to make sense of sex, desire, and sexual violation but at the same time women do have knowledge about the sexual nature of their bodies. In the analysis that follows I analyse the participants’ stories of “mubobobo” in light of the trouble that these women may have of expressing aspects of their embodied memories-such as sexual feelings/desires, and memories of sexual violation. I explore how the *Sisters for Sisters* members

collectively transform their past in terms of both their victimhood and their agency. The analysis is structured around the three theoretical questions of the study: 1.) How do the women transform the past within this collective space? 2.) What kinds of identities do they construct? 3.) What psychological function could these particular ways of remembering have for the women's sense of themselves in the world?

I explore the relationship between perceptions/experiences of violation through "rape from a distance" and the complex dynamics of suppression of sexual feelings in the context of a culture in which the expression of female sexual agency is taboo. The following narratives are complex and varied and they hold important insights into the ways in which the women drew on the "mubobobo" practice to construct particular kinds of (violated) female identities. As I will show, these collective narratives opened up new ways of thinking about women's expression of sexuality, sexual desire and sexual violation and illuminated the possibilities that such collective spaces can offer for the negotiation of various kinds of (agentic) identities.

### **"YOU ARE REALLY NOT SURE WHO TO TRUST ANYMORE": REFLEXIVELY NARRATING EMBODIED MEMORIES OF ABUSE**

#### *A "whispering" return of sexual desire: Cheney's voice*

Cheney is forty three years old and has been divorced from her husband for a number of years. She experienced a long and traumatic relationship that was characterised by frequent emotional and sexual abuse at her partner's hands. Cheney narrated that her husband used to bring home women that he would sleep with in their family home. She said that the most painful experiences for her during these years were when her husband had sex with her in a way that was completely devoid of emotion, sometimes having sex with her while he read the newspaper or refusing to look at her when he had sex with her. Cheney described these experiences as a form of rape- a violation of her sexualised body and mind. She says that these experiences left her hating sex and avoiding sexual intimacy and that, to this day, she does not engage in sex. In the discussion about "mubobobo" rape she says the following:

**Cheney:** But what I know is in a dream you can have like those funny (dreams) like us maybe we get that we have been sexually active yes. But maybe now we are talking three or four years without it (sex). But once in a while we would have that kind of dream and then those are called wet dreams (S4S group: Ja, ja, yes). But to think it was someone using you (“mubobobo”) or it’s just a dream.....

(Focus Group Discussion 1, page 28 of research transcript)

Cheney’s narrative above reflects a widely accepted consequence of rape, which is that some women lose their desire for sex. Cheney’s narrative suggests a weakened sense of self and devalued sexual subjectivity that could have been caused by the years of sexual and emotional abuse that she experienced. However, women are also able to reclaim a positive sense of self after abuse (see for example Hydèn, 2005) and they may slowly regain their desire for sex. The ‘wet dream’ that Cheney refers to suggests this “whispering” return of her sexual desire (‘you can have that funny dream’). We see this “whispering” return of her sexual desire through the way that she linguistically positions herself as a sexual subject in the world. She says, ‘you can have those funny (dreams)’ and ‘we get that (‘wet dreams’) we have been sexually active yes’. Her use of language suggests that she is clearly aware of the physical sexual pleasure and desire that she experiences and she can interpret these feelings as sexual feelings.

Cheney’s narrative conveys a refreshing perspective in that it illuminates an example of an alternative and creative strategy that women may use to express aspects of their sexual subjectivity when they have experienced abuse that may have reduced their sexual desire and when they may not have expressed such feelings for a significant amount of time. While the dominant scripts of the Shona culture may not offer Cheney space to express certain elements of her sexual desire/enjoyment, her account represents an intrinsic knowledge about the sexual nature of her body. Her narrative seems to contradict Gwandure’s (2009) view that African women will always interpret their ‘wet dreams’ as “mubobobo” because their perspective is rigidly moulded by rigid cultural discourses that say that women cannot experience such a phenomenon. However, Cheney does not proclaim her sexual pleasure in a bold, definitive way and her narrative reflects a sense of her apparent discomfort with expressing these aspects of her sexuality.

Firstly, she terms wet dreams ‘those funny dreams’, here she conveys meaning that wet dreams are peculiar to her, it is something that she does not classify as really normal, per se. Her use of language, “funny dreams” suggests that this is something that she is uncomfortable with. She also situates her experience of ‘wet dreams’ as occasional (‘once in a while’). Her narrative conveys meaning that women like herself, who have been sexually active but have not had sex for a number of years, can and do experience ‘wet dreams’, but that such dreams are not experienced on a regular basis.

Cheney uses the collective ‘we’, seen through her statements, ‘*we*<sup>14</sup> have been sexually active’ and ‘maybe now *we* are talking three or four years without sex’. The use of the pronoun ‘we’ suggests a sense of struggle to own the experience as her individual subjective experience. It seems as if she needs to “dilute” or neutralise her statement in collective terms. She validates female sexual subjectivity and desire as being part of *their* biological repertoire (for the participants in the discussion and for Shona women from Zimbabwe); it is not a complete validation of her own individual experience. It seems as if Cheney is not able to embrace the experience of ‘wet dreams’ fully, but by situating the experiences as ‘their’ experience then, as a group of Shona women, they are all implicated.

Furthermore, in the last line of the excerpt she says, ‘But to think it was someone using you [in other words, “mubobobo” rape] or it’s just a dream’. This comment destabilises what Cheney said before about female sexual subjectivity and ‘wet dreams’ and she creates a sense of ambiguity. Ultimately Cheney’s use of language suggests a complex intersection between her awareness of her sexual pleasure and a strong self-monitoring in which she is pulling herself back from expressing this pleasure. This is much more complex than Gwandure (2009) suggests. As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, for various reasons it is often very difficult for women of the Shona culture to express aspects of their sexuality and desire. We see that even while Cheney expresses aspects of female sexuality (here the ‘wet dream’) cultural restrictions still maintain a pernicious hold. It seems as if Cheney has deeply internalised aspects of her culture that women’s expression of their sexuality is wrong and ‘bad’. These cultural messages seem to be so deeply ingrained that a kind of ‘culture within’ is operating to monitor this talk, not merely the outside culture.

---

<sup>14</sup> Italic emphasis added for the purposes of this discussion.

Such ambivalence is a common element of stories that emerge from collective biography work (see Davies & Gannon, 2006b). Davies and colleagues say that the subject goes through mo(ve)ments as she catches herself in the act of being subjected while at the same time struggles to deconstruct this position in any way possible. “She is above all, in process, vulnerable to inscriptions that may be opaque to her and yet developing the powers to make the discourses and their inscriptive powers both visible and revisable” (Davies et al., 2006e). Cheney’s narrative sheds light on certain ‘cracks’ in the dominant cultural discourses, spaces of opportunity by which we see glimpses of Cheney imagining herself differently.

According to my interpretation, it is through the “mubobobo” narrative and the resulting ambiguity that Cheney can express this sense of female sexual subjectivity, albeit in an unstable, almost contradictory way. The “mubobobo” narrative may be a more acceptable cultural tool by which to ‘explain’ the cause of women’s sexual pleasure and desire (remember the women described that sexual pleasure was a known ‘effect’ of the “mubobobo” violation). It is significant that this focus group discussion based on “rape from a distance” was the first time throughout all my collective biography discussions that these women narrated aspects of their sexual pleasure. It seemed as if the “mubobobo” cultural narrative offered her a means to express aspects of female sexuality and desire that may not be so easily expressed in another setting.

So, according to my interpretation, Cheney uses the “mubobobo” cultural narrative in a way that allows her to express something significant. It provided her the opportunity to express her “whispering” return of sexual desire and her acknowledgement of her own sexual subjectivity—things which may have been silenced by African cultural discourses about ‘appropriate’ female sexuality. Memory is never a clear representation of the original act and traumatic memory, in particular, often involves a fragmentation, or splitting, of the event and the feeling that is associated with the event. However, the body often remembers more and the feeling is often vivid in the ‘bodies’ mind’. Due to her repeated sexual abuse at the hands of her husband, Cheney may have emotionally ‘buried’ any sexual memories as it may have been too painful to recall the feelings associated with her sexuality and her sexual life. In other words, she may not have the psychological or linguistic tools to express such memories as they may have been associated with deep pain and trauma. These memories may have been imprinted onto Cheney’s body, becoming what has been referred to as embodied memories (Davies & Gannon, 2006a).

With the help of the “mubobobo” narrative we see some of these memories begin to re-appear. By slowly re-introducing such embodied emotions and feelings into her life narrative Cheney may be able to engage with these feelings in a way that reduces them of their complexity and makes them more manageable. She is able to begin to make sense of what I call the ‘uninterpretable known’. Davies et al. (2006e) call this ‘deconstruction’ (p. 171) and say that it is a process through which women break down aspects of their embodied memories and work towards making sense of how these experiences reflect their gendered ‘reality’ in terms of dominant power structures. This surfacing of ‘hidden’ memories may have particular positive implications for Cheney’s sense of self in the world. She can situate her trauma as part of her life narrative and she can begin to engage with previously ‘concealed’ aspects of her sexual subjectivity. Such acknowledgement of traumatic memory is crucial for ‘moving on’ towards a transformation of ‘self’ and one’s role in the world (Lamb, 1999). Similar findings have been documented in other parts of Africa.

For instance in Zanzibar, Thompson (2011) studied women’s agency and their narratives of supernatural sex. Thompson’s (2011) work resonates with my interpretation of Cheney’s “mubobobo” narrative. The context of Thompson’s (2011) study is one in which rules of Islam abide with ideals about female sexual discretion that ultimately hinder women’s discursive agency around sex. In her paper, *“Zanbari women’s discursive and sexual agency: violating gendered speech prohibitions through talk about supernatural sex”* Thompson (2011) outlined women’s talk about a phenomenon called “popobawa”. The “popobawa” phenomenon was described by her participants as a form of witchcraft that is embodied by a mystical bat like creature that is believed to attack and sexually violate women and men in certain areas of Zanzibar. The narratives of the participants in Thompson’s (2011) study focused on graphic details of the sex act with this spirit. Thompson (2011) interpreted the women’s talk about this supernatural sex as a means by which the women were able to violate gendered speech prohibitions and to critique dominant knowledge about female sexuality. She argued that the women’s talk was transformative in the sense that they were able to position themselves as discursive and sexual agents through their talk about “popobawa”. Ultimately, Thompson argued that the shared resource of the “popobawa” narrative gave the women a culturally sanctioned opportunity to talk about sex within an environment where the open expression of female sexuality is taboo.

The parallels between Thompson's (2011) work and the current analysis are evident. I interpret "mubobobo" as a shared cultural resource that offers women an element of ambiguity in their accounts. It is through this ambiguity that women can express certain (sexualised) embodied memories that may have been concealed due to trauma and certain cultural restrictions. The next section of the analysis examines Akeyo's account of the presence of "mubobobo" in her life.

*"It will always stay here in my head": Akeyo's voice*

At the time of our discussions Akeyo was twenty six years old, and married with one young child. She did not disclose any experiences of abuse at the hands of her intimate partner but she highlighted the many everyday incidents of woman abuse (including other women's experiences and stories of "mubobobo") that she witnessed as a young adult in Zimbabwe. Akeyo was a key informant about the muti rape practice.

Throughout the focus group discussion the women narrated a sense of the ever present possibility of "mubobobo" rape. I wanted to explore the ways in which the women 'experienced' a world in which, for them, "rape from a distance" was always a possibility. The following dialogue ensued.

**Samantha:** And for women who haven't experienced it yet but they know about it? Does it affect their lives? Can it affect their lives in any way?

**Akeyo:** I can answer that because I lived around it but I never directly experienced it. Maybe I did and I didn't feel it I don't know because my grandfather had a lot of muti stories [there were a lot of stories about him using muti].

(Focus group discussion 1, page 58 of research transcript)

Earlier in the discussion Akeyo gave a rich contextual outline of her childhood visits to her family farm in Zimbabwe. She said that her grandfather on her mother's side utilised many different kinds of mutis. In particular, she said that he used a special muti called "chikwambo" that helped him to magically cultivate his crops at night without any extra manpower. She

discussed that her mother constantly warned her against the dangers of muti and that from a young age she was taught that she was vulnerable to muti violations. She says that she was constantly aware of the dangers of muti when she went to visit her grandfather's farm.

In the extract above Akeyo says that she was exposed to "mubobobo" incidents while growing up in Zimbabwe but that she was never actually violated in this way ('I never directly experienced it'). She then contradicts this statement by saying, 'maybe I did and I didn't feel it'. Akeyo uses the example of her grandfather to position herself as always potentially vulnerable to "mubobobo". Akeyo says that her grandfather could have violated her through "mubobobo" because there were many stories circulating about his use of muti ('I don't know because my grandfather had a lot of muti stories'). However, she says that she cannot say for sure if such a thing happened and there is a sense of uncertainty and doubt in her account.

Below Akeyo elaborates on the elusive nature of "mubobobo".

**Akeyo:** He (the "mubobobo" perpetrator) will just be walking simply or maybe just look at you with the eyes. That's what they claim like it is something that we just grew up hearing and something that maybe happened around us you know. So they will just sit and look at you, maybe with the eyes and then they are busy. So I think it has got levels that maybe they are busy undressing you and so it could be a psychological thing. You know undressing you while they are staring at you.

(Focus group discussion, page 23 of research transcript)

Akeyo says that she was taught that "mubobobo" perpetrators can violate through the guise of normal actions such as 'simply' walking near to you or they could 'just look at you with the eyes'. So every glance from a man and every lingered look, according to what she has heard, could be an example of "mubobobo". Through this type of narration, Akeyo helps us understand her confusion about whether her grandfather violated her in this way. She implies that it is often hard to identify outright as these types of perpetrators often utilise subtle extensions of normal everyday behaviour.

Akeyo suggests that this is a ‘psychological thing’ for the perpetrator, as in, they are taking what they need from a woman simply through the act of observation (‘busy undressing you’). Here she conveys a visceral feeling that women may experience if they sense that a man is zoning in on them ‘with the eyes’, it seems to be a feeling that one is caged in by the presence of the man. This resonated with a sense of my own gut feelings that I have experienced when men’s presence or a lingered glance feels like a violation. This may happen anywhere and at the hands of unexpected men but it is a violation that often cannot be proved and it is extremely difficult to put such feelings into words.

The participants stated that many women victims do not feel any physical or emotional effects of “mubobobo” and they therefore do not know that they are being ‘raped from a distance’. Cheney, for example says, ‘Some will just come and finish with you without you aware of anything’<sup>15</sup>. They say that many women experience funny feelings or the sexual effects of “mubobobo” but they can often not definitely pinpoint what is going on. In other words, they say that the experience of “mubobobo” usually has blurred boundaries and is inconclusive, leaving women with many questions (‘what happened?’, ‘did something really happen?’). Within the context of the women’s narratives of the obscure/visceral, ‘invisible’ and very often ‘indescribable’ nature of “mubobobo” we may understand Akeyo’s lack of ability to define if or how something happened.

Women’s capacity to define and make sense of their experiences of abuse and violation plays an important role in their development of a gendered sense of self as well as their process of healing from abuse (Lamb, 1999). If Akeyo does not know if her grandfather raped her “from a distance”, then she cannot position herself as ‘true victim’ and this means that she has limited subject positions with which to situate her current self. That is, if she cannot definitely say that her grandfather violated her through “mubobobo” then she cannot situate this trauma as part of her life narrative and identity and therefore she cannot position herself as ‘survivor’-processes that are central to women’s recovery from abuse (Enander & Holmberg, 2008; Wuest & Meritt-Gray, 2001). She can only ever position herself in the precarious position of ‘possible victim’.

---

<sup>15</sup> Focus group discussion 1, page 21 of research transcript

Although Akeyo narrates that she ‘does not know’ if she did indeed experience such a violation, she does, however, narrate a complex picture of the ways in which the ever present *possibility* of such violence has shaped her world. She says,

**Akeyo:** Um it (“mubobobo”) makes one feel scared, it makes you feel very scared. Like I am saying I don’t know maybe my grandfather slept with me (**Elinah:** Mmm) you know and if I look at my grandfather the relationship between us, how I feel about him you know the love I have for him as my mother’s father. You know it *disturbs* relationships, especially family relationships it disturbs a lot. It gives like confusion and conflict and you know hatred. It affects a lot. You really are not sure who to trust anymore.

(Focus group discussion 1, page 58 of research transcript)

Above Akeyo conveys a sense of the emotional complexities that are characteristic of a life in which “mubobobo” is always a possibility. She says that this sense of her own vulnerability has deeply affected her psyche, particularly in terms of her sense of self in relation to others in the world. Firstly, she says that the possibility that she was violated through “mubobobo” makes her feel ‘scared’. Here she conveys meaning that she constantly experiences negative feelings that are largely tied in to her sense of her own vulnerability in the world. She positions her grandfather as powerful possible perpetrator and herself as powerless and ‘fearful’ possible victim; she narrates herself as powerless in relation to her all powerful grandfather. Here she aligns her ‘experience’ according to dominant scripts of ‘abused’ women as ‘fearful’ and ‘powerless’ in relation to male abusers (see Lamb, 1999). It is through this description of her own powerlessness, as a gendered being, and her grandfather’s power, as the head of the household, that she conveys a sense of her vulnerability to “mubobobo”. The example of her grandfather makes her account more extreme -if Akeyo ‘fears’ her grandfather in the traditional family setting (family members should, in theory, be safe people) then this brings home the point about the ever present and insidious nature of “mubobobo” and her (and other women’s) chronic and far ranging vulnerability.

Importantly, Akeyo narrates a sense of her connection with her grandfather (‘the relationship between us, ‘the love that I have for him’) that, she says, occurs naturally because he is her mother’s father. She emphasises the significance of their relationship and I gained a sense that

she was talking about a very unique kind of love. She seems to be talking about something more than “mubobobo” here. She suggests that the close bond that she had with her grandfather has ‘disturbed’ family relationships (‘it disturbs relationships, especially family relationships’) and that such a bond may have also disturbed her own sense of self in the world (‘it disturbs a lot’, ‘it affects a lot’). Her narrative suggests that her close love for her grandfather has caused confusion and conflict and even feelings of hatred among family members. Akeyo seems to be trying to convey the substance of this love relationship with her grandfather and the complexity of emotions that this relationship stirred up for significant others in her family circle. However, apparent in her talk is a deep undercurrent of something that she is *not* saying outright.

I wondered what the meaning was behind Akeyo’s narration. Akeyo says that her consciousness about potential violation was instilled within her from a young age and due to the concerns of other family members (‘That’s what they claim’, ‘it is something that we just grew hearing’). She suggests that her relationship with her grandfather was viewed with distrust by other family members. She also conveys that the emotional energy surrounding her relationship with this older male family member was a negative one that destabilised her sense of self in the word and her trust of those people closest to her (‘You really are not sure who to trust anymore’).

I wondered if her narrative could reflect concerns that were communicated in various ways by female family members. I also wondered if Akeyo’s narrative could represent a kind of feeling of vulnerability that has been instilled in her from other female family members through intergenerational transmission. Such a feeling of ‘*self as vulnerable*’ could have been part of the experience of women in her family in the context of the patriarchal rule at the Zimbabwean farm. A sense of vulnerability is necessarily tied to a sense of injustice about one’s ‘powerless’ position in relation to men, a sense that it is unfair that one occupies a social and material body that is always under threat of being hurt or abused.

Women family members could have communicated this feeling in nonverbal and emotionally energetic ways that would not be seen as acts of male defiance, or particularly, defiance of the grandfather. They would have most likely been careful not to overstep the boundaries of the grandfather’s patriarchal rule within the context of the family farm in Zimbabwe. Such a feeling of ‘*self as vulnerable*’ could have been transmitted across generations of women in her family-as

a bond between the women which also serves as a protection mechanism in terms of how this sense of self is woven into ways of relating to the world and protecting their young.

Could Akeyo be insidiously conveying her exposure to such a collective consciousness, her absorption of this consciousness at a young age, and the resulting effect that such a consciousness has on her sense of self and the ways that she relates to others. Such a consciousness, while the seed may have been planted by others through social messages when she was young, may have been richly cultivated throughout Akeyo's lifetime - her witnessing of men's brutal treatment of women that she spoke about and, particularly, her witnessing of the inhumane abuse of her older sister who contracted HIV/AIDS from her husband who used to beat her and philander with other women. When Akeyo was a teenager she nursed her sister to death.

It almost seems as if Akeyo looks back on an idealised relation of love with her grandfather from innocent eyes. We see through Akeyo's account that her love for her grandfather was contradicted by the negative ways that others reacted to this love. I wondered about the nature of Akeyo's relationship with her grandfather. Her narrative does indeed leave room for an interpretation that the relationship was of a sexual/abusive nature. In this sense the concerns and distrust of the family members would have a very valid base. These women may have been powerless to influence the relationship because of her grandfather's all powerful position as head of the family homestead.

According to such an interpretation Akeyo is able to narrate the emotional context ('confusing', 'distrust', 'hatred) that emerged as a result of this relationship with her grandfather. She can also frame the relationships as potentially abusive through the terms of "mubobobo" ("mubobobo" makes one feel scared, it makes you feel very scared. Like I am saying I don't know maybe my grandfather slept with me'). However, Akeyo may be unable to narrate more about this relationship and what may have happened (physical sexual abuse?) with her grandfather at the family homestead in Zimbabwe. Such a narrative silence could be caused by the deficits of traumatic memory as time has gone past. It could also be caused by a certain experience of shame felt on Akeyo's part-shame that may often be associated with memories of her

relationship with her grandfather because of Akeyo's felt complicity in the relationship; a relationship which the other female family members seemed to not approve of.

Below Akeyo elaborates on the ways in which this sense of 'fear' and vulnerability shapes the ways in which she is able to respond to the social world.

**Akeyo:** Even some of my mother's brothers, people who just do muti, even if I get a wet dream I will hurt him for no good reason I will suspect him and you know once I suspect someone did something evil to me there is something behind my head even if I don't want to accept it like here [in my mind]. But it will always stay here in my (**Chadamwari:** In your consciousness) in my head you know and maybe that will affect my kids, maybe my child's relationship with my uncle's kids. You know like at home we really like draw in um family relationships you know like far relationships we would draw them close ja. Extended families we keep them. So that would affect maybe to an extent that my child would never visit my uncle because I don't I hardly talk about him because I am not sure what he is up to. Even if he didn't do it ("mubobobo") to me, I have a girl child, maybe he will do it to my child you know. So it does it affected me a lot. You know.

(Focus group discussion 1, page 58 of research transcript).

Akeyo paints a picture of the ways in which her feelings of vulnerability to "mubobobo", which have been transmitted to her through close family and acquaintances, have been carried over into other aspects of her life. She describes that her constant sense of vulnerability to this kind of violation significantly affects the core of her identity-as woman, mother, and family member. This reflects a continuation of the intergenerational transmission of the feeling of '*self as vulnerable*'. Specifically Akeyo narrates her suspicion and mistrust of her mother's brothers who use muti. She says that if she experiences sexual urges ('a wet dream') then she will suspect that it is one of these men violating her through "mubobobo". She explains that her mother's brothers are people who 'use muti' and therefore they have the power to do to women what they wish.

Through her narrative she represents a sense of her own 'fear' that 'exists' because of these men's capacity to exert power and control over her body and her mind. Akeyo says that her suspicion that one of these men has violated her causes something in her consciousness, a visceral feeling/shadow lurking ('something behind my head') that lingers on - an imprint, per say, that stays with her for a long while ('It will always stay here in my head'). This reflects a sense of her ever-present consciousness of her vulnerability in relation to these male family members. She says that such imprints on her consciousness affect the way that she relates to others. She also narrates a sense of ambiguity about her suspicions/feelings/emotions. Her choice of words conveys meaning that these feelings are intricately connected to her body and her sexuality. She says that if she experiences a 'wet dream' she will hurt these men, 'for no good reason'. Here her use of language suggests a sense that her suspicions may often not have solid explainable ground, or proof that she can easily identify or narrate.

Akeyo focuses on her concern about her child's vulnerability to male muti users. Her statement 'even if he didn't do it to me' suggests that even though she may not have had a direct experience of violation at her uncle's hands, that every man is a possible perpetrator and could potentially cause harm to her child. She narrates that the possibility of violence and her 'fear' of her daughter getting harmed has affected the ways in which she behaves towards such males (here her uncle). In particular she mentions that she engages in avoidance strategies. She keeps her daughter away from her uncle because she is 'not sure what he is up to', and there is always the possibility that he will harm her child. She also describes controlling the indirect exposure that her child has to her uncle, she says that she does this through limiting the extent to which her daughter receives information about this man ('I don't hardly talk about him').

Akeyo describes that she has the capacity to engage in strategies that may help to protect her daughter from male family members but at the same time her narrative conveys a sense of deep powerlessness and helplessness. The child's exposure to potential harm could threaten Akeyo's sense of self as a good mother (carer and protector). If her daughter is exposed to "mubobobo" it may be more difficult for Akeyo to protect her than if her daughter experienced other physical forms of abuse such as physical rape, molestation, or beating. If physical or sexual forms of abuse

occurred Akeyo may be able to identify what is happening to her daughter or even catch the perpetrator in action. The mystical, complicated and largely psychological nature of “mubobobo”-features of the violation that the women have outlined above-may mean that in line with the “mubobobo” cultural script a mother may be completely unaware that their child is being violated in this way.

At the beginning of the excerpt Akeyo says that people of the Shona culture draw family members ‘close’. She also says, ‘extended families we keep them’. Here she conveys a sense of the value that is attached to family connections in the Shona culture ‘at home’ in Zimbabwe. This resonates with a general African emphasis on the collective and the importance placed on the maintenance of family ties (see Mkhize, 2004).

Akeyo’s narrative suggests a conflict between the cultural pressures to maintain family ties on the one hand and on the other hand her responsibility as mother who should protect her child. Here Akeyo discusses that she ‘chooses’ an identity of ‘good mother’ who has the responsibility to protect her daughter over and above her sense of a responsibility to maintain connections with her family collective. This ‘choice’ does not come without tensions. Akeyo mentions, for example, that her sense of vulnerability has ‘affected me a lot’. She connotes a sense that her experience of herself as a vulnerable woman in the world has led to her engaging in certain types of actions and that the consequences of these actions have largely been damaging to her social self. Here her narrative resonates with ideas that victimisation does not mark a victim in any kind of unilateral way of cause and effect. Rather, as Lamb (1996) suggests, “the way that a person reacts and responds to her victimisation [her actions and reactions] also transforms, creates, and marks her” (p. 129).

Akeyo’s avoidance strategies that she adopts in order to protect her daughter may in turn cause trouble for her sense of self as ‘appropriate cultural subject (she is not able to maintain certain family ties). This is reflective of the double bind that many women are caught up in and the pressures that women face when they deal with the daily challenges of the entrenched and often unspoken dark family secrets when dominant

male family members violate daughters, wives, sisters, and nieces. Her narrative speaks to broader questions of how African women who suspect abuse can protect their children in a culture in which the value of family ties is of utmost importance and the role of men as protectors is respected. How can women maintain a sense of self-worth in this context?

Akeyo positions herself as reflexive agent who is aware of gender dynamics and the reality of potential gendered violation. She draws on the identity of ‘good mother’ that needs to protect her child, an identity that she would not be able to achieve if she allowed her child to be exposed to the male family members. Through her narrative we gain a sense of the many challenges that women go through, particularly the struggle for survival and the sacrifice to protect their children. Such an emphasis on the role of mother was a re-occurring theme throughout the collective biography sessions.

Women’s investment in the role of ‘good mother’ has also been found to be a central component of their justifications for leaving abuse and contradicting collective notions of romantic love and marriage (see van Schalkwyk, Boonzaier, & Gobodo-Madikizela, 2014).

In the narrative above Akeyo sheds insight into her subjective experience from the position of a woman who is socially situated within a matrix of cultural and patriarchal strictures and practices that shape her sense of self in the world. She highlights some of the complexities including the challenges and the conflicts that women have to deal with in a world where “mubobobo” is always a possibility. She expresses a profound sense of her vulnerability to “mubobobo” and the ways in which this sense of her own weakness in relation to “mubobobo” perpetrators has shaped her world and her behaviour.

When we consider Akeyo’s narrative of the presence of “mubobobo” in her life as tightly situated within socio-cultural scripts of femininity, sexuality, and female victimisation, it is possible to theorise about her narrative in different ways, beyond the obvious elements of her account. These socio-cultural scripts mean that much of women’s past experiences (sexualised and other) borders on the unspeakable. Many

women do not have the language, the psychological resources, or the correct social spaces (that offers complete acceptance of their story) within which to express their embodied memories of trauma. My thoughts when Akeyo told her story were as follows: 1.) Could Akeyo's story represent something other than an experience of rape from a distance? 2.) Could the "muti rape" cultural concept function as a narrative tool whereby Akeyo is able to express elements of her traumatic memory that have been imprinted onto her (sexualised) body and mind? And, assuming that this interpretation holds some weight, 3.) What function could this "mubobobo" story have for Akeyo's sense of self in the world?

With regards to the first question- 'could Akeyo's story represent something other than an experience of rape from a distance?', I must briefly reiterate the theoretical frameworks that inform my analysis of the 'self' as well as the epistemological frameworks that shape my ideas about memory. Firstly, from a feminist poststructuralist theoretical viewpoint, one's narratives do not represent any static 'truth' that lies behind the words (Weedon, 1987). In other words, language is not seen as a transparent tool through which we can gain access to any objective facts about one's existence. Secondly, I do not adhere to any kind of forensic models of memory. Rather, following Haaken (1999), I draw on transformative models of memory in that I consider memories as reconstructed differently in different social contexts in different ways according to what the narrator wants to achieve.

From this perspective the information that Akeyo narratively displays through her words and emotional contextualisation may not represent any actual "mubobobo" events that lie behind this story. It is not relevant from my current analysis if in fact Akeyo did experience "mubobobo" at the hands of her grandfather, or at the hands of any other family member. Although narratives may not always convey cold facts about what happened, they do provide insight into the construction of self through language and this in turn conveys meaning about one's subjective experience, or the *feeling* of inhabiting the social world (see Davies & Gannon, 2006). I interpret Akeyo's narrative as a crucial tool through which she can convey meaning about aspects of her subjective experience as a gendered being in the world that is vulnerability to male sexual abuse.

Within the powerful atmosphere of Akeyo's telling, I began to intuitively sense something underlying Akeyo's linguistic expression of "mubobobo". She seemed to be expressing an intuition of the past-a presence- that she possibly did not have the language to express outright. Let me briefly reiterate a few themes from Akeyo's account to illustrate my point. Firstly, Akeyo narrates a sense of her 'fear', 'powerlessness' and 'helplessness' as a woman/mother in the world. She says that she experiences uncertainty and doubt; her experience/s are characterised, she says, by blurred definitional boundaries. She describes that her feelings of vulnerability to "mubobobo" are like a constant heavy, dark presence hanging over her head, in her consciousness. She says that this visceral feelings/shadow affects the core of her self-seen through her description of her avoidance strategies, 'disturbed' relationships, and the hatred and confusion that she feels towards certain men.

Importantly, Akeyo chooses to linguistically convey a sense of her deep seated sense of vulnerability; she does this by positioning herself as powerless in relation to males within the "mubobobo" cultural script (the presence of "mubobobo" in her life). Akeyo's narrative of her sense of vulnerability to "mubobobo" and the associated uncertainty, 'fear', and suspicion of men struck me on an emotional level. These themes seemed to be common elements of women's general experiences of living as women in a patriarchal world. The content of her account resonates with my own feelings of vulnerability and possibly the experiences of many other women; feelings that stem from our position as women in a world where we are always vulnerable to abuse at the hands of men.

The feelings that are associated with everyday vulnerability are often very difficult for women to communicate and interpret. Traumatic memory has a very unique quality in the sense that it is often imprinted on women's bodies in non-narrative, intuitive forms. Such feelings/emotions are often 'locked up' because women do not have the linguistic resources to express these things outright. In other words, these memories do not meet certain social standards of what constitutes 'truth' or 'comprehensibility' (Culbertson, 1995: p. 169). There are also many socio-cultural strictures that contribute to the silencing of women's memories of violation; Culbertson (1995) calls these 'cultural silencers' (p. 170).

Culturally, there is also little space for women to discuss aspects of their everyday oppression and sense of vulnerability in the world as these memories/feelings often do not fit the definition of abuse-they are not extreme enough, they do not show marks on the body and so forth. So, many women remain silent about their memories because they may believe that their recollection

of the traumatic events does not fit existing schemas of trauma or they fear that they do not remember appropriately in terms of facts and coherence. In other words, they may fear that their narratives will not be believed (Culbertson, 1995).

The association of female sexuality and the female body with negative imagery is another reason that women may mute their feelings of vulnerability. To narrate a sense of your own vulnerability is risking positioning your body as somehow culpable and as ‘tempting’ abuse with the heightened sexuality and ‘dirtiness’ of the female body (see MacFadden, 2003). To keep silent reduces the risk that others will position one as culpable ‘whore’. As a result of these socio-cultural ‘rules’, survivors of violence often remain mute about their memories of violation and oppression. Many women survivors may nevertheless feel the ‘truth’ of their memories, but at the same time this ‘truth’ is imperfectly known. The experience of violation does, however, remain fundamental to the survivor’s existence and their unfolding constructions of self (Culbertson, 1995; Herman, 1992).

With these challenges of expression in mind, I wondered if the “mubobobo” narrative could stand as a metaphor for Akeyo’s general sense of vulnerability as a gendered being in the world. Her grandfather could represent all powerful men and her sense of vulnerability to “mubobobo” could represent her sense of vulnerability to multiple forms of gender-based violence. Significantly, it seemed as if the metaphor of “mubobobo” allowed Akeyo to express such embodied memories and intuitive feelings that are associated with the trauma of her position as a woman in a patriarchal society and in a culture that is restrictive towards women. According to my interpretation, the “mubobobo” cultural concept functioned as a narrative tool whereby Akeyo was able to express elements of her traumatic memory that has been imprinted onto her (sexualised) body and mind-such as the many small acts of everyday oppression that she has experienced and also her witnessing of the brutal treatment of other women in her socio-cultural environment. I interpret Akeyo’s narrative of her vulnerability to “mubobobo” at the hands of her grandfather and her uncle to represent her sense of vulnerability, as a gendered being, to *all* men in the world; a sense of the constant threat that she feels on a day to day basis, just because she is a woman.

We can see that her account is deeply shaped by the interplay between body, mind, and culture, she constructs a certain ‘fiction’ that may through the emotions that are attached to these words feel like ‘truth’ for Akeyo. She transforms her embodied feelings into linguistic language. Most importantly the “mubobobo” narrative allows her to narrate these feelings within a framework that will be understood and believed by others who share her cultural position. It is a social construction of her ‘truth’ in a form that others need in order to understand it. Culbertson says (1995), “Narrative in all this is processual, an active and conscious denial and reassertion of memory, in a slow process of building a story of loss and recovery, of placing body and mind in a cultural narrative that recognises certain things as truth, and the body’s language as always in need of translation” (p. 190). Ultimately, according to my interpretation, it is through the ‘muti rape’ narrative that Akeyo renders her embodied feelings speakable.

Lastly, I address my third question- what function could the use of the “mubobobo” metaphor have for Akeyo’s sense of self in the world? As I have interpreted it, the “mubobobo” narrative was a means for Akeyo to narrate certain feelings that are associated with her gendered position in the world. Such linguistic representation is done for a specific purpose which is not always conscious or intentional and it may serve a particular psychological function in terms of Akeyo’s sense of self in the world. Trauma is a social act that is destructive towards the social self of the victim; pieces of one’s personhood are, in a sense, ‘taken away’ by the perpetrator and by constant acts of degradation. This renders women victims to what Culbertson (1995) calls a ‘cellular’, ‘non-social’, ‘surviving self’ (p. 179). To return fully to the self as socially defined, or to reclaim a sense of the whole self, says Culbertson (1995), the recollection of memory is not enough, rather the survivor needs to *tell* what happened, they need to disembody this memory in front of and in relation to listening others (Culbertson, 1995). As Culbertson (1995) states, “remembering itself, that creates a “me”, finally, rather than a disembodied, confused recipient of harm” (p. 184).

According to my interpretation, Akeyo is able to express previously concealed feelings that form an important part of her traumatic memory. Akeyo may, for example, find her negative feelings towards males disconcerting and she may begin to question her own character and her motives for certain avoidance behaviour. The “mubobobo” narrative allows her to engage in a gendered analysis of her position and to contextualise and make sense of these emotions and intuitions that make up her worldly experience. She is able to reintegrate these feelings and emotions as part of

her self and, by doing so, she re-narrates herself anew. This is a significant and powerful act of *resisting* dominant cultural scripts that define what one can know and what one can be. The next section deals with the women's constructions of self in relation to "mubobobo" perpetrators.

### **"YOU WOULD NEVER IMAGINE TOUCHING THEM": (RE)-CREATING SELVES THROUGH NARRATIVES OF THE "MUBOBOBO" PERPETRATOR TYPE**

This section examines the specific ways in which the women participants spoke about the 'typical' male "mubobobo" perpetrator type. During the stories of the "mubobobo" violation they constructed male perpetrators as socially 'other' or 'different' by drawing on 'common sense' characteristics of these men's socio-economic status and psychic world. I look at the language that the women use to construct "mubobobo" perpetrators and the specific ways that they chose to present these men. I then theorise about the function that these kinds of constructions have for the women's sense of themselves in the world.

#### *Constructing the "mubobobo" perpetrator type*

In the extracts of talk below Chadamwari and Akeyo construct "mubobobo" perpetrators by drawing on 'common sense' aspects of these men's psychology.

**Chadamwari:** But is it true what I heard that um like men who are shy they can't approach women, they go out to get the muti and men who stay unmarried because you know there are men who don't want to get married they just stay single bachelor whatever until forty fifty years, they go and get that muti for that pleasure and then they keep it and don't get married. Maybe they don't want the responsibility of a family or what. They just want to stay single.

**Akeyo:** Isn't that a modified version of sexual toys and whatever because now days like the modern men are buying women, things that don't talk back, they can put them in whatever place.

**S:** That is interesting.

**Akeyo:** People who don't want responsibilities, no women in their house, homosexuals who don't want women anyways. They just need sex but they don't want women in their space....

(Focus group discussion 1, page 19 of research transcript).

In the first extract above Chadamwari sets the scene for the type of man who may utilise muti to have sex with women from afar. She narrates a sense that her understandings about “mubobobo” perpetrators have been shaped by a more general understanding of these type of men (what others perceive of these men), she says, ‘is it true what I heard?’ and by doing so she opens up space for the others to engage with her descriptions of the personality of “mubobobo” perpetrators. She says that males who perpetrate “mubobobo” are ‘shy’ by nature. Shyness connotes a sense of someone who cannot assert themselves and who may not have the capacity to establish certain social connections or relations such as marriage. Chadamwari then explains that this psychological feature plays itself out behaviourally in the sense that these men ‘can’t approach women’ and very often they cannot cope with the emotional responsibilities that marriage entails.

Chadamwari’s focus on marriage and responsibility was a characteristic concern throughout her narratives. She grew up with a very supportive father figure and this childhood experience meant that she experienced much dissonance when she met her partner who she later had a baby with. This man abused her and eventually left her with the sole responsibility for the child. In the extract above she focuses on men, responsibility and power. She says that “mubobobo” perpetrators are men who cannot achieve the kind of masculine position that her father did (the kind of position which she seems to look up to). She infers that this is because “mubobobo” perpetrators lack something on a psychological level (‘they are shy’) and therefore they cannot achieve these levels of responsibility and social power. Chadamwari says that, as a consequence of their shyness, these men find themselves living certain lifestyles in which they do not have a wife or other female connections and, as a result, they have to find alternatives means to satisfy their sexual urges.

The second characteristic of “mubobobo” perpetrators is voiced by Akeyo. She agrees with Chadamwari that these men may be unconventional in terms of certain aspects of their psychology in the sense that they prefer, ‘no women in the house’. Akeyo says that these are men who, ‘don’t want to get married’ and who remain single until an old age. She goes further to say that many “mubobobo” perpetrators are homosexuals who are not interested in establishing heterosexual relations with women. She says, ‘they want sex but they don’t want women in their space’. In the context of Zimbabwe where homosexuality practice is not readily accepted (Hodza, forthcoming), men may not have easy access to sex with other men. The women’s narratives insinuate their ‘view’ that these men may then choose to utilise “mubobobo” via which they can rape women ‘from a distance’ so that they can experience sexual pleasure without the actual presence of a female body (‘don’t want women in their space’). So ultimately, the women paint a linguistic picture that the typical “mubobobo” perpetrator type does not have easy access to women (or in the latter case men) and they cannot obtain sex via traditional means such as through heterosexual partnership.

The positions of ‘shy, ‘homosexual’ men lie outside of what is considered to be ‘normal’ for ‘African men’. Within the framework of the Shona culture of Zimbabwe such positions are largely considered as ‘untraditional’ and these are social devalued subject positions (Hodza, forthcoming). Dominant scripts of masculinity and femininity in many African cultures convey meaning that ‘proper’ ‘African men’ need to be assertive and dominant in relation to their female counterparts. To fit the grade of ‘appropriate masculinity’ men need to be outgoing and they need to express their sexual needs overtly. According to such dominant scripts of masculinity, men also need to be forceful and they need to dominate women’s bodies (Tamale, 2011b). Men who are shy and unable to act out their sexual intensions cannot achieve the position of ‘normal’ African masculinity.

In the Shona culture it is considered unusual for a man to remain unmarried (Gwandure, 2012). So, unmarried bachelors of the ages outlined by the women above (‘forty, fifty years) also do not fit the norm. African cultures value the collective and family connections and to be an unmarried bachelor would mean that one has not achieved the ‘appropriate’ roles of manhood-father, husband, breadwinner, and head of the household (Mkhize, 2004). In a similar vein, homosexual men are often deeply stigmatised in the African context as they do not fit in with hegemonic modes of heterosexuality, which is considered to be the standard/norm. Although the roles for

men and women are changing in contemporary Africa, such expectations are still very much entrenched in certain areas and within certain cultures-such as the Shona culture of the women participants. Thus, the women construct the “mubobobo” perpetrator type as men who cannot achieve African cultural norms of ‘appropriate masculinity’ and, by doing so, they position “mubobobo” perpetrators in a precarious way in terms of these men’s power in the world.

Akeyo brings in the theme of sexual toys in this conversation. Sexual toys are often caricatures of women’s body or bodily parts onto which men perform various sexual acts. Sexual toys are inanimate objects that men can use however and whenever they like. Akeyo says that men buy sexual toys because, ‘they don’t talk back’, in other words a man can do whatever he likes sexually and there will be no consequences or resistance from this female figure. Akeyo then provides an analogy through which she likens the body of female “mubobobo” victims to sexual toys. According to the women’s representations, muti, like sexual toys, can be bought by men and can provide men with some form of sexual gratification. These accounts resonate with cultural discourses about women’s bodies as something that can be owned (see Lebowitz & Roth) as well as the commodification of women’s bodies as sexual objects.

The act of ‘rape from a distance’ renders the “mubobobo” victim passive and powerless, like an inanimate doll or a lifeless figure, say the women. They say that the woman victim of “mubobobo” is usually unaware if someone is violating her or who this person is, and in this sense they cannot resist the sex in any way. Men can thus obtain sexual pleasure without consequences. They can also satisfy their needs without any resulting emotional responsibilities or heterosexual commitments. Akeyo also says that men can, ‘put them in whatever place’. She conveys meaning that both sexual toys and muti enable men (even those with relatively little power who have not achieved the status of ‘appropriate masculinity’) to put women ‘down’, to render them as lacking in worth and it is through this act of belittlement that the men gain a sense of control over the feminine. They can perform anything they wish onto the feminine figure. So Akeyo conveys that, similar to sexual toys, the bodies of female “mubobobo” victims are rendered powerless inanimate sites, a symbol really, onto which men can perform their perverse wishes and imaginings.

The women narrate that “mubobobo” perpetrators are able to gain a sense of sexual control over women’s bodies through the use of magical muti. We spoke about the fact that having sex with prostitutes would often be much cheaper and easier than obtaining muti. However, the women mentioned that “mubobobo” perpetrators are not able to achieve their sexual/psychological goals without the help of ‘muti’. Chadamwari, for example, says, “It doesn’t work for them physically, it works through the muti”<sup>16</sup>. Here she insinuates that these men lack virility. She also contributes to the sense that “mubobobo” may be one of the only means by which these men who occupy ‘abnormal’ and ‘powerless’ social positions can exert their power sexually over women’s bodies.

Below Akeyo, Elinah, and Cheney add to this co-constructed image of the typical “mubobobo” perpetrator type by narrating what they represent to be ‘common sense’ aspects of these men’s materiality.

**Akeyo:** And in most cases it would be the worst people that you would never imagine even touching (S4S group: Yes!) ja and these people they go around with pride like something like I am going in and out you know I am always sleeping with you.

**Elinah:** But if you saw this person he doesn’t bath all the time, he was smelling. But just imagine.

**Cheney:** Imagine that person on top of you. Oh my God!

(Focus group discussion 1, page 6 of research transcript).

The women narrate a type of man that has low levels of personal hygiene and that does not have the material resources to take care of their bodies and their dress. Through the image of a dirty, stinking male who does not bath regularly, they convey a sense that these men are poor, and possibly living on the streets as beggars. The women outline a sense of their disgust towards these kinds of men, seen through their words ‘worst people’ that they would, ‘never imagine touching’ and ‘Imagine that person on top of you. Oh my God!’. Here they suggest that they would never willingly converse with such men, let alone have sexual intercourse with them.

---

<sup>16</sup> Focus group discussion 1, page 20 of research transcript

They also say that many “mubobobo” perpetrators feel proud that they are able to have sex ‘from a distance’ with women of a higher social status (‘going in and out you’). Through the women’s narrations, they convey the sense that these men have nothing much else to brag about in their lives. Ultimately the women construct themselves as being different to these men who perpetrate “mubobobo”. They suggest that they have more social and material worth in relation to these men and that such a man would not ordinarily be able to have relations with respectable women like ‘them’.

The women formulate the status quo between women and the ‘typical’ male “mubobobo” perpetrator as follows: ‘Shy’, ‘homosexual’, ‘disgusting’, ‘smelly’ men do not occupy social positions that afford them power in the African context and they need to engage in alternative means by which to achieve the standards of ‘good’ masculinity. So, according to the women’s view, men turn to muti because their social situation is equal to, or worse, than women who are helplessly stuck in the position of feminine roles, because like women, these men have to fit the standards of traditional masculine roles, which their subject positions of gayness and shyness do not allow them to do. Thus, according to Chadamwari and Akeyo’s interpretation of what might be going on, men’s decision to use muti stems from a position of *weakness*, it is all that is left for them to do as men who are unable to face the world with women in it.

Their narratives suggest that during the act of “mubobobo” men may feel as if they are assertive, powerful and sexually in control. These men may experience themselves to be the puppet master who controls the body of their victim; they can craft the act according to their own needs and their own subjective reality. As such, according to the women’s views, the “mubobobo” victim’s body can be seen as a site onto which these men can project any feelings of powerless, fear, or anxiety about their life. They insinuate that in the moment of “mubobobo” the male perpetrators may feel more powerful as if they have moved closer to achieving the position of ‘appropriate masculinity’ and thus in the moment of the act these men may feel more psychologically in control of their lives.

*Narrative purpose: “Mubobobo” as a metaphor for the ‘unspeakable’*

Above, the women construct the typical muti rape perpetrator type as ‘shy’, ‘homosexual’, ‘dirty’, ‘smelly’ and lacking virility. They described these men as being unable to fulfil their sexual/psychological needs and desires via any normal kind of heterosexual relations.

Ultimately, they position these men as being unable to achieve dominant forms of masculinity and the social power that is associated with such positions. They imply that it is not any sort of man who commits this violation, it is man that needs to utilise the power of muti to gain in some way what he does not have.

So, the women did not portray “mubobobo” perpetrators along the lines of dominant scripts about hegemonic gendered power dynamics-the all powerful male who exerts his power over the body of the all passive and powerless female victim (Lamb, 1999). Rather, they disrupted these discourses by positioning these perpetrators in devalued social positions. They say that ‘weak’ socially powerless male perpetrators thrive off the power of socially superior women and in this way the violation is represented more as a parasitical act whereby the males draw a sense of power from the act of violating these women. Such descriptions of the pathological and obscure male perpetrators also challenge mainstream notions of the masculine as ‘normal’ and the feminine as abhorrent; and thus complicates any simple interpretation of the nexus of male/female power within the act of “mubobobo”.

When listening to these stories I thought about the parallels with contemporary forms of masculinity in South Africa (and the broader African context). According to dominant notions of masculinity, men are supposed to be family breadwinners. The reality is that in the African context of much deprivation, poverty, and scarce job opportunities many men are unable to achieve such a position. It has been argued that the rape, beating and other forms of social control over women symbolise men’s attempt to deal with their lack of social power (see Boonzaier, 2005). The current moment in South Africa is one in which women are gaining increased power in the social and economic spheres and male violence against women has been conceptualised as a kind of resistance to women’s increased power (see Shefer et al., 2008). Within this context the sexual conquest of women is conceptualised as one of the ways in which men achieve dominant forms of masculinity. The stories of “rape from a distance” resonate with this. The women say that it is through “mubobobo” that male perpetrators achieve something that is essential to their survival in the world. In both cases women are constructed as

the vehicles via which men can achieve certain things-masculinity or the maintenance of spiritual/psychological survival.

While Akeyo, Elinah, Chadamwari, and Cheney narrated these perpetrators as less socially powerful in relation to themselves, they also suggested that the mere potential of such a violation negatively affects women, that is, even “imaginary”/potential perpetrators have the power to harm them. Women living in contemporary South Africa may feel empowered to some extent due to increased economic power, discourses of women’s rights as well as their experiences in support groups like *Sisters for Sisters*. At the same time many women may experience a contradictory feeling of being ever vulnerable to abuse at the hands of men (Gqola, 2007). These narratives illuminate the power of patriarchy and the chronic and far reaching vulnerability that women of different classes, races, and cultures experience.

So on a surface level linguistic/narrative process the women outlined a sense of their vulnerability in relation to these men. The women’s likening of the female “mububobo” victim’s body with sexual toys and their accounts of “mubobobo” victims vulnerability and powerlessness in relation to these male perpetrators resonates with certain ‘feelings’ that women may experience as gendered subjects who are vulnerable to many sorts of gender-based violence in a patriarchal and culturally restrictive world. The feelings that came through in the stories about “mubobobo” rape provided rich insight into the how these women perceive the ways in which their bodies are used by men. This reflects the nature of these women’s subjective experience in patriarchal world within a culture that severely restricts women; a world within which *every man* is a potential threat. They convey their sense of the invasion of the masculine onto feminine material-social bodies that happens across time, space, and class.

In other words, the culturally accepted concept of “mubobobo”, as I have interpreted it, represents a metaphor for women’s feelings and intuitions of various forms of bodily and psychic disruptions of female boundaries. Often such disruptions, like the accounts of “mubobobo” rape are unknown to women in the sense that such violations often have blurred interpretative boundaries and cannot be easily defined or proved. I interpret the “mubobobo” metaphor as a convenient linguistic tool via which the women were able to give words to these often ‘inexpressible’ feelings.

In the next subsection I address the following questions: Why did the women choose to ‘remember’ “mubobobo” perpetrators as shameful, dirty, and ‘powerless’? Could these kinds of constructions serve a particular function for the women who narrated them?

*Psychological dimensions of the “mubobobo” narrative*

As stated in the introductory section above, Akeyo, Chadamwari, Elinah and Cheney are all of the Shona culture, a culture that largely restricts women’s expression of their sexual desire and pleasure. Social power structures privilege the voices of some while excluding the voices of others. The voices of poor migrant women are not rendered with much power. Across cultures, women who do not adhere to conservative sexual codes are constructed as bad and/or tainted in some way (see Potgieter, Strebel, Shefer, & Wagner, 2012). Women are subject to what McFadden (2003) calls ‘brutal socialisation’ (p. 54.). That is, if women do not conform to the norms or rules of what is expected for women within a specific culture then they are often blamed, shamed, or punished. Shame is a particularly powerful social tool through which women are controlled and such negative connotations are particularly associated with the black female body. As a result of such negative social meanings and the threat of ‘brutal socialisation’ many (African) women suppress their sexual desires and other aspects of their sexuality. This is what McFadden (2003) calls the ‘muting’ of female sexual memory and instinct (p. 50).

Women may also often suppress many experiences of violation against their bodies-sexual or physical- because their vulnerability to such violation is often tied in with blame and shame of the female body (for example, ‘she wanted it’). So this suppression becomes more complex when women’s bodies have undergone repeated abuse across the lifetime. Women often avoid disclosures about their violations because they aim to avoid such negative connotations. Ahrens, (2006), for example, found that women who do disclose their experiences of rape are unlikely to talk about their experiences for a second time due to social reactions that reinforce feelings of self-blame for women and that reinforce uncertainty about whether their experience qualifies as an actual violation. Women often take on these negative meanings about their bodies and their minds; they may internalise these meanings and, as such, these negative social schemas may become toxic in the sense that they have a significant impact on women’s sense of themselves and their experience of themselves in the world. As a result of these toxic messages about female sexuality and the violated feminine body women may often have deeply embedded intuitive feelings of shame, blame, inadequacy, and unworthiness.

So, for these women, female sexuality is largely tied in with shame, blame, and harm. With this in mind I wondered if these negative representations of the “mubobobo” perpetrators could signify a process by which the women are projecting their own negative feelings about sex/sexuality onto these men. The women constructed these men as ‘shy’, lacking psychologically and/or spiritually, ‘poor’, and ‘dirty’/ ‘disgusting’. All of these positions are devalued subject positions and they represent these men as powerless and shameful in the sense that the men have not achieved the cultural standards of dominant masculinity.

Women are taught that if they do not behave in ‘respectable’ ways then their bodies take on a demonic status, that is, if they do not adhere to the strictures of ‘good’ femininity then they risk being positioned as having a deviant humanity, or not being fully human. Perhaps these descriptions of the men represent the women’s own sense of shame—a sense of themselves as somehow inadequate on a psychological and social level—perhaps not being able to fulfil the requirements of ‘respectable’ femininity (‘good’ woman and ‘good’ sexual subject).

The women’s descriptions of the typical “mubobobo” perpetrator type— as physically ‘dirty’ and ‘smelly’ are particularly significant. They say that they would never willingly touch such men because they are disgusting sexually—they have a dirty physical body with a repulsive odour, they say that these men are ‘untouchable’. Women’s bodies, particularly poor, abused women, are degraded according to the meanings that are attached to dominant socio-cultural scripts. Women may experience their bodies to be worthless and tainted throughout their lifetime and these feelings may be more pronounced after a woman has experienced a lifetime of abuse and maltreatment.

So, according to my interpretation, the women’s constructions of the negative social and material bodies of “mubobobo” perpetrators signifies a psychic process whereby they projected their own internalised feelings about their bodies/minds onto these men. Throughout the women’s talk these images of the male perpetrators were a symbol for the women’s own suppressed sexuality/sexual desire. These images represent the ‘tainted’ sexual part of themselves that they have internalised through particular cultural messages. It is significant that by narratively ‘getting rid’ of this ‘tainted’ part of themselves the women were able to negotiate more positive

selves in their tellings-selves that are more powerful in relation to the male perpetrators and also selves that are not 'weighed down' by the negative aspects of female sexuality and desire.

It is crucial to note that the space of this collective biography discussion facilitated this narrative process. Such disclosures and creative engagement with cultural stories may not have occurred in another kind of space. There are a number of reasons why this collective biography space was conducive to such creative discussion. Firstly, the open ended and creative format of the session allowed the women to engage with stories that were 'off the grid', so to speak. The topic may have not been fully narrated had I stuck to a format of questions that were devised by me, according to Westernised frameworks of meaning about female abuse and violation.

Secondly, all of the women shared the same cultural background and were therefore familiar with the concept of "mubobobo". Their 'memories' were expressed via this socially constructed reality; a reality that the other women could recognise and identify with because of their shared positioning as part of the Shona culture. Also, over time the women had developed strong relational connections with each other, as *Sisters for Sisters* members, and with myself, as researcher and this meant that the collective biography space was a supportive environment. Women who have experienced forms of gender-based violence require human connection-a collective- that will join them in labelling that what happened to them is wrong and to acknowledge that they have been injured (Lamb, 1996). These factors meant that the potential for re-victimisation was minimised within the space and the women were given a safe opportunity to express these embodied emotions and intuitions. Ultimately, through the "mubobobo" cultural narrative the women in this specific collective biography discussion were able to (re)-create their selves anew.

So the women's narratives of "mubobobo" shed insight into this narrative (re)-creation of selves. Similarly, Davies (2000) says that collective biography research comprises of imagined stories, or creative narratives of a combination of various 'truths'. She says that these are valuable resources as they may hold the potential to disrupt and decentre old discourses and narratives and to unstitch old patterns of desire, creating, of course new patterns of desire and new opportunities for the transformation of the self. It can be seen in the analysis above that the Akeyo, Elinah, Chadamwari, and Cheney were able to narratively get rid of certain negative feelings and

intuition by projecting them onto the image of the “mubobobo” perpetrator. During this narrative moment they were able to create new ‘selves’ that are not shaped by toxic socio-cultural messages about female sexuality and the violated body; they are free to take a new shape in any direction imaginable. The women were thus able to work towards the disruption of certain subjectivities that have been moulded onto them by society. Davies et al., (2006e) call this ‘decomposition’ (p. 180) and refer to this process as a subjective move through which the narrator unmoors themselves from the confines of dominant discourses and creatively shapes new kinds of meaning about oneself in the world.

The transformed self constructions of Akeyo, Elinah, Chadamwari, and Cheney above may, of course, also have a crucial impact on the way that these women *experience* themselves in the world. Gavey (2005), for example has argued that by working with discourses in different ways and by constructing the ‘self’ in different ways, one shapes the ways in which they experience themselves in the social world. Here my sense was that in their attempt to experience themselves as ‘fully human’, the women were attempting to break free from certain shackles of meaning that shape their selves as violated women in the world. This highlights the political potentials of such a space. Rape and other forms of gender-based violence serve to render women powerless- women are silenced about feelings and intuitions surrounding their bodily selves. Breaking the silence, even via metaphor and narrative projection, is crucial in the complex process of moving towards a position of agency. As women mobilise previously embodied emotions they can begin to acknowledge and engage with these feelings, a process through which they can slowly begin to integrate the pieces into their sense of self and (re)-create new kinds of selves.

In conclusion, in their discussion of the muti rape violation the women constructed the typical “mubobobo” perpetrator in negative ways and as having less social status in relation to most women. However, they also conveyed a sense of their deep seated vulnerability to violation at the hands of such men. They say that muti empowered these men to disrupt boundaries of material worth and class and to gain a level of control over women’s bodies. I interpret the narratives of “mubobobo” as a metaphor for the participants’ sense of general vulnerability as women in a patriarchal and culturally restrictive world. It is through this metaphor that that they expressed a sense of the invasion of the masculine onto feminine material-social bodies that happens across time, space, and class. Through this type of language they constructed themselves as ‘vulnerable beings’.

According to my interpretation, the women also projected their negative feelings about sex and sexuality onto the “mubobobo” perpetrators. The broader function of such narrative action was that the women could construct positive selves that are not ‘weighed down’ by the negative aspects of their sexual feelings and desires or their ‘memories’ of bodily violation. The cultural specific framework of “mubobobo” was a linguistic means by which these women could narrate previously concealed aspects of their psycho-social selves and construct new ‘selves’ that are not ‘tainted’ by toxic societal messages about abused women and the female body.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter I draw on voices from one particular collective biography discussion that was based on the topic of “mubobobo” rape. The women described “mubobobo” as an act whereby a man obtains a magical muti that enables him to have sex with women from a distance, without physical contact. Reports of “mubobobo” in the Zimbabwean media and various discussions that I have had with Zimbabwean students at the University of the Free State suggest that “mubobobo” is an accepted cultural story, in the Zimbabwean culture at least. As such, this narrative represented a shared cultural resource for the women.

The concept of “mubobobo” was outside of my own cultural understanding and thus I largely played a questioning role in the discussion. My analysis was shaped by the theoretical tools of feminist poststructuralism that posits that identities are fluid and continually (re)constructed in different narrative moments (Weedon, 1987). It was also shaped by a transformative model of memory (see Haaken, 1999) –what one ‘remembers’ is reconstructed in different contexts according to what the narrator wants to achieve. According to such views, narratives do not convey any static ‘truth’ or ‘facts’ about experience. Rather narratives provide insight into subjective experience, or the *feeling* of inhabiting the social world (Davies & Gannon, 2006a).

In the first analysis section, “*You are really not sure who to trust anymore*”: *reflexively narrating embodied memories of abuse*, I draw specifically on the stories of Cheney and Akeyo. Women’s bodies are often rendered as objects to serve males’ needs and women are often disconnected from their sexual feelings due to socio-cultural strictures that render women’s overt discussion of their sexuality taboo. However, in the face of such restrictions, Cheney expressed a “whispering return of sexual desire” and an acknowledgement of the sexual nature of her body. Her narrative seems to contradict Gwandure’s (2009) view that African women will always interpret their ‘wet dreams’ as “mubobobo” because their perspective is rigidly moulded by rigid cultural discourses that say that women cannot experience such a phenomenon. However, Cheney expresses aspects of her sexuality in an ambiguous and cautious way that does not fully embrace the experience as her own. Her narrative suggests the pernicious hold of the ‘culture within’. According to my interpretation, the “mubobobo” narrative functioned as a tool that created a sense of ambiguity and allowed Cheney to express sexual feelings that socio-cultural strictures have rendered taboo. Ironically, it is through this well established cultural narrative that she is able to reclaim her ‘self’ as sexual subject.

Secondly, Akeyo sheds insight into her subjective experience from the position of a woman who is socially situated within a matrix of cultural and patriarchal strictures and practices that shape her sense of self in the world. Her rich narrative conveys a sense of the presence of “mubobobo” in her life and the way that her sense of vulnerability to “mubobobo” disrupts family relationships which are of utmost importance in her culture. She represents her experience as ever-possible “mubobobo” victim as characterised by ‘fear’, uncertainty, vulnerability, and a lack of ability to define certain incidents. For me, this resonated with a large part of my own gendered experiences and the experiences of others.

According to my interpretation, Akeyo’s narrative of the presence of “mubobobo” in her life represented a metaphor for her general sense of vulnerability as a woman in the world. It is through this cultural trope that she was able to express certain embodied emotions that have perhaps been concealed due to cultural strictures that render certain relationships and ways of being as taboo. Through this narrative Akeyo is able to work towards reintegrating these feelings and emotions as part of her self and, by doing so, she re-narrates herself anew. She seems to work towards *resisting* dominant cultural scripts that define what one can know and what one can be.

In the second analysis section, *“You would never imagine touching them”*: (re)-creating selves through narratives of the “mubobobo” perpetrator type’, I analyse the ways in which the women co-constructed certain linguistic images of “mubobobo” perpetrators. Here I draw on the voices of all four women in the “rape from a distance” discussion. I analyse their ways of ‘remembering’ according to three levels; women’s constructions of “mubobobo” perpetrators, the narrative function of this talk, and, finally the deeper psychological function of the women’s narrations.

The women construct the ‘typical’ “mubobobo” perpetrator type as men who cannot achieve African cultural norms of ‘appropriate masculinity’ and, by doing so, they position “mubobobo” perpetrators in a precarious way in terms of these men’s power in the world. The women constructed themselves as more socially powerful in relation to these men and they challenged dominant scripts of the all-powerful perpetrator and the all powerless victim (see Lamb, 1999).

However, at the same time they spoke about their vulnerability to men and the power that these “mubobobo” perpetrators can gain over women’s bodies. The feelings that came through in the stories about “mubobobo” rape provided rich insight into the how these women perceive the ways in which their bodies are used by men. This reflects the nature of their subjective experience in a patriarchal world within a culture that severely restricts women; a world within which every man is a potential threat. I interpret the culturally accepted concept of “mubobobo” as representing a metaphor for women’s feelings and intuitions of various forms of bodily and psychic disruptions of female boundaries.

On a deeper level I interpreted the women’s narratives of “mubobobo” perpetrators as signifying a process by which the women psychologically projected their internalised, negative feelings about their mind/bodies onto these men. Such feelings can often not easily be voiced because of the silencing of female intuition and sexual/bodily memory (McFadden, 2003). Throughout the women’s talk these images of the male perpetrators were a symbol of their own suppressed sexuality/sexual desire. These images, according to my interpretation, represent the ‘tainted’ sexual part of themselves that they have internalised through particular cultural messages. It is significant that by narratively

‘getting rid’ of this ‘tainted’ part of themselves the women were able to negotiate more positive selves in their tellings-selves that are more powerful in relation to the male perpetrators and also selves that are not ‘weighed down’ by the negative aspects of female sexuality and desire. The language of “mubobobo” was a convenient means by which the women could displace negative feelings/emotions onto the images of these types of men who perpetrate “mubobobo”.

My assertion throughout the chapter has been that the women drew on the language of “mubobobo” as a narrative of convenience to express their complex feelings of desire (in a context that does not allow the expression of such experiences) as well as other embodied feelings that have to do with their experiences of violation and degradation (things that are not easily made sense of or communicated). They transformed their embodied feelings into language. In this way they seemed to move towards a deconstruction of these complex memories, or their processes signify the beginning of such a journey. Most importantly the “mubobobo” narrative allowed them to narrate these feelings within a framework that will be understood and believed by others who share their cultural position.

The women were thus able to situate their trauma as part of their narrative- a process that is central to women’s recovery from abuse (Enander & Holmberg, 2008; Wuest & Meritt-Gray, 2001). Such acknowledgement of traumatic memory is also a crucial part of ‘moving on’ towards a transformation of self and one’s role in the world (Lamb, 1999). They used the narrative strategy of “mubobobo” to psychologically ‘open up’ negative feelings and intuitions that are associated with the feminine. Through the “mubobobo” narrative they were able to reclaim a sense of themselves as sexual subjects. They were also able to reclaim their right to express previously concealed emotions and memories. The women thus moved towards a disruption of certain subjectivities that have been moulded onto them by society (‘culpable’, shameful, abused subjectivities, for example). It is through this process that the participants creatively shaped new kinds of meaning about themselves in the world and (re)-created more positive ‘selves’ in their tellings.

## CHAPTER 6: RESULTS/DISCUSSION

### CROSSING BORDERS IN AFRICA: COLLECTIVELY NARRATING THE ‘FOREIGNER WITHIN’

*“What we normally call memory is not the remembered at all of course, but a social accepted fabrication, a weaving together of the thin, sometimes delicate and intertwined threads of true memory, the remembered, so that these might be told” (Culbertson, 1995: p. 179).*

#### INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I analyse women’s narratives of crossing geographical borders during their journey from their home country in Africa to Cape Town, South Africa. I draw on data from one particular focus group discussion that consisted of migrant women from Kenya, Zimbabwe, and Congo. Analytically I focus on a dominant theme that the women narrated about the ‘self’ in transit<sup>17</sup> through Africa—the women’s narrations of encounters with men at border posts. These border posts refer to physical entry points between one country and the next.

In what follows I give a brief conceptual and theoretical outline to my interpretive framework that I use to analyse these stories of ‘self’ in transit. I then outline women’s descriptions of transit before I move on to critically analyse their narratives of ‘self’ within this space. My analysis is structured into three broad sections. The first two sections are titled, *“You are desperate and you want to cross”*: *Collectively constructing ‘self’ in the space of transit* and, *“I just became another person”*: *Narrating the ‘pathological self’ in transit*. In the final section, *the psychological function of these reconstructions of memory*, I theorise about the psychological function of these narrations.

---

<sup>17</sup> Throughout this chapter I use the word ‘transit’ to refer to the geographical and temporal space that the women moved through when they travelled through Africa from their country of origin to Cape Town, South Africa.

*“It was another chapter of my life”: The encounter at the border post through a social remembering lens*

In 2003 Lynn travelled from Kenya to South Africa in search, she says, of a better life with better employment opportunities. This resonates with the motivations of many other African migrants who travel to South Africa in search of a life with more social, economic and political dignity (see Daimon & Nyamunda, 2013). At the time of her travels Lynn was still married to her partner. She travelled alone, leaving her partner and her three children in Kenya to join her in South Africa at a later stage once she had settled into a home in South Africa. She describes being short on travel money and that this desperate situation created challenges for her along the way. Lynn says that enroute to South Africa she needed to show 500 US Dollars in order to get through a border post, money which she says that she did not have. Lynn then explained that she met a man who helped her pass through this site. She says that after this fleeting favour her and the man became ‘close’ and he bought her breakfast at a restaurant and invited Lynn to enjoy the rest of the day with him, as her bus was only coming in the evening. Lynn accepted this invitation, partly, she says, because of a connection that developed between her and this man. She did not share any further details about exactly what happened with this man.

This left me wondering: how did Lynn enjoy the day with this man who helped her get through the African border post? Did the man perhaps expect something in return for the favour? I wanted to hear more about this particular encounter in transit. I asked questions and I tried to open up space for Lynn to talk more about this experience and her interactions with the man but to no avail. Lynn’s response to my probing was as follows,

**Lynn:** Look Sam I have a lot of experience(s) at those borders..... if I start talking about it now we will sit until midnight. From the hour that I got into that Nissan (Bakkie) leaving Kenya....it was another chapter of my life.  
(Group Discussion 7, page 14 of research transcript).

However, other women hinted at the details of these encounters at border posts:

**Wendy:** You know that problem? That man help(s) you, it is not for free. (Lynn: Ja). Ja, you must know. It is not for free. He want to buy (you things). You pay only your body. No other payment, only your body. So you must pay. Nothing (is) for free. Because the man he don't like your money, he like only you.  
(Group Discussion 7, page 14 of research transcript).

Wendy's description of these kinds of relations between men and women in transit 'fleshes out' Lynn's story and provides contextual detail about such border post encounters. Her statement, 'It is not for free', 'Nothing (is) for free' suggests that men in transit do not readily help women without the expectation that they will have to repay them. She stresses that women pay with their bodies ('You must pay', 'You pay only your body'). She emphasises the object status of women's bodies in a social environment where exchange is a way of life and, for most, the only means of survival. Here she affirms her status as one of the older and more experienced members of the group and paints a picture of the 'common knowledge' of transit ('Ja, you must know. It is not for free').

On the other hand, Lynn's response to questions about what happened with the man at the border post is characterised by a lack of disclosure of the finer details about what happened. Lynn transforms her past experience with this man in a very particular way through her use of language. Firstly, she organises all of her experiences in transit into one category ('I have a lot of experience(s) at those border posts'). She states that in our collective biography session she does not have time to really unpack what happened ('we will sit until midnight'). Such a description serves to situate her past as involving multiple experiences and also suggests the complexity of these experiences.

Lynn's names her time in transit 'another chapter of my life'. Another chapter of one's life is usually a period that is closed off, a time in which one was a different person who did things differently. The events of a closed off chapter will not make sense in the time of the present moment. Thus, she suggests certain disconnect between the past 'self' and the present 'self'. Through this use of language she distinguishes between what happened then (in transit) and what is happening now (her current self). Lynn actively chooses to linguistically represent her experiences in such a way within the particular context of her telling. I have termed this lack of disclosure a narrative silence. What meaning can be made of such a silence?

In her discussion on making sense of collective biography data, Davies (2000) says that we need to look not only at the discourses and practices through which experience is articulated but also at the absences and silences in talk. Such silences, according to Davies, shed very important insight into subjectivity and context-what one is 'allowed' to say in certain contexts and what this says about their agency/subjectivity within the context of telling (Davies & Gannon, 2006b). Instead of reading the silences as a lack of data or as a 'unsuccessful' data gathering, I began to think about what this silence could mean in terms of Lynn's subjectivity and what function such a narration could play for her sense of self in the world.

As is consistent with the rest of this thesis, I address these questions through a social remembering lens. A transformative approach/social remembering approach to memory is one that acknowledges that a survivor's relationship to their past is not immediately settled; rather identity and agency are managed in the present moment of telling (Haaken & Reavey, 2012). The past is actively shaped as it is narrated in the present moment for particular purposes (Reavey & Brown, 2007). As Eisikovits and Winstok (2002) argue, "Memories become tactics for manipulating occurrences in everyday life to achieve personal, interpersonal, and social aims" (p. 695). An integral part of the function of narrative is to construct the 'self' in certain ways; this shapes the moral judgments that others can make about the storyteller. So along these lines, I analyse the construction of 'selves' through the various ways in which the women retrospectively examine their past experiences and give them significance in the present moment (Reavey & Brown, 2007: p. 11). Such a process of managing the self is of course influenced by the broader socio-cultural scripts which shape women's 'experience' and their ways of knowing themselves as a gendered being in the world.

### *Conventional socio-cultural dramas of 'abuse'*

Across the board of most cultures masculine language impedes women's process of capturing certain meanings about their experiences because scripts are structured around strict definitions of 'abuse' and 'victim' (Lempert, 1996). Certain experiences of women are not granted the status/definition of abuse/violence due to the fact that these power relations structure women's reports of their lived experiences (Lempert, 1996). Women construct knowledge and make sense of their experiences of violation within the context of a language system that provides obstacles to the expression of meaning of gender-based violence in their lives (Lempert, 1996). Events are only classified as 'abuse' when they meet certain criteria. The severity of an event often

determines whether it will be given the status of 'abuse'. Kelly and Radford (1996), for instance, have argued that in the absence of a complete physical assault (that leaves marks on the women's body) women are often confused as to how to label their experiences. The frequency of an event also plays a role in whether it can be labelled as 'abuse', often events that are common among women, i.e. not an exceptional occurrence, are not granted the status of 'abuse'.

Women also have to fit certain criteria in order to gain the status of 'true victim' (Lamb, 1999). Women's status as 'true victim' is judged according to their behaviour and agentic capacity in the context within which the event occurs. For instance, women who are passive, non-agents and who act in line with 'appropriate' femininity are accorded the status of 'victim'. These women also need to show clear signs of physical or psychological damage as a result of the abuse. On the other hand, if women seem to exhibit some agency or choice in the situation then they are often considered blameworthy and culpable in the event, and they thus do not achieve the status of 'victim' (Lamb, 1999). This is particularly true for women who utilize aspects of their sexual agency (McDonald, 1995). Such women may be positioned as 'bad' sexual subjects (and given the labels of 'whore' or 'prostitute'). Subject positions such as these are associated with a myriad of negative connotations that may put women in physical or psychological danger (McFadden, 2003). Discourses of blame have wide range implications for how gender-based violence is understood and responded to socially (Baker, 2010) and this has significant implications for how abused women experience themselves in the world.

In the African context in particular, many women have been socialised into rules about 'appropriate' feminine conduct and ways of managing their bodies in certain social spaces. Women are expected to be submissive and humble in public but in private they are supposed to become wild sexually and cater to their husband's every whim (Tamale, 2005). Sexuality in the era of HIV/AIDS in Africa has resulted in a powerful resurgence of patriarchal dominance in which women's struggles for social autonomy are curbed by cultural strictures that construe women's agency to be dangerous and irresponsible (McFadden, 2003).

So to be a 'good' sexual subject is a position filled with much ambiguity as it is imbued with sexual double standards. Cultural meanings about 'good' or 'bad' female sexuality are closely associated with marriage and with the *places/spaces* in which sex takes place. Speaking

specifically about the Zimbabwean context, Kambarami (2006) says that self surveillance and proper conduct is particularly important for women when they are in public spaces. If women do not handle themselves ‘correctly’ in public spaces, such as the space of transit, they are vulnerable to scrutiny and degradation (see Tamale, 2011b). In many African cultures, women’s pursuit of sexual pleasure or their utilisation of their sexual body to achieve certain means (for example, finances) is considered deviant and women who do these things (such as prostitutes) are often severely stigmatised (Tamale, 2011b). Within such cultural environments women’s discussions of their own (sexual) agency is often very difficult.

Lynn’s narrative silence about the details of her encounter with the man at the border post is situated within these broader socio-cultural discourses. Any information that may convey a message that Lynn negotiated survival in transit in exchange for sex may suggest her culpability in these acts. Culpability contradicts dominant scripts of the all passive and ‘powerless’ female victim (see Lamb, 1999). As such, her status as ‘victim’ may be rendered precarious. ‘Good’ women, according to the cultural scripts that Lynn is familiar with, are not sexual agents and they do not engage in sexual activity for their own benefit. Lynn may have engaged in the narrative silence so as to avoid positioning herself in such a way that opens her ‘self’ up to negative connotations of ‘bad’ sexuality. It is significant that Lynn was married at the time of this occurrence and narrating any kind of sexual activity outside of the institution of marriage would result in further negative connotations, such as that of ‘cheater’.

Within the context of such socio-cultural definitions of ‘abuse’ and ‘victim’, women may have to negotiate alternative linguistic means to express and give meaning to their experiences. The reconstruction of a narrative memory is, in essence, the taming of our embodied memories of the past and the organising of these memories into intelligible frames (Culbertson, 1995). This is an important part of women’s agentic process through which they are able to find a voice and reclaim an identity (Culbertson, 1995; Gobodo-Madikizela, Shefer, Fish, 2014).

While Lynn chose not to fully disclose the details of her relations with this man at the border post, she goes on to describe in detail the *context* in which the event took place and the ways in which the social space of Africa shapes women’s motivations to engage in such relations with men. The analysis that follows explores the multiple and contextualised meanings that Lynn, Chadamwari and Wendy co-narrated with regards to sex, sexuality, and ‘abuse’. The women

found ways of narrating their experiences at the border post that would not compromise their position as ‘good’ feminine cultural subjects. I foreground these narrative strategies throughout the analysis that follows.

#### *Micro-context of the collective biography space*

I approach the data from a perspective that acknowledges the importance of the interactive context within which the data is produced. I draw on data from one specific collective biography discussion; a smaller discussion that was based on the topic of violence in transition from home place to Cape Town, South Africa. The talk was focused on women’s transition of leaving their home country, travelling through Africa, and reaching South Africa. The discussion took place at the home of one of the *Sisters for Sisters* members and comprised of Lynn (forty years old from Kenya), Wendy (fifty four years old from Congo), and Chadamwari (thirty one years old from Zimbabwe).

At the time of the discussion Lynn was the only woman that was employed on a full time basis. Wendy ran a small business and Chadamwari was involved in part time work at community centres. All of the women except for me were divorced from abusive male partners. All of the women except myself had travelled through Africa from their home country to South Africa. At the time of the interview all of the participants had been living in South Africa for more than eight years. All had experienced abuse at the hands of an intimate male partner and multiple other forms of gender-based violence; including violence in their communities and the violence of poverty.

The women were cognisant of the fact that I had never travelled through other parts of Africa. This meant that they were able to interactively position themselves as more knowledgeable in relation to me as they had the *lived experience* of journeying through Africa. So although I brought with me sensitivity about what it means to be a woman in the world who is vulnerable to abuse and I could engage with these women about such issues, there were certain experiences that I had not witnessed/experienced and the *Sisters for Sisters* members were the authority on the topic. I could only gain a sense of these experiences through listening to the women’s stories and, more specifically, through the way that they *chose* to narrate certain events.

## “IT’S LIKE ANOTHER FORM OF ABUSE”: NARRATIVES OF TRANSITION, POWER(LESSNESS), AND PLACE.

In the analysis that follows my interpretive focus is shaped by my main research goal of exploring how the women transform the past within the space of the collective biography discussion and the function these types of memories play in terms of their sense of self in the world. I critically analyse the women’s narratives of their experiences in transit through a social remembering lens. The analysis is shaped by my three main theory questions: 1.) How do the women remember the past within the collective biography space? Here I look at the content of their ‘memories’ of travelling through Africa and, particularly, what has been included and omitted in their stories. 2.) What kinds of identities were constructed in this collective process? 3.) What function did these particular ways of remembering have for the women’s sense of ‘self’ in the world? In other words what are the practical uses of this kind of remembering within the specific contexts that the telling took place? I situate the analysis within the broader socio-cultural context and I theorise about what these tellings mean in terms of the women’s agency in the world.

### THE WORLD OF TRANSIT

In the analysis below I briefly outline the content of women’s descriptions of the social world of transit. Using rich metaphors and images they collectively constructed the space of transit as dangerous, a place in which the vulnerability of women’s bodies is heightened. In the talk below Lynn and Chadamwari highlight the risks that many women take in transit and they convey a sense of women’s heightened vulnerability within this space.

**Lynn:** But then the other thing uh which I felt that really you know we kind of really put ourselves at risk during the seven days that I travelled. Apart from the map that I had if anything happened if there was an accident or if I died or if anyone killed me, nobody would have traced me. (Wendy: Ja). And you don’t even think of that. And later I just sat and I was imagining how many women fall trap and they never reach their destination.

**Chadamwari:** There are quite a lot. That's what I was going to talk about-other women and especially women who died on their way from Zimbabwe. As short as it is, there is a lot that happened in those forests. Somebody was even telling me that those forests are rich with human bones (S: Wow). Those forests because you know what they did like it was a lot of pressure for people to go [to South Africa] so it was like a lot of people wanting to go to cross there....to the other side of the next border, that distance. There's a river and there is a forest. So they would go through the forest. So what they would do a lot of things I heard. ....there were points where they would be told to remove their clothes and you are with men and you are a woman. You have got a child now already, you are not a girl (you are) a woman.

(Focus group discussion 7, page 34 of research transcript)

Lynn narrates her retrospective reflections about women's positions when travelling through Africa. She says that women ('we') really put themselves at risk during their travels. Lynn travelled alone from Kenya to South Africa. She reflects back on her anonymity in transit and that she was disconnected from her loved ones and the world that she knew back home. She says that if something had happened to her she would have been untraceable, just another nameless and faceless body lost in the dark depths of Africa. She says that she did not think of this risk when she travelling but once she was successfully in South Africa she 'looked back' and reflected on the risk that transit posed and on how many women get damaged or killed in the space of transit and their anonymous bodies left behind.

Chadamwari carries on from Lynn's comment and narrates a story about the many women who died trying to cross the Zimbabwean-South African border illegally. She says that the forest at this border is, 'rich with human bones'. Here she creates a picture of the many Zimbabwean women who died whilst on route to South Africa and conveys a sense of women's vulnerability within the dark, dangerous space of this forest. She constructs a sense of death, decay, and unfulfilled hopes. She says that pressures to get to South Africa (largely caused by the economic situation of Zimbabwe) led to crowds of desperate people crossing to South Africa illegally through these spaces such as the river and the forest. Such a chaotic crowded space, she says, resulted in invasions of women's bodily self. She uses the example of mature women who were told to remove their clothes when crossing the river to South Africa. Her example highlights that women were treated with a lack of respect and a lack of privacy in this space. Through this example she constructs the female body as particularly vulnerable in transit.

Below Chadamwari and Lynn describe the space of transit as fertile ground for the abuse of women.

**Chadamwari:** You experienced it for seven days but here are people who stay there (at the borders), women who stay there that's where they stay and so they wake up to that (and) they sleep to that.

**Lynn:** And you can imagine people that are taking advantage, Chadamwari, who are taking advantage of women that are going through these borders. Every day like, for example, when you go to the bathroom because it is shared whereby you pay. So when you go to the bathroom you must pay. I don't know 1500 Tanzanian shillings or Zambian money. You will see different faces everyday of women. So then you are imagining the people who are taking advantage of these women, how many of them are they seeing on a daily basis (S: Ja). So it's just another life there.

(Focus group discussion 7, page 48 of research transcript)

Lynn constructs a sense that the space of transit is a space in which normal physical and social boundaries of the self are dissolved. She describes the border posts as anonymous spaces that are transient ('you will see different faces everyday of women'). At the same time, however, she suggests that such spaces are intimate and lack privacy, as seen through her descriptions of the sharing of basic necessities. Lynn says that such an environment of name-less women streaming through and the sharing of intimate spaces means that abusive men have ample opportunity to take advantage of many women ('the people who take advantage of these women, how many of them are they seeing on a daily basis'). She comments on the unequal gender dynamics and suggests that women are more vulnerable in transit. She draws on these images of chaos, confusion, and anonymity and says, 'it's just another life there' Here she suggests that transit is a space that operates under social rules that are very different from what she is used to 'back home'.

The women carry on using a similar metaphor.

**Lynn:** I was just thinking being on transit is another world. It is another world and if you get to the border.....that place is so busy and everything is there.

**Chadamwari:** it is also very active.

**Lynn:** Mmmm it is *busy* twenty four hours people go up and down. Everything is happening. So you can imagine.

**Wendy:** In the business that business (of) sexuality is too much.

**Lynn:** it is too much! People are compromising too much.....it is too much you know you go and see and you sit like this and you watch and you see this is like another life all together.

(Focus group discussion 7, page 47 of research transcript)

Lynn starts by describing the space of transit as ‘another world’. She then talks about the particular space of the border posts-places at which people cross over from one country to the next- as ‘busy’ and ‘active’ in terms of the social interactions that take place in these spaces. Lynn says, ‘everything is happening. So you can imagine’. Here she conveys meaning that in such a busy, chaotic space all kinds of social encounters take place, she insinuates that while travelling one is exposed to certain interactions that may not happen publically, or overtly, in other spaces (such as the space of their home countries).

Wendy then unpacks what kind of behaviours take place in transit. She specifically mentions sexual relations (‘that business (of) sexuality is too much’). Her words, ‘too much’ convey meaning that sex in transit is a common and very explicit occurrence and that one’s exposure to sex in transit may transcend certain cultural ‘rules’ of what is moral and acceptable. Lynn concurs that sex is indeed something that is practiced ‘too much’ at these social sites of the border posts. Lynn also says, ‘people are compromising too much’. Here she implies that women compromise in terms of giving their bodies away freely for sexual intercourse. She insinuates that the border posts between countries of Africa are social spaces in which moral values and boundaries of the self, the proper way that things are supposed to be, are dissolved. Lynn positions herself as moral observer (‘you sit like this and watch’) and she says that the social behaviour that she witnessed at these border posts is not something that she has been exposed to in her everyday life. She says that the social environment at the borders is so unusual that it cannot be compared to anything that she knows (‘this is like another life all together’).

The women continue along a similar vein,

**Lynn:** You see Chadamwari and Wendy I don't know whether you (saw this) Wendy like when you travelled very long distance like.....the passengers in the bus they start connecting because the journey is long.

**Chadamwari:** It is long. It is like you are living together.

**Lynn:** Ja, the people like start trusting each other and you are *strangers*. And at night you know the people are already comforting themselves already.

(Focus group discussion 7, page 24 of research transcript)

Lynn begins with an example of social interactions that she witnessed while travelling on the bus long distance through countries of Africa. She says that the passengers in the bus 'start connecting' on these long journeys. She makes a call for other women to discuss their own experiences on the bus by saying 'I don't know whether you (saw this) Wendy like when you travelled very long distance'. Here she appeals to the other women's 'shared experience' of travelling through Africa. Chadamwari concurs and says that, due to the length of the journey that people go through in such an enclosed space, 'It is like you are living together'. Here she suggests that a sense of intimacy and emotional connection develops among African travellers. Lynn says that people who do not know each other beforehand ('strangers') begin to trust each other.

Their narrative suggests their 'shared experience' of travelling (Chadamwari and Lynn both agree that this is something that they witnessed in transit) and they imply that such behaviour is a common occurrence in these spaces. Once again, they confer meaning that the space of transit is a place in which normal 'rules' of social behaviour do not apply (people do not usually trust strangers). They also suggest that usual social boundaries of the self are dissolved. In particular, Lynn implies that sexual/physical borders of the 'self' are transgressed ('at night you know the people are already comforting themselves').

In sum, the women narrated the space of transit as ‘another world’ and as a place where normal social boundaries are dissolved. They specifically mentioned the sexual relations and connections that African travellers engage in. They also conveyed a sense that women’s vulnerability as gendered subjects is heightened within the space of transit. Here they spoke in a general manner, collectively weaving a sense of what they witnessed of others in transit. The women’s descriptions of the social world of transit stood as the foundation for more complex stories. They drew on the context of transit to construct certain kinds of ‘selves’ within the space of this collective biography discussion. The analysis that follows unpacks these collective self-constructions and theorises about both the linguistic and psychological purposes of such narrations.

### **‘YOU ARE DESPERATE AND YOU WANT TO CROSS’: COLLECTIVELY CONSTRUCTING ‘SELVES’ IN THE SPACE OF TRANSIT**

The women narrated a sense of their dire financial situation while travelling through Africa and they juxtaposed this position with a sense of their pressing need to reach South Africa. In doing so, they constructed ‘desperate selves’ in transit and this representation of ‘self’ seemed to play an important narrative function for the women. In the talk below Wendy narrates a sense of women’s desperate situation in transit.

**Wendy:** ...You are in that *need*. When you are travelling you are in that need and we don’t have sometimes enough possibility for your travelling. So it is like...I *want* to arrive in South Africa but I don’t have a possibility [resources]. But I must use it all the way for me to arrive there.

**Lynn:** Arrive there (spoken simultaneously with Wendy).

(Focus group discussion 7, page 32 of research transcript)

Wendy speaks about a collective ‘experience’ of African women who are travelling to South Africa. She uses the pronouns ‘you’ and ‘we’ and thus positions all African women travellers in the same category according to their position of economic deprivation during transit and their will to arrive in South Africa. She says that women who are travelling often do not have enough resources to successfully complete their trip to South Africa (‘I want to arrive in South Africa

but I don't have a possibility [resources]). She represents women travellers as experiencing a certain tension that is caused, she suggests, by the fact that they want to get to South Africa to gain access to a better life with more opportunities but at the same time women do not have the money to successfully complete their journey. Thus, she represents urgency and desperation as characteristic features of women's transit experience ('You are in that *need*').

Wendy utilises these descriptions of the features of women's experiences in transit-the 'need' and the will to get to South Africa-to provide a context that can provide an explanation of why women may be motivated to engage in active strategies that will help them survive in transit and also complete their journey to South Africa. She says, 'I must use it all the way for me to arrive there'. The words 'use it' convey meaning that women in transit need to take any opportunity that they can in terms of survival and resources that will aid their journey.

The women also drew explicitly on images of other African women's behaviour in the oppressive environment of transit.

**Chadamwari:** Before even this South African immigrating thing there were ladies who were travelling to trade and come back home. Just like that....and I know a couple of ladies who became pregnant. I think they got into situations along the way like along the border...and they got home. And I know this other lady who has got a lot of children. Like she had mature children already but her last born child this girl is Indian (**Chadamwari** laughs). (**Lynn:** hoah!).....she has got a husband they stay together they have got other grown up children and this child was just born an Indian (**Lynn:** Oh my goodness!). But the normal thing was the people knowing that it's the mother and the father ja, but she's an Indian.

**Lynn:** Ja, so those are some of the results of.....>...

**Chadamwari:** And to think that if it happens to other people then there becomes a lot of this and that....break down of the family and whatever. But these people are mature people. I think that it was the last act left for this lady because she got an Indian baby (**Chadamwari:** laughing). So people do compromise.

**Lynn:** People do compromise a lot of things, ja.

**S:** Especially women.

**Lynn:** Especially women, ja.

**Chadamwari:** Because they are at a disadvantage and men always get enough for their travels,

(Focus group discussion 7, page 52 of research transcript).

Chadamwari represents her knowledge of how women behave in transit by drawing on one example of a woman that she is familiar with. She draws on her 'experience' as an observer of many women in the Zimbabwean setting ('there were ladies who were travelling to trade and come back home.....I know a couple of ladies who became pregnant'). She says that many women traders 'got into situations along the way like along the border'. Here she speculates that many of these women had sex with strange men in the spaces of the border posts where they were trading.

Chadamwari draws on one particular example of a Black Zimbabwean woman who went to go trade and had sexual relations with an Indian man in the anonymous space of the border post. She describes that this woman was old with her own mature children but she fell pregnant because she had sex with a strange Indian man in transit. The result, she says, was the birth of a child that was Indian. Within the context of Chadamwari's culture (The Shona culture of Zimbabwe) it is not acceptable for women to cheat on their husbands or to have sex for any kind of gain (sexual pleasure or monetary gain) beyond marriage and reproduction (McFadden, 2003). In this case she describes that the Indian child was not fitting with the family, as she was of a different race. The child did not contribute to her family and, as Chadamwari suggests, it was a clear mark of the woman's 'transgressions'. Chadamwari suggests that such behaviour is common among women traders who travel through Africa ('I know a couple of ladies who became pregnant') and that the consequences of such behaviour is commonly evident in the context of Zimbabwe ('But the normal thing was the people knowing that it's the mother and the father ja, but she's an Indian'). Importantly, she represents such behaviour as causing negative consequences for the traditional family unit ('break down of the family').

I call this linguistic image of African women *recognisable feminine subjects* in that the participants construct these women as similar subjects who share the same oppressive environment and motivations as 'they' do. The women use these hypothetical images to paint a

picture of the context of transit and the ways in which this space shapes women's actions. Chadamwari explicitly states that women who do these things in transit are 'mature', here she implies that they are respectable family people who would not normally behave in such a way. They say that the actions of these women are shaped by the space of transit, a context in which many women are placed in a disempowered position and they struggle to survive. As Chadamwari says with regards to the example of the lady who had an Indian baby, 'I think it was the last act left for the lady'. Here she positions the woman as desperate and as not to blame for her actions of sleeping with the Indian man at the border post.

Chadamwari and Lynn say that these types of women engage in certain survival strategies in transit (such as having sex with men) because they are 'desperate' within this space. Importantly they insinuate that the context of transit and women's 'desperate self' make women compromise parts of themselves and do things that are not considered respectable. Lynn explicitly states that the act of 'compromising' is a distinctive feature of women's experience in transit. Chadamwari validates her comment by stating that this is because women 'are at a disadvantage and men always get enough for their travels'. Here they co-construct meaning about the unequal gendered power dynamics in transit whereby women are in a more disempowered position in relation to men. Ultimately, they imply that these women are 'victims' of circumstance and that they should not be judged for their behaviour.

In the talk below Chadamwari and Lynn specifically expand on the motivations of women who have sex with men at border posts during their time in transit to South Africa. They also theorise about the psychological process that are at play when women behave in this way.

**Chadamwari:** It's a coping mechanism because sometimes you don't really want to do it. You are not that kind of person who can do that thing. Things like prostitution....but you end up when you reflect and you think I actually had sex for this you know or I actually did this for that. You know something that you wouldn't do in normal life.

**Lynn:** Exactly.

**Chadamwari:** You compromise.

**Lynn:** You compromise and you block your mind and you don't even know what's right and what's wrong. Your sense of decision making kind of like it shuts down (S: Mmm..mm). So...ja but it is not a good experience. It's terrible.

(Focus group discussion 7, page 49 of research transcript).

Firstly, Chadamwari explicitly names some of these things that happened in transit as ‘prostitution’ and by doing so she attaches emotional significance to such acts. It must be acknowledged that her account of prostitution is situated with the frame of reference of the Zimbabwean Shona culture. Within this culture (as well as many other African cultures) women who engage in prostitution are very often looked upon in disgust and are heavily stigmatised (Tamale, 2011). Chadamwari evaluates and communicates her ideas through a cultural lens that deeply judges women who engage in such an act. In her account of these relations in transit she overtly frames prostitution as undesirable/deviant.

It is significant that Chadamwari does not refer only to her own ‘views’/experiences; rather she speaks in a broad sense and includes the ‘views’ of other ‘African women’-drawing again on the image of *recognizable feminine subjects*. She speaks in a general sense describing why women would engage in relations such as prostitution during their travels through Africa. She says, ‘you end up when you reflect and you think’. Her choice of the word *you* instead of *I* signifies her representation of the experiences/reflections of the other *Sisters for Sisters* members present in the discussion and also the experiences of many other African women who have travelled through Africa. She infers a sense of her authority, as an African woman, to interpret the responses of other females who have journeyed through the African continent.

Chadamwari narratively paints a picture of a feminine African self that stands as a collective, a blanket homogenised category that adheres to certain morals and values. She does this by representing the ‘innate’ character of ‘African women’ travellers. Here she specifically describes women’s will and their motivations to engage in prostitution-like behaviour in transit. Firstly, she says, ‘you are not that kind of person who can do that thing. Things like prostitution’. Here she implies meaning about ‘their’ character as human beings-she implies that for ‘them’ such behaviour is not usual. She also says that prostitution is, ‘something that you wouldn’t do in normal life’. Here she suggests that such liaisons are not a part of ‘their’ everyday, normal behavioural repertoire but that such behaviour may manifest in unusual or highly stressful circumstances-such as those posed at the spaces of the border posts. Secondly, she refers to women’s lack of will to engage in prostitution in transit, she does this by explicitly stating, ‘you really don’t want to do it’. Here she conveys meaning that women do not choose to get involved with men in this way; it is something that they are forced into doing. Chadamwari implies that

‘they’ do not want to engage in such relations but that they go against their will in order to survive or to achieve successful travel to South Africa.

Chadamwari carefully describes the motivations of women who engage in such relations with men in the context of transit. She says, ‘when you reflect back and you think I actually had sex for this you know’ and ‘I actually did this for that’. Here she suggests that women have sex with men because they want to receive something in return. As outlined above, the women construct transit as a space that is characterised by very particular challenges that fall out of the realm of ‘normal life’. They say that the circumstances of transit is characterised by severe vulnerability and financial stressors and they insinuate that their struggle to survive within this space was uniquely challenging. Chadamwari says that women’s motivations to engage in sexual relations with men in transit are to obtain something (‘for this’), a coping mechanism per se that help women to survive in the challenging space of transit. She says, “when you reflect and you think I actually had sex for this you know or I actually did this for that”. Her repetition of the word ‘actually’ serves to solidify her explanation of why women engage in this behaviour. Such solidification (You have sex with strange men in transit for survival, not for any other reason) conveys meaning that women’s motivations are shaped by the gendered economics of poverty that often renders women most vulnerable.

Chadamwari and Lynn also talk about particular psychological strategies that women utilise while travelling through Africa. They state that due to the oppressive environment of transit women are forced to ‘compromise’ themselves. That is, they are forced to give up their own morals and values within the space of transit. This means that they had to consciously separate themselves from the rules of femininity that they had learnt from their culture and their society (such as that of female sexual passivity and restraint). Lynn says that in transit, ‘you block your mind’. Here she draws on psychological discourses and says that they engaged in dissociative-like strategies through which they were cut off from aspects of their own character.

When Lynn says that one has to ‘block their mind’ she connotes meaning about psychologically cutting oneself off from what you are doing (you are acting in an instinctive way in terms of survival). She says that in this psychological state your, ‘decision making shuts down’ and suggests that in transit her mental functioning was not running as normal. She says, ‘you don’t

even know what's right and what's wrong'. In other words, she infers that you are unable to make 'good', socially acceptable decisions. The meaning is clear-due to the stresses in the space of transit they were not functioning on a normal psychological level and thus they cannot be held accountable for their actions within this space.

Lynn elaborates along similar lines,

**Lynn:** Ja, like, for example, me I travelled from Kenya through to Tanzania uh Zambia, Zimbabwe, South Africa. And I experienced a lot of stuff. It was a journey for seven days but the things that I went through I think is two chapters of a book (Lynn: giggling). If I start explaining you one by one you will say, "No, how did you go through that?". You know it's really not easy as an African woman travelling between countries because one you have got limited finance or things have been tough for you at home. You are moving into another country you are going to look for a better life. But in the process of doing that you know you experience a lot of things. For example, myself I had um R1800 from Kenya to South Africa and those are how many countries that I had to go through and it was..it was difficult. It was very, very difficult. There are some things that happened at those border points it just you know things that you really don't want to do but you are desperate and you want to cross and so you are forced to kind of like compromise um with yourself. And I think a lot of people take advantage of um a lot of men take ja take advantage of you know those kind of situations. Especially young women that are going through and you know and personally I have experienced bad things you know being on transit and I have also watched other women what they go through and how they compromise and the things they do and you just look at it and you say um ja it's also another sort of abuse that you never even like kind of classify. (Focus group discussion 7, page 6 of research transcript)

In the extract above Lynn highlights the financial challenges that she faced when she was travelling from Kenya to South Africa. She says that she only had R1800 to finance her seven day trip. With this money she had to cover her bus fare, food, and accommodation costs. She also mentions the challenges she faced in Kenya, her country of origin ('things have been tough for you at home'). She constructs the hardships of 'home' as the reason why she needed to get to South Africa, a place that, according to Lynn, could offer her and her family better opportunities and a life with more human dignity. She highlights a sense of women's desperation in transit. Lynn juxtaposes her need to get to South Africa with her economic deprivation and limited opportunities while travelling. Here she sets up a catch twenty two, she had to get to South

Africa but she had limited possibilities to achieve successful arrival in the country. She uses her economic situation to explain why she may have engaged in certain relations such as ‘connect’ with the man at the border post. If, as she says, she did not have enough money to survive for the entire trip, then her relations with this man may have been one of the only means for her to make it to South Africa successfully.

Lynn represents women’s oppressed position as particularly pronounced in the space of transit. It is a space, she says, in which women’s lack of opportunities is exaggerated and their vulnerabilities are multiplied-particularly when women are travelling alone, as Lynn was, without the ‘support’ of a male partner. I refer to the word ‘support’ in inverted commas here because I acknowledge that support from men may often be a double edged sword. Many women migrants are abused by their intimate partners or other men with whom they share emotional attachments (Jinnah, 2012). However, this said, the presence of a male partner or male family member may, to some extent, provide women with financial resources or ward of advances from other men-thus often helping women to maintain a less vulnerable position in transit.

It is through a description of her situation of poverty and deprivation while travelling to South Africa that Lynn insinuates that her engagement with this man at the border post was a survival strategy and not an active choice per say (‘things that you don’t want to do’). Lynn suggests that she did not choose to engage in such behaviour in transit (‘you don’t really want to’, ‘you are forced’). She also implies that some of the things that she did at these border posts went against her own morals and values (‘you are forced to compromise with yourself’). She says that she had to do these things because she had no money and she needed to get to South Africa. She explicitly uses the word ‘compromise’; this suggests an active mental negotiation whereby one evaluates a social situation and acts according to the perceived options available. Here she infers that she disconnected from her ‘true’ moral self to cope with the challenging environment in transit.

Lynn’s use of the word ‘force’ further suggests that there are not many other choices available to women in this position. For example, what would happen to women who, like Lynn, are desperate in transit but who do not compromise their morals and values? Many women may get stuck in an African country while enroute to South Africa. Indeed Wendy experienced such a

thing when she left her home country and then got ‘stuck’ in Angola for four years struggling to survive and to make enough money to complete her journey to South Africa. Other women travellers may be forced to return back to dire situations in their home countries.

It is significant that Lynn extends this description of transit beyond elements of her own experience. She comments broadly on the experiences and hardships of ‘African women’, *or recognizable feminine subjects*, who often face severe economic deprivation when they are travelling through Africa. She says, ‘I have also watched other women what they go through and how they compromise and the things they do’. She says that many other African women travellers have experiences that are very similar to her own experiences and that many of these women respond in the same way as she did (by ‘compromising’). Importantly, she insinuates that these women do these ‘bad’ things because of their economic deprivation that renders them in a lesser position of power in relation to men. Here she positions all ‘African women’ in the same category in terms of social dimensions and experience. By doing so she positions herself within the collective identity of ‘African women’ (‘it is not easy as an African women travelling between countries’).

It is significant that Lynn narratively connects her own experiences with the experiences of *recognizable feminine subjects* and she draws on discourses of societal gendered power imbalances to narrate women’s experience in the public space of the African border posts. She highlights women’s powerless position in relation to men. Here she affirms men’s personal responsibility during these interactions by explicitly stating that men ‘take advantage’ of women’s ‘desperation’ situation in transit. She also implies that this is a common occurrence (‘a lot’ of men do this). In this way she de-privatises her own experiences with the man at the border post. She also seems to soften women’s responsibility by insinuating that women’s actions are shaped by the context of transit and not by any aspect of their characters. It is through this contextualised gendered lens that she is able to define such border post relations as ‘another sort of abuse that you never even kind of classify’.

The naming of abuse is often thwarted by the challenges of language and certain cultural scripts that are structured around strict definitions of what constitutes ‘abuse’ and ‘victim’ (Lamb, 1999; Lempert, 1996). Such dominant scripts determine that events should only be classified as abuse

when they are severe, extreme acts that leave marks on women's bodies, and they should be exceptional (ie, not a common occurrence) (Kelly & Radford, 1996). In other words, experiences of abuse (within the context of this talk I refer specifically to instances where women are forced into sex because of their dire situation in transit), that are transient, that do not show overt signs of damage and that are often silenced (as many women's experiences in transit are) may be difficult for women to label as 'abuse'.

Women also have to fit certain criteria in order to achieve the status of 'true victim' (Lamb, 1999). Women's status as 'victim' is judged through an examination of their actions and agentic capacity within the situation that the abuse occurs. Generally women who adhere to hyper-feminine ways of being are granted the status of 'true victim'-that is, they need to be passive, non-agentic recipients of abuse. If a woman exhibits agency and choice in her situation then the boundaries between powerful male perpetrator and powerless female victim become blurred and women are then seen to play a part in the event, they are considered to be culpable and therefore blameworthy. Women's relational engagements with men are often framed in gender-neutral ways. Such encounters with men at border posts may, for instance, be framed as mutually beneficial 'exchanges' that women choose to be engaged in. Under these circumstances women may not be accorded the status of 'true victim' (Lamb, 1999).

In spite of such discursive challenges, Lynn does achieve the definition of 'abuse'. The ability to define one's experiences as 'abuse' is an important part of women's interpretive repertoire and such definitions significantly shape women's subjectivity. Hage (2006) says that defining one's experiences as abuse is a crucial part of the healing process. In addition, Profitt (2000b) has found that naming and interpreting traumatic experiences as abuse and interpreting these experiences through a different lens are crucial components of women's socio-psychological movement from the position of individual survivor to the position of political actor. Such transformation is not a linear or rapid journey; women may constantly fluctuate between positioning themselves as 'victim' or 'survivor' at different moments and such positionings are dependent on the complex material and contextual realities of women's lives (Boonzaier & de la Rey, 2003).

Personal transformation takes place over many different occasions; spaces that offer women the opportunity to (re)-narrate their experiences in ways that contradict hegemonic scripts of masculinity and femininity. So overcoming these challenges of naming and recognising abuse is an important part of Lynn's transformative journey. By defining such experiences as abuse Lynn narratively frames these experiences and crafts an alternative reality for herself. She also narratively produces a very specific reality for her audience-the women taking part in this collective biography discussion.

So, ultimately, the women construct the place and time of transit as a specific chapter/snippet of life within which women's vulnerabilities are heightened. They juxtapose a sense of their deep need to get to South Africa with their pressing economic circumstances in transit. They construct the hardships of 'home' as the reason why they needed to get to South Africa, a place that, they say, could offer them and their family better opportunities and a life with more human dignity. This sentiment was repeated throughout this discussion. The women explained that they wanted to get to South Africa because the country could offer them a better, more fulfilling life with a greater sense of self-worth. This may not be the practical reality of the women's current lives in South Africa. However, they retrospectively narrate such expectations, perhaps to reinforce a sense of their urgent *need* to arrive successfully on South African soil.

Lynn, Chadamwari, and Wendy convey meaning that the social context of transit shaped their motivations and behaviour. They say that a 'desperate self' emerged in this space and that this 'desperate self' was forced to compromise and behave in ways that are incompatible with their own values. Importantly, they say that they were not functioning on normal psychological levels in transit and they were disconnected from their 'true' selves. The 'desperate' self functioned in this particular space. They also convey meaning that this 'desperate' self is a kind of 'foreigner' in the sense that it behaved in ways that are very different to their 'true selves'. By constructing the 'real self' as tuned off in transit they confer meaning that they are not accountable for their actions within this space.

The women also draw on images of *recognizable feminine subjects* whose behaviour and motivations are shaped by the challenging environment of transit. In this way they de-privatise their own experiences at these border posts and situate them within the broader context of

unequal gendered power dynamics between men and women. By highlighting the social context of unequal gender relations, the women represent female ‘connections’ with men in transit as based on women’s need in a society that is oppressive toward the feminine and in which women are often treated as second class citizens. McFadden (2003) says that such connection of personal experience with the realities of others is a critical feminist resource and stands as a crucial tool by which individuals can analyse their experiences. Here the women’s narrative connection of their own experiences with the experiences of other women serves to situate these encounters at border posts within the wider social context of women’s oppression. In turn they are able to linguistically frame their experiences as ‘abuse’. The naming of such experience is a crucial part of women’s transformational journey (Hage, 2006: Profitt, 2000a).

It is through these contextualised images of the ‘desperate foreigner self’ and the self as ‘victim’ that the women manage a sense of blame within the space of the discussion. They linguistically place blame on the specific space of transit and the ‘foreigner selves’ and by doing so, they displace themselves from blameworthy positions in the moment of telling. This applies equally to managing judgement about their actions from the listening others who were taking part in the collective biography discussion and also to judgement from “imagined” hypothetical others in the world. The next section examines Lynn, Wendy, and Chadamwari’s talk about another kind of ‘foreigner self’ that emerged in the space of transit.

### **‘I JUST BECAME ANOTHER PERSON’: NARRATING THE ‘PATHOLOGICAL SELF’ IN TRANSIT**

#### *The instinctual survival ‘self’*

In addition to the focus on the financial challenges and stressors in the space of transit, the women narrated transit as a space within which a very different kind of ‘self’ emerged. Lynn talks about her psychological ‘experience’ when she was travelling through the countries of Africa on her way to South Africa.

**Lynn:** I think also the other thing that makes it worse (in transit) is if you are coming from a family that is not functioning properly or you are coming from an abusive relationship. For example myself, travelling in between those countries you have got that unhealthy bond that you always want to be attached to someone. I don't know if you experienced what I did? Ja, like just to feel protected and...(**Chadamwari:** There is somebody for you). Yes, and you really don't know yourself so it is very, very difficult for you to make your own decisions as a person. You kind of keep leaning and what I experienced I can't speak for everyone but I can just speak out my experience and what I have watched and what I think, most of the people that come from broken families that are running from one country to another-families that are not functioning properly-they ..they are much more vulnerable to the men that take advantage of them on the way (**Chadamwari:** Mmm). And this is something that I have watched.  
(Focus group discussion 7, page 20 of research transcript).

Lynn provides additional explanations for why some women may engage in relations with men in transit. She says that particular versions of the past-relationships of abuse or a family that is not functioning properly-makes transit 'worse' for certain women in that it heightens women's vulnerability within this already challenging space. Lynn situates her own experience in transit within the context of the experiences of other women who come from 'broken families' and who are 'running from country to country'. Here she situates herself as a moral observer and comments on the cycle of violence in women's lives. She comments particularly on the 'fact' that women in transit are negatively affected by their past experiences of abuse ('not functioning properly') and she says that this makes them more vulnerable to men in transit who may want to take advantage of them.

Lynn says that she did not feel confident functioning in the world of transit, as a woman who was travelling alone. She conveys meaning that she did certain things in transit 'just to feel protected'. Her words 'you kind of keep leaning' convey a sense of her 'powerlessness' in transit and her need for emotional support. Chadamwari immediately concurs with her by saying that women may act in a certain way to feel that, 'there is somebody there for you'. Here Chadamwari contributes to a shared understanding of what it is like to be an 'abused woman' traveling through Africa who 'feels' vulnerable and in need of support. Chadamwari implies that attachments with men in transit have significance as they provide 'vulnerable' women with emotional resources.

Lynn thus narrates her 'self' in transit as 'vulnerable' and 'weak'- a 'self' that was not behaving in a normal way. She says that she was 'not functioning properly'. She gives a concrete example of this abnormal behaviour-an 'unhealthy bond' that caused her to 'always want to be attached to someone'. Here she conveys a sense that she experienced a compulsive need for connections with men-even if these men were the 'wrong' people who would take advantage of her. So Lynn describes herself as being entrapped in a web of compulsion, in continual need of attachment because of her sense of vulnerability in the world.

Importantly, she conveys meaning that these feelings of vulnerability were a result of her abusive past and the accumulation of violence that she has experienced throughout her lifetime ('if you are coming from a family that is not functioning properly or you are coming from an abusive relationship'). As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Lynn has experienced a multitude of different kinds of gendered abuse during her lifetime; including recurring sexual abuse in childhood and young adulthood and years of physical and emotional abuse at the hands of her husband. Here Lynn draws on her past abuse to continue the story of her experiences at the border posts. She insinuates meaning that her abusive experiences have resulted in a kind of damaged, non-agentic person -see through her descriptions of self, 'you don't really know yourself' and 'it is very, very difficult for you to make your own decisions as a person'.

Further, she suggests that this psychological damage manifested in pathological behaviour (such as sex at the border post) in the stressful space of transit when she was travelling alone. She says that it is because of these past experiences that she lost a sense of the nature of healthy relationships and in certain situations, like when she was 'travelling in between those countries', she felt that she needed to depend on a man, or someone who she perceived as more powerful in relation to herself. Ultimately, she says that the accumulation of violence throughout her life has shaped a 'pathological self'. Similarly, in their social constructionist research on abused women's agency through narrative, Reavey and Gough (2000) found that women's accounts of their current self are structured around their past experiences of abuse and how it relates to their reactions to certain gendered interactions in the present. They conceptualised this linking between past and present as an agentic strategy on women's part as it allowed women to manage dilemmas about the role that they have played in past abuse.

Lynn draws on psychological scripts of trauma and ‘abused women’ and psychoanalytic scripts of victimisation to paint a picture of her psyche in transit. Early feminist concepts such as Walker’s (1979b) ‘battered women’s syndrome’, Dutton and Painters (1993) ‘traumatic bonding’ and Herman’s (1992) ‘captivity’ have entrenched dominant understandings of ‘abused women’ as passive, helpless non-agents (Shefer, 2004). While such notions functioned to highlight the problem of woman abuse, such dominant modes of seeing the world often pathologise abused women, portraying an image of females as helpless and non-agentic victims of male power. For example, Dutton & Painter’s (1994) ‘traumatic bonding’ refers to certain emotional ties that abused women have to an abuser. In their study on women’s retrospective accounts of leaving abusers, Enander & Holmberg (2008) found that the process of leaving and recovering from abuse entails women overcoming such emotional ties (such as guilt).

Such scripts convey meaning that ‘typical’ abused women are psychologically scarred and damaged from abuse (O’Dell, 2003) and their past pathology is linked to their present subjectivity via a strong emotional bond to their abusive past. From a psychoanalytic perspective, women who experience this traumatic bond are said to be pathologically attached to some symbolic representation of the abuse and this attachment leads to their repetition of situations/events that may expose them to further abuse. Such repetition is seen to be an attempt at mastery over a past event in which one experienced severe powerlessness in relation to the perpetrator.

So Lynn draws on such scripts to make sense of her complex experiences in transit. She describes herself as ‘abused woman’ who is caught up in such a cycle of repetition and pathology that forms part of the repertoire of the traumatic bonding script. Lynn describes her past as encroaching on her travelling self and represents herself as tied to her traumatic past. She says that her behaviour is caused by her abuse and the many real and imagined perpetrators that she ‘holds’ within herself. By doing so she positions her ‘self’ in transit as ‘powerless’ in relation to her abusive past.

Instead of interpreting her story as representing some kind of innate pathology, I wondered why Lynn chose to convey her story through such repertoires of understanding. According to the majority of hegemonic cultural scripts, the masculine is linked with agency and the feminine is

linked with a lack of agency. Thus, the chains of meaning making linking a past lack of agency with present obstacles to agency (I was abused in the past therefore I am 'weak' and 'powerless') are easily and readily established by women (Reavey & Brown, 2009). Lynn does not only choose to tell her story in this way because it is culturally one of the easiest versions of the story to tell. She transforms her past in such a way that she can position her current 'self' as not associated with this 'powerlessness'. According to my interpretation, there are significant reasons why she composes her story in this way. It is through such scripts of understanding that Lynn has the opportunity to position herself in certain ways that hold important meaning for her linguistic project of the self within the collective biography setting.

When one looks deeper into the meaning that Lynn makes about her 'self' in transit it is evident that she does not construct this 'pathological self' as part of her innate stable self. Lynn's words, 'you have got' suggests that this pathology is a behavioural way of relating to the world that she has picked up along the way, it is baggage that she is carrying. Thus, it seems as if Lynn does not represent this pathology as part of any kind of 'true self' that exists beyond transit. Rather she represents such pathological behaviour as a strategy for coping with the world that she has developed over years of physical and sexual degradation. She says that her unhealthy bond is caused by her past experiences of abuse and this bond manifests in the stressful space where she was 'running from country to country'. She insinuates that it is within the specific context of transit that she was not in control over her responses. Lynn's construction of the 'pathological self' in transit serves a particular narrative purpose.

Lynn represents her engagements in transit as fuelled by another force, the all penetrable influence of her past experiences of degradation and violation that persist through repetition and the 'pathological self'. Ultimately, she narrates this traumatic bond as taking hold of one part of her subjectivity-her pathological, broken self that manifests in the space of transit. She says that this pathological 'abused self' went beyond her own moral boundaries within the space of transit and, by doing so; she places the locus of control on the 'pathological' self. She insinuates that her 'true', stable self is of a different character and would not make the same kinds of decisions as the 'pathological self'. Through this description she linguistically dislocates blame for what happened in transit from herself as a person and instead places blame on the behaviour of the 'pathological self', an overwhelmed 'self' that is an effect of her past abuse. According to my

interpretation, this is the narrative purpose of her utilisation of psychological discourses of trauma and the 'pathological self'.

Lynn and Chadamwari elaborate on this other 'self' in transit.

**Lynn:** And then you go beyond your boundaries and you know...

**Chadamwari:** You don't have any boundaries at that point.

**Lynn:** I think you don't have any boundaries.

**Chadamwari:** And you regain them when you get to the other side [South Africa].

**Lynn:** To the other side. And then it's funny because now I have just remembered and when you reach your destination [South Africa] then you become another person. So it is kind of a personality split and I don't know whether this is coming from the abuse that somebody has experienced. Especially in childhood where maybe you have had uh assault and stuff. You know it kind of like splits you. Then it's like again when you reach (South Africa) then that person is gone then you become somebody else. Now you are in South Africa you are good.

(Focus group discussion 7, page 49 of research transcript).

Lynn and Chadamwari reflect back on their experiences and co-narrate a kind of blurred boundaries of the self that occurred when they were travelling crossing the geographical borders of countries in Africa. Once again, their continuous use of the pronoun 'you' gives the impression that they are referring to a broader frame of reference beyond just their own experiences. As such their use of language suggests that they are representing the broader experience of many African women who have travelled through Africa.

Lynn says in the first line that you 'go beyond' your boundaries. Here she suggests that in transit one would behave in slightly more extreme ways than usual. Chadamwari says directly after, finishing off Lynn's sentence, 'You don't have any boundaries at that point'. This point is then reiterated by Lynn ('I don't think you have any boundaries'). Here Lynn validates Chadamwari's interpretation that in fact one loses all boundaries in transit. The boundaries that they speak of here seem to refer to moral boundaries of the self. Many women have been socialised into the

rules of ‘appropriate’ female conduct and socially accepted ways of managing their bodies and minds in certain spaces (McFadden, 2003). Self surveillance or the establishment of moral boundaries and proper conduct are particularly important for women when they are in public spaces, such as the space of transit in Africa, in which they are vulnerable to scrutiny and degradation if they do not handle themselves ‘correctly’ (see Tamale, 2011b). Above, Lynn and Chadamwari say that they had no boundaries in the space of transit. Here they convey meaning that they did not have any sense of a moral base to restrict their behaviour.

Lynn draws on trauma discourses that are available to her to give story to her ‘experiences’ in transit. Firstly, she mentions the notion of ‘splitting’. The discursive meaning around ‘splitting’ in psychological terms refers to a defence mechanism whereby a traumatised person compartmentalises certain painful and overwhelming aspects of their traumatic experience and their betrayed self. Lynn uses this notion in her account to refer to the ‘splitting off’ of certain parts of the personality that may be caused by past experiences of gendered abuse. This refers specifically to dissociative identity disorder-the manifestation of many identities in one person that emerge as a result of repeated abuse in childhood. Lynn says that women’s past experiences of abuse at the hands of men often affect women to the extent that they become fragmented (‘it kind of splits you’). Such a description of the self as ‘split in two’ or as acquiring ‘another self’ is a common narrative resource used by women who are giving meaning to their ‘selves’ ‘post’ sexual abuse (Davies, 1995).

Such descriptions are often taken at ‘face value’ to represent some form of innate pathology of the women narrators. Again, I do not explore these narratives with the assumption that they represent any ‘true’ pathology. Rather, I look at the ways in which Lynn works with these discourses and what this tells us about ‘truth’, subjectivity, and identity as they manifest within the space of this particular collective biography discussion. Taylor (2010) refers to such discourses as a narrative resource through which women can make meaning about their experiences. Lynn uses this particular narrative resource to achieve particular constructions in her talk. At the same time these constructions provide insight into what I call the narrative purpose - what she wants to achieve in her account.

By drawing on psychological discourses of the psychic damage that is caused by trauma and abuse, Lynn communicates a sense that her personality was divided into two distinct parts- a 'bad self' and a 'good self'. According to Lynn, this 'bad' self is a kind of psychological alter and it emerges in the stressful space of transit, it is not connected to good morals and values and engages in 'inappropriate' behaviour such as sexual liaisons with men or other forbidden acts of sexual agency. Lynn constructs disconnect between these two selves. She describes the 'good' self and the 'bad' self as two separate kinds of identities that do not function simultaneously but are rather mutually exclusive.

Such constructions resonate with the 'Madonna'/ 'Whore' dichotomy (see MacDonald, 1995) that associate women's value and worth with the ways in which they behave sexually. According to such scripts women who do not obey social rules about female sexuality are of less worth and value than women who practice sexual passivity and restraint. A 'good' self that has morals and values and behaves in line with social rules is associated with greater social worth. Lynn draws on such meanings to give 'truth' to her account of the switching of different selves (the 'good' person and its contradictory 'bad' alter).

Chadamwari states that the loss of boundaries occurs specifically within the space of transit 'at that point' in your life where you experience unique challenges and stress. Chadamwari says that you regain these moral boundaries when you get to 'the other side', i.e. when you successfully cross the crazy domain of transit and you reach your destination, South Africa. She says that one does not have any moral boundaries while they are in transit but that these moral boundaries re-establish when one has arrived in South Africa. She implies that the moral 'good' self is the true self that 'returned' when she reached South Africa. Lynn says, 'it's funny because now I have just remembered'. Here she suggests that Chadamwari's statement stimulated her 'memory' of what commenced when she reached South Africa.

Lynn then goes one step further and says that when one reaches the destination South Africa then one becomes 'another person'. She says that when you reach South Africa the person that you were during transit disappears ('is gone') and that in South Africa you become someone else (a 'good' person). Here she gives an account of this 'bad' self as a temporary occurrence as it emerges only in the space of transit. In South Africa the 'bad' self is no longer relevant to her

sense of self as a moral being, it does not exist in this space, she says. She explicitly names this person in South Africa as 'good'. She describes South Africa as the place within which one re-established one's social boundaries and 'becomes' one's 'true' self again.

Lynn and Chadamwari collectively weave a 'tapestry' of common understanding (Davies & Gannon, 2006b) to convey an understanding of the emergence of these two types of selves. We see that they draw on space associations and represent the 'bad' 'pathological self' as connected to the space of transit in Africa and the 'good' moral self as connected to the space of South Africa.

In the section of talk below the women expand on these place associations.

**Wendy:** You want to get there [South Africa] so you focus.

**Lynn:** I think you become another person.

**Wendy:** Yes! I got your idea. You are another person. (I) am not me. So when you cross (the border and get to South Africa) you see wah, that's me. By the time you are front there [at the border] that South African is going to kill you. You see you are like somebody who want to died [you take the risk]. But you want to pass there. Maybe there is the gun but you must pass.

(Focus group discussion 7, page 39 of research transcript)

And,

**Wendy:** ....There was a lion and we pass the border there and we get in [into South Africa]. We get in tough at night.....we don't know where we are going to go but we are inside South Africa now because we see light. So Namibia more than South Africa, Namibia is dark. So when you pass into South Africa then there is light, like heaven (Chadamwari: like heaven). Ja, you see so we cross there we sit in a bush there. It is quiet. Even the baby don't [didn't] cry. Even the baby because I bring xxxxx [daughter's name] she was here (on my back).

(Focus group discussion 7, page 63 of research transcript)

The women continue a narration of a kind of switching of 'selves', or blurred boundaries of the 'self', that occurred during their journey to South Africa. Wendy once again draws on women's

strong will to get to South Africa ('You want to get there so you focus') and this stands as the basis of their descriptions of 'self' in transit. Lynn says, 'I think you become another person'. Here she connotes a sense that the strong focus to get to South Africa moulded another type of self that was geared towards survival. Wendy narratively connects with Lynn by saying, 'Yes! I got your idea. You are another person'. Her use of language suggests that something else is taking over in transit, something with a very different personality and behaviours. She suggests that this other person, what I have called the 'pathological self', 'existed' in stark comparison to who she knows herself to be ('(I) am not me').

Wendy expands on this 'pathological self' in transit by providing an example of when she reached the border post between Namibia and South Africa. She crossed this border 'illegally' as she did not go through the main border post. She told us that she and a group of other people hired some people to give them a lift through the desert in Namibia. She says that once they had received the money these people cheated them and threw them out the taxi, leaving them stranded in the dark to find their own way through Namibia. In the excerpt above she expands on the challenges of her trip and specifically describes the dangers that they faced when they reached the South African border ('By the time you are front there [at the border] that South African is going to kill you', 'There was a lion').

Thus, as seen within the context of Wendy's story, the 'pathological self' is represented as a means to cope with the stressful and dangerous environment of transit. She constructs this 'pathological self' in transit as a 'self' that is geared towards survival. She represents this 'self' as driven by a need to get into South Africa ('But you want to pass there') and says that she took various risks in this context ('You are like somebody who want to die' and 'Maybe there is a gun but you must pass'). Ultimately, she narrates the 'pathological self' as a temporary manifestation that only 'existed' in the dangerous and threatening space of transit through Africa. She explicitly states that on arrival to South Africa she returned to the recognisable state of her 'true' stable 'self' ('So when you cross (the border and get to South Africa) you see wah, that's me').

The women in this specific collective biography discussion associate these 'good' and 'bad' selves with specific places/spaces on the map of their life journey. They draw on what Davies et al. (2006b) call 'moral landscapes' (p. 38) in terms of their implied meaning about 'acceptable' /

‘non-acceptable’ ways of conducting oneself. The meanings that they narrated about morality and ‘goodness’ were closely connected to linguistic images of specific places (the space of transit, the space of South Africa). It is significant that South Africa is the space that is associated with the ‘good’ self. Throughout the discussions the women spoke about their need to reach South Africa and they constructed South Africa as a better life, a place of ‘greener pastures’ and morality (‘So when you pass into South Africa then there is light, like heaven’). On the other hand the space of transit, a challenging and stressful space for the women, is constructed as a blurred, dark, dangerous space that is associated with the ‘bad’ self.

This neat association of certain selves with particular social spaces seems to serve an important narrative function for the women. If their ‘self’ in South Africa (the ‘true’ self) is so different from the self in transit and if this ‘bad’ self no longer exists in South Africa (‘is gone’) then the women narratively separate their current selves from any ‘inappropriate’ behaviour in transit. Their ‘true’ self cannot be blamed for their actions in transit because the transient ‘bad’ self was in control in this context. By engaging in space associations the women discuss these ‘inappropriate’ actions in transit without implicating their ‘true selves’ as actors who behaved in a morally incorrect manner.

By drawing on the ‘pathological self’ in transit the women were also able to position themselves as ‘powerless’ over their actions in transit, as ‘true victim’ (see Lamb, 1999) who is not to blame for their actions in that space. Here they seem to adhere to dominant scripts of abused women as powerless and passive in relation to their abusers. However, by narratively associating these ‘powerless selves’ with the space of transit, the women do not own this ‘powerless’ position. At the same time they were able to position their current self-in South Africa as ‘good’ person who ‘looks back’ on their past ‘pathological self’ from the position of powerful moral agent who has control over their behaviour. They imply that they have moral boundaries and they have the capacity to respond to the world in ‘appropriate’ ways and to manage social boundaries of self and other. Lynn and Chadamwari have both been living in South Africa for more than eight years and they position themselves in line with the post-transit morally correct ‘self’ and maintain positive subjectivities even while aligning to the dominant scripts of ‘powerlessness victims’.

So the women drew on space associations in order to position themselves in terms of their power and agency in the world. These findings concur with the work of researchers in the social constructionist field who have done work on memory, identity, and space. Such work has highlighted that narrators utilise meanings around space to construct a sense of their power(lessness) in the recollected moment. Taylor (2010), for example, highlights how spaces are imbued with certain social meanings and she argues that place/space stands as an important narrative resource in the meaning that women make about themselves and their lives. In addition, Reavey (2012) argued that survivors of gendered abuse draw on material locations in their process of remembering abusive events and that these material locations play a significant role in producing positions of agency and representations of themselves as powerful/powerless in relation to men. The next subsection outlines slightly different versions of this ‘pathological self’.

*Beyond survival: ‘You are just enjoying the life that’s around you’*

Below Lynn and Chadamwari expand on the ‘pathological self’ in transit with what seems to be a more positive representation of their experience within this space.

**Lynn:** And then I don’t know if you experienced this. But what I experienced when I was travelling and I was going through there I kind of like blocked off everything else. Do I make sense? I put aside (myself) it is like I just became another person.

**Chadamwari:** you give yourself to the situation.

**Lynn:** I gave myself to the situation. But also I kind of like you know I was a different person in the sense that I forgot about any other thing.

**Chadamwari:** You are not thinking about anything.

**Lynn:** I wasn’t thinking about anything..... (I was thinking) of the travelling what is happening at that moment and I enjoyed what was happening at that particular time. For those days. So it is like I became another Lynn altogether.

(Focus group discussion 7, page 32 of research transcript)

And,

**Lynn:** But you know from the very moment...you want to be there [South Africa] but you are not even thinking about your destination. You are just enjoying the life that’s around you. It’s like you are living. (Wendy: Ja). And you just live and I am sure you guys (agree). You are sleeping, you are waking up, you are having breakfast.....

**Wendy:**.....<....and you don't see nothing.

(Focus group discussion 7, page 33 of research transcript)

Lynn and Chadamwari jointly construct a sense of this other 'self' in transit by drawing on their shared knowledge of travelling through Africa. Lynn begins by addressing Chadamwari and Wendy, 'I don't know if you experienced this' and 'do I make sense?'. Her use of language suggests that she is seeking validation from the other women who both have experience of travelling through Africa. Such a validation may 'give weight' to her rather unconventional story about her 'enjoyment' in transit (I enjoyed what was happening' and 'You are just enjoying the life that's around you').

Lynn's description of her 'enjoyment' in transit stood out strongly for me when I first read over this transcript. At other moments (seen throughout this chapter) Lynn explicitly defines such relations in transit as woman abuse (men using women sexually) and she gives a detailed narrative of her severe financial hardships during her travels. Her words in the second extract, 'you are not even thinking about your destination' go against the main themes that emerged in this discussion-women's urgent need to pass through transit and reach South Africa. 'Her inclusion of 'enjoyment' as an experiential element of her time in transit thus runs in contradiction to the main thread of her narrative. Narrating these experiences as 'enjoyable' may have very particular implications for Lynn's identity project.

Firstly, by including this element of 'enjoyment' Lynn suggests that her experience in transit was more complex than initially described. Narratively she conveys meaning that her feelings/emotions during transit were more complex than what is socially expected of the 'pure victim', ie. these experiences were not all bad. According to Reavey and Brown (2009) ambiguities are not mere rhetorical devices; rather they represent things that are difficult for the narrator to situate within a clear narrative understanding. Abusive experiences are not 'clean cut' and relations between men and women may involve a complex set of fluctuating emotions and feelings. An abused women's sense of powerlessness/power in relation to an abuser fluctuates at different moments (Boonzaier, 2008) and with these fluctuations certain oscillations of 'pleasure' and 'pain' may arise. This is in fact the central tenant of theories of 'traumatic

bonding'- that abused women experience bonds of love/affection that co-exist with feelings of hatred towards their abusers (see Dutton & Painter, 1994).

Such complexities can be illuminated by briefly unpacking the example of Lynn's travels. Although she travelled alone and describes herself to be 'desperate' and 'fearful' during this challenging time, Lynn may have found some comfort through her relations with this man at the border post. This engagement may have provided her with a touch of humanity and feelings of being needed and may have given her the strength to continue her journey to South Africa. This is by no way going against Lynn's definition of her experiences as abuse; it is acknowledging that even the most severe episodes of abuse may evoke emotion that does not fit with hegemonic scripts of what the victim 'should' be feeling. Lynn's account of her 'enjoyment' during transit creates ambiguity about herself as all powerless 'victim'.

Reavey and Brown (2007) argue that narrations of 'enjoyment' in accounts of abuse render women's ambiguity about their sexual agency concrete. They say that women's narratives are characterised by dilemmas about how to read their own agency and the agency of others. Ultimately, acknowledging an element of ambiguity in past episodes of abuse is central to maintaining a sense of agency in the present (I chose to act in a certain way then because in essence I am an agentic being, 'I am not all powerless') (Reavey & Brown, 2009). So ambiguity in abused women's accounts is a means for women to grapple with a sense of their own agency, even in the face of stories of victimisation and disempowerment (Reavey & Brown, 2007). By creating ambivalence in her account Lynn is able to depart, albeit temporarily, from the dominant cultural scripts that convey meaning of the all powerless and all passive female victim. Here she can narrate the complexity of her experience in a more rich and nuanced way. She can express aspects of her experience that she may have not been previously able to associate with her 'survivor self'-such as elements of agency, choice, or pleasure. Ultimately, Lynn's ambiguous account of her experience in transit allows her to move into uncharted territory-both linguistically and ontologically.

This uncharted territory may, however, be dangerous as threads of meaning about her own agency during these events could convey a sense that that she is somehow to blame. In the face of socio-cultural strictures that dictate appropriate ways for women to behave, Lynn may not

easily be able to narrate certain actions in transit such as the relations with the man at the border post. These actions may be judged harshly and such tellings may make one vulnerable to stigma and blame from others. It may also generate negative feelings of anxiety and shame about what one has done. If women connect any kind of ‘enjoyment’ with their experiences then this may also problematize their positions as ‘true victims’ and these experiences may not be granted the status of ‘abuse’ (see Lamb, 1999). Such a construction could destroy the neat picture that Lynn has painted of her status as a ‘victim’ of gender imbalances and of her *motivations* (‘financial need’) to engage in certain relations in transit. When women tell ‘clean’ one dimensional stories about themselves (such as narrating oneself as all powerless and passive female victims in relation to male abusers) this may not be descriptive of the full complexity of women’s experiences. However, women often do not have the linguistic tools to narrate such complexities.

According to my interpretation, Lynn is able to narrate her ‘enjoyment’ in transit by linguistically adopting the image of the ‘pathological’ self. This image was collectively constructed throughout the focus group discussion. Lempert (1996) calls this kind of co-construction “women to women talk” and defines it as a process by which women narrate shared assumptions about their experiences that ultimately lead to new understandings about their experience. Lempert (1996) says that when experiences are difficult to communicate-such as experiences that are silenced by society or behaviour that is not entirely socially acceptable- then women rely on the shared experiences of being female for some degree of understanding.

Lynn says, ‘I enjoyed what happened at that particular time. *For those days*’. Here she explicitly states that the ‘enjoyment’ was specific to the time/space of transit. Lynn also says, ‘I put aside (myself) it is like I became another person’. Here she connotes meaning that something else took over in transit and her ‘true self’ was not operating within this space (‘I was a different person’; ‘I just became another person’). Lynn and Chadamwari construct women’s responses in general (‘you’) to the chaotic and strange world of transit. They say, ‘You give yourself to the situation’. This connotes a sense of fluidity, a kind of motion of the self whereby one adapts to the environment by morphing into something else (‘I became another Lynn altogether’). Here they suggest that women go with the flow and they let go of restraint in order to cope with this unusual world of transit.

The women carry on explaining that this process of morphing involved a kind of psychological disengagement whereby they disconnected from their values and their responsibilities. Lynn says, 'When I was going through transit I kind of blocked off everything else'. She describes that within the space of transit thoughts of 'normal' life did not infiltrate her mind. Lynn and Chadamwari co-narrate a sense that women are 'not thinking about anything'. This use of language seems to signify a kind of dissociation from socially shaped aspects of the 'self' such as morals, values and responsibilities. In the second excerpt Wendy concurs by saying, 'you don't see nothing'. Ultimately the women suggest that the processes in transit involve a psychological disengagement from certain social-cultural rules of what it means to be a 'good' woman-such as the role of wife and mother and certain prescriptions of how women should behave ('good' female sexuality, for example). In addition, Lynn's words in the second excerpt, 'It's like you are living' convey a sense that the experience of dissociation was, on some level, positive.

So they describe the 'pathological self' in transit as a 'foreigner' within themselves in the sense that this 'self' behaved in unknown, unusual ways. They described the 'pathological self' as disconnected from their moral values and mental capacities. We gain a sense that the mental wiring of this other 'self' in transit was different and it was not 'weighed down' by a sense of social responsibility and moral boundaries. The narratives suggest that this 'pathological self' was not affected by feelings of guilt or shame and therefore it could behave in 'unimaginable' ways (such as having sexual relations with strangers). They insinuate that the 'pathological self' 'enjoyed' certain things in transit that Lynn and other women would not 'enjoy', or even participate in. Ultimately, they narrate a strict dichotomy between the 'pathological self' that manifests in transit and their 'true selves' that 'exist' outside transit. Any negative associations that listeners may have about the behaviour in transit may then be easily associated with this mentally dysfunctional, temporary alter. They linguistically displace any responsibility onto this image of the 'pathological self'. Such narrative strategies seemed to signify a deeper psychological process that was at play. I theorise about the psychological function of such strategies below.

## THE PSYCHOLOGICAL FUNCTION OF THESE RECONSTRUCTIONS OF MEMORY

In the stories above we see that the women narratively displaced any culpability for their actions in transit onto the images of the 'foreigner within' (the 'desperate self' and the 'pathological self'). They engaged in such narrative strategies in order to dis-place themselves from any negative connotations that may be attached to such 'undesirable actions' and, by in doing so, they deflected blame from their 'real self'. They could then represent their 'true selves' as not accountable for the actions in transit. The women were thus able to narratively position themselves along the lines of positive subject positions as non-culpable, 'good' women ('I am not that kind of woman', 'I am a good woman). According to my interpretation, the linguistic image of the 'foreigner selves' stand as a means by which the women could narrate their complex experiences in transit while at the same time representing themselves positively within the moment of the telling.

These constructions of 'self' were, however, not mere linguistic achievements on the women's part. Gavey (2005) reminds us that by constructing the 'self' in certain ways one also shapes the ways in which they experience themselves in relation to others, as a social being in the world. In other words, it is through discursive practice that people actively produce social and psychological realities. All subjects are situated inside language and to change discourse is, for the large part, to change one-self (Davies & Gannon, 2006). Along these lines, it seemed as these narrative strategies signified deeper psychological processes that were at play. According to my interpretation, it is through these kinds of tellings that the women were able to psychologically manage negative emotions, reclaim a 'self', and maintain a sense of 'belonging' as members of the *Sisters for Sisters* group.

### *Managing negative emotions*

It may be anxiety provoking to reflect back on such experiences in transit, particularly when women are speaking about such things for the first time and when such experiences may be culturally associated with shame (Phillips, 2000). Many women discussed that during these collective biography discussions they disclosed things that they have never spoken about before.

Such reflections may threaten one's concept of the self as a 'good', morally correct person and thus cause disruptions in one's sense of 'self'.

During their stories about the 'pathological self' and the 'desperate self' that exist as separate to their 'real self' the women seemed to be creating a socially acceptable explanation about their experience (to themselves and to listening others). These other 'foreigner selves' represented a symbolic scapegoat for their actions in transit. Telling these kinds of stories may have helped the women to downplay their sense of their own culpability in transit. The naming of experiences as abusive can help women to move away from questioning the role that they played in such occurrences and thus can help women move away from self-blame. The positioning of self as 'powerless' and as not accountable in transit ('I was desperate and I was not in control therefore I am not to blame for the encounters with men in transit') may also help to manage the aura of shame that is so often attached to such (sexual) encounters.

This is a psychological strategy that happens at the moment of telling. According to my interpretation, the women are trying to stop the shameful aspects of their experiences from penetrating the self. They psychologically distance themselves from such emotions. A move away from such negative emotions may have resulted in the women maintaining a positive sense of self as a 'good', moral person in the world. Rather than being entrapped by shame these women utilised certain narrative strategies to decrease a sense of their culpability/responsibility and they thus negotiated more positive identities in their tellings.

The specific space of the collective biography discussion with women who knew each other and who had all travelled through Africa facilitated such dialogue. Davies & Gannon (2006a) say that collective biography sessions have been described by participants to have certain therapeutic effects. Haaken (1999) concurs, "Some of the pleasure in social remembering, in the sharing and creation of a common stock of stories, is in the sense of strength that the group provides in protecting against previously overwhelming experiences, thus making them more emotionally manageable" (p. 24)

### *Reclaiming the self*

Paradoxically, the process of positioning themselves in ‘powerless’ ways according to the dominant scripts of femininity stood as narrative strategies that reflected the women’s own agency in authoring their own stories. It is through such scripts that they made their ‘messy’ stories tellable in ways that were intelligible within the context of the telling. Such experiences at border posts may not be granted the status of abuse/violence. The women’s stories show that they were able to narrate their experience in their own terms in ways that made sense to them (and to real and imagined listeners).

The setting of the collective biography discussion-the collective space that facilitated the ‘weaving’ together of ‘shared experience’- allowed the women to make sense of something that they may not have been able to make imaginable before. The women found others with which they were able to jointly label these experiences at the border posts as ‘abuse’ and define that what happened to them was wrong. Culbertson (1995) says that survivors of abuse have to tell what happened in order to undo the grasp of the perpetrator/s, reconnect with the world, and recreate a socially defined self that is often lost in the midst of violation. Ultimately, the act of reconstructing memory is an agentic act for many women in the sense that they take an agentic position of ‘recreating’ their past and finding their voice (Gobodo-Madikizela, Shefer, Fish, 2014). The women in my study were able to return their ‘self’ to a status of someone who tells. In essence they were able to disrupt certain dominant ways of understanding the world, re-create new meaning about their experiences and negotiate their sense of self in relation to the world. According to Ewick and Silbey (2003), these are central features of women’s resistance.

### *Maintaining a sense of belonging*

The women also maintained identities that were compatible with the *Sisters for Sisters* collective identity. By constructing the context of the space of transit they were able to position themselves as ‘true victim’. The ‘language of victimhood’ is often highly emotive and women draw on this language for particular purposes-to articulate themselves as ‘convincing victim’ (Lamb, 1999: p. 116). This articulation of self as ‘convincing victim’ serves a particular purpose within the context of the collective biography discussion with the *Sisters for Sisters* members. It is significant that the status of *Sisters for Sisters* group member is dependent on the status of ‘true

victim' (it is a support group for abused women) who does not transgress certain boundaries (such as that of culturally appropriate sexual conduct).

According to Reavey & Brown (2009) women survivors place a premium on constituting some kind of narrative consistency between past and present. Along these lines, the women look back and portray a non-culpable self in transit that is consistent with their current *Sisters for Sisters* identity (good agent/activist consciousness, working against the oppression of women/woman abuse and maltreatment). According to my interpretation, the women structure their memories in such a way so as to maintain a sense that they are deserving members of this social group ('I am good and I belong in this group') so that they do not break what Davies et al. (2006) call the 'possibilities of belonging' (p. 40) in this social sphere.

The particular narrative strategies that the women used may also have been influenced by my presence in the discussions. On many occasions I told the women how I valued their strength, agency, and determination in their work in the field of gender-based violence. The women may have strategically downplayed a sense of their culpability in transit in order to present a 'self' that is more compatible with my articulated view of the women, as researcher and as survivor of abuse in childhood. Butler (1997) calls this a 'primary vulnerability to the other in order to be' (p. 20). This means that one is constantly tied to others expectations about oneself and this shapes the opportunities that we have of constructing our 'selves'. If, for example, the women had constructed themselves as accountable in transit this may have rendered precarious the neat sense that we had co-constructed of their activist/survivor role in the world.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter I highlight women's co-constructed talk about their experiences in transit while travelling from their home countries to South Africa. My point of departure is women's talk about encounters with men during their travels. Certain encounters with men at border posts in transit can be seen as a means of survival for many women, according to my interpretation at least. However, these kinds of stories are difficult to tell because they do not adhere to cultural scripts of 'abuse' and the 'appropriate victim' (Lamb, 1999) This is because many women

exhibit a level of (sexual) agency in these situations in terms of negotiating financial or other 'payment' for such acts. Such stories also do not adhere neatly to the requirements of 'good' sexuality for African females. Within African culture sexual relations with male strangers in the public space of transit is quite clearly an act of going beyond the confines of what constitutes 'acceptable' womanhood (Tamale, 2011b). Many African women who utilise sexual agency are often severely stigmatised or punished (McFadden, 2003). As such, women's definition of abuse across the lifetime may be questioned and their status as 'good' person rendered precarious.

The women transformed their past experiences in transit in complex and creative ways. They did not discuss any specific details about these interactions; rather they drew on rich descriptions of the context of transit and the ways in which this environment shapes women's motivations and actions. They described the space of transit as a strange 'other world' in which the 'normal' social rules of behaviour do not apply; a space in which promiscuous sexual behaviour is rife, morality is lacking and the vulnerability of the feminine body is heightened. These descriptions stood as the foundation via which I made sense of their collective construction of certain kinds of 'selves' in transit.

The women narrated their experiences in transit even in the face of socio-cultural/ linguistic restrictions. They engaged in various narrative strategies that shaped the ways in which their stories were 'remembered' as well as the meaning that they give to their experiences and the experiences of others. The participants in my study situated their experiences within the broader context of unequal gendered power imbalances and they contextualised their own experiences by narratively connecting their own experiences to the experiences of women in similar situations- *recognisable feminine subjects*. The women also drew on what O'dell (2003) calls the 'language of victimhood' to explain 'their' motivations and actions in transit. It is through these discourses that they were able to position their experiences as 'abuse' and themselves as 'true victims'. They constructed themselves as powerless in relation to their abusive past. However, it is important to note that they used these discourses for strategic purposes and did not 'own' the powerlessness that is associated with such positions.

It is through these frames of meaning that they constructed the linguistic images of the 'desperate self' and the 'pathological self'—two kinds of 'foreigner selves' that they narrate to be unique to

the space of transit. They implied that these ‘foreigner selves did not have much capacity for choice as they were driven by instinctual goals of survival. They drew on what Davies and Gannon (2006) call ‘moral landscapes’ (p. 38) and narratively associated the ‘pathological self’ as a ‘bad’, survival self that emerged in the space of transit. They associated their moral ‘true self’ with the space of South Africa. By doing so they positioned themselves as commentators who ‘looked back’ at the time of transit from a moral high ground. The utilisation of space associations to make meaning about one’s power/powerlessness in the past has been documented by scholars in the field of memory, identity, and abuse (for example, Reavey, 2012 & Taylor, 2010).

The participants narratively displaced any culpability for their actions in transit onto these images of the ‘foreigner within’. They engaged in such narrative strategies in order to dis-place themselves from any negative subject positions that may be attached to such ‘undesirable actions’ and, by in doing so, they deflected blame from their ‘real self’. They could then represent their ‘true selves’ as not accountable for the actions in transit. These ‘foreigner selves’, according to my interpretation, stood as a narrative strategy whereby the women could give an account of unusual aspects of their experience. Silences prevail in women’s talk about sex, sexuality, and deviance/transgression. Similar silences were noted in the first section of this chapter when Lynn refused to disclose the specific details about what happened with this man at the border post. However, the image of the ‘pathological self’ and the ‘desperate self’ filled in the gaps of what may have very well been silences.

The linguistic image of the ‘foreigner selves’ stand as a means by which the women could narrate the complexity of their experiences in transit while at the same time they were able to collectively position themselves along the lines of positive subject positions as non-culpable, ‘good’ women (‘We not that kind of woman’, ‘We are good women). As is common of such collective biography work, the collective process of taking up and resisting certain discourses showed insight into the ways in which they constituted themselves in concert with one another (see Davies et al., 2006c), and it is through this process that they co-created ‘selves’ that may very well not have been imagined by isolated, independent individuals.

The women's voices in this chapter shed light on the process of 'selving' whereby their individual experience is moulded into a collective representation of the world. The collective biography space functioned as an interactive site in which the women connected their 'experiences' to the stories of others and were stimulated by points in each other's narratives. As is common of collective biography work, they threaded one 'experience' onto the last (see Davies & Gannon, 2006a) and narrated a 'shared understanding' of their experiences in transit. Their stories no longer signified individual identities but rather common collective 'selves' and 'common sense' understandings of the world. It is through such 'shared understandings' that they managed to transform their past in 'safe' and intelligible ways.

These narrative strategies, according to my interpretation, signified deeper psychological processes that were at play. Collective biography research spaces often facilitate some kind of therapeutic effects for the participants (Davies & Gannon, 2006a). Phillips (2000) also argues that certain narrative strategies help women to manage disturbing memories and emotions. By narratively displacing accountability onto the 'foreigner selves', the women were able to energetically distance themselves from negative emotions-such as shame and blame- that may be attached to certain ways of behaving in transit . They were also able to construct certain 'selves' that were compatible with their identity as *Sisters for Sisters* member; they were able to tell 'difficult' stories while maintaining a sense of belonging in this social sphere.

The women were also able to tell their stories in their own way in their own voices and express past emotional material that may have largely been 'un-interpretable'. They were able to reclaim a sense of self in transit. The taking up of the position of agent who re-creates one's past may be an invaluable resource for these women who are situated within the South African context of poverty, lack of material resources, and socio-cultural strictures that offer limited positive subject positions for abused women. Such an agentic position may be the first step towards mobilising and transforming the self in ways that were previously unimaginable. In the next chapter I explore the women's use of similar narrative strategies by which they creatively made sense of themselves as social beings within the space of South Africa.

## **CHAPTER 7: RESULTS/DISCUSSION**

### **PSYCHO-SOCIAL BORDERS AND THE “IMAGINED” FEMALE ‘OTHER’: COLLECTIVELY CONSTRUCTING ‘SELVES’ IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

This year South Africa celebrates 20 years of democracy since the end of apartheid. This new democratic era promised hope and change for all and the transition to democracy in 1994 saw many people moving from countries of Sub-Saharan Africa to South Africa in search of a better life with more employment and educational opportunities (Chigeza, De Wet, & Roos, 2013). Today the socio-spatial landscape of South Africa remains very much the same as during the apartheid era, with poor townships segregated away from the main city hubs. ‘Coloured’ and ‘black’ people in South Africa still represent the most marginalised and poor groups in the country (Boonzaier & de la Rey, 2003). Many people in the country (including a large majority of African migrants) struggle with access to housing and jobs, and vast overcrowding and lack of basic services in poor townships where the majority of people do not have access to basic human needs such as electricity and running water (Hayem, 2013). Women disproportionately face the burden of poverty in the country, with many women acting as breadwinners of families or the sole supporters of their children (Moore, 2013).

Currently, South Africa has some of the highest rates of violent crime reported anywhere in the world. Some have suggested that South Africa has a ‘culture of violence’, an echo of the country’s violent past during apartheid (Hamber & Lewis, 1997). This entails a broad acceptance of violence (Vogelman & Lewis, 1993) as well as social relations and interactions that are governed by violent means (Harris, 2002). In particular, violence against women is on the increase and South Africa has been dubbed the ‘rape capital of the world’ where women are more likely to be raped than to be educated (Naidu-Hoffmeester & Kama, 2013). In 1999 it was estimated that the country had an intimate femicide rate of 8.8 per 100 000 women over the age of 14 years old; this is the highest rate of intimate femicide reported anywhere in the world.

(Matthews, Abrahams, Jewkes, Martin, Lombard, Vetten, 2008). According to Fuller (2010), South Africa has a rate of rape of women that is more than twice that of the United States, with Black and Coloured (or 'mixed-race') women 4.7 times more likely to be raped than White women (Anderson, 2000).

Contemporary South Africa is also plagued by a relatively new kind of violence-xenophobia-a form of violence that entails South Africans engaging in violent actions against black migrants and refugees from other parts of Africa (Harris, 2002). Here migrant Africans are treated as a homogenous category, as people who do not belong in South Africa and who are not deserving of a socially valued existence (Strauss, 2011). They are also treated as threatening entities who have come to the country to steal valuable resources such as jobs and housing (Sinclair, 1998). Some have argued that xenophobic attitudes are a result of a change in the idea of citizenship and belonging from the idea of 'African ubuntu', or one-ness, an important principle in the nation building process of 1994 (Strauss, 2011), towards a more exclusionary process that differentiates along the lines of South African nationals 'us' versus those seen as 'foreigners' ('them') (Hayem, 2013). Black migrants from other parts of Africa are portrayed as a threat to the success of the post-apartheid project (Strauss, 2011). They are the scapegoat, the contaminating 'Other', or 'outsider', who are blamed for the lack of progress in post-apartheid society (Morris, 1998). Xenophobic violence reached critical proportions in May 2008 and again in 2011. However, evidence suggests that xenophobic attitudes are still very much alive in South Africa (The South African Press Association, 2013a; Chigeza, De Wet, & Roos, 2013) and such treatment significantly shapes the subjectivities of Black African migrants who have made South Africa their home.

This chapter draws on the voices of six African migrants; four of whom are of the Shona culture of Zimbabwe, one from the Lou culture of Kenya, and one from the Waziemba culture of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). These cultures dictate certain 'rules' of femininity- that women should be passive, sexual recipients and that they should not express aspects of their sexual desire or pleasure (Kambarami, 2006; Mupotsa & Mhishi, 2008). In Africa women's sexuality in the era of HIV/AIDS has also resulted in a powerful resurgence of patriarchal dominance-women's struggles for social autonomy have been curbed by cultural climates that interpret women's sexual agency as 'dangerous' and 'irresponsible' (McFadden, 2003).

If women do not adhere to the cultural values of ‘good’ femininity (passive sexuality, reproduction), if they overstep the line, per se, by engaging in active sexuality and by acknowledging sexual pleasure then they move into dangerous territory: this is the discursive terrain of ‘bad’ feminine subject. Such a positioning often has very negative consequences for women and at the most extreme this manifests as violence as a form of control over women’s bodies (McFadden, 2003; Tamale, 2011b). This type of violence has been found to be used extensively against South African women (Gqola, 2007) as well as towards Zimbabwean women who are living in South Africa (Mupotsa & Mhishi, 2008). Through such strictures many women have learnt to suppress certain feelings and emotions that are associated with their bodies. They often learn to *be* a certain kind of ‘self’ that society has instilled in them-what Profitt (2000b) calls the ‘foundation of the self’. It is very challenging to ‘undo’ this integral part of the self. Women may experience a clash between their own embodied feelings and the strong expectations of their culture and this may result in tension and confusion, and consequently anxiety about ‘knowing’ the ‘self’ in the world.

All of the women participants whose voices I draw from in this chapter have experienced a myriad of forms of gender-based violence across space and time in their lives. The ‘abused female body’ is closely associated with both shame and blame. In their study of women survivors of childhood sexual abuse, for example, Reavey and Brown (2009) found that participants narratives about the female body signified shame, self-blame, and lack. The women in the study constructed themselves along the lines of what Reavey and Brown (2009) call ‘shamed identities’ (p. 335). In addition, Enander and Holmber (2008) identified guilt as a strong emotional tie that binds women to their abusive past and that may carry on long after the abuse has ended. These scholars argue that women may internalise the shame and blame that socio-cultural power structures confer onto the ‘abused female body’.

Within cultures such as the Shona culture of Zimbabwe women may experience heightened challenges with regards to expressing certain emotions that are associated with their experiences of bodily and psychic violation –speaking of the broad African context McFadden calls this the ‘muting’ (p. 50) of feminist memory and instinct. Such suppression may result in a ‘build up’ of ‘unrecognised’ embodied feelings of shame and guilt that may significantly affect women’s sense of ‘self’ in the world (Herman, 1992).

This section has provided a brief psycho-social context for the stories that follow. Subjectivity, according to Blackman et al., (2008), is ‘the experience of the lived multiplicity of positionings’ (p. 6). The African migrants, whose voices that I draw on in this chapter, ‘exist’ in very complex positionings within the space of South Africa. The women’s current position is one that is characterized by challenges that stem from the intersections of gender, poverty/deprivation, and their ‘foreigner’ status. The position of ‘foreigners’ in the contemporary South African socio-political landscape is one that is characterised by alienation, exclusion, and often heightened vulnerability (Harris, 2002). This intersects with the lack of resources that is associated with joblessness and poverty, and, possibly, also heightened feelings of shame and vulnerability that are very often associated with an ‘abused woman’ status (see Reavey & Brown, 2009). African migrant women are on many levels powerless in relation to the dominant patriarchal power structures in South Africa but, at the same time, they are capable of negotiating an increased sense of power for themselves in complex and strategic ways.

#### *The micro-context of the collective biography workshop*

In this chapter I draw on the voices of Sisters for Sisters members from three African countries; namely Zimbabwe, Kenya, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). I utilize data from two specific group discussions that included only migrant women. The first discussion was based on the “mubobobo” phenomenon. This discussion took place at a church in Cape Town. Participants were Akeyo, Elinah, Chadamwari, and Cheney. All of these women were from Zimbabwe and were of the Shona culture. Akeyo and Chadamwari had been living in South Africa for eight and five years respectively. Akeyo worked a part time job at a local NGO and Chadamwari was unemployed. Elinah and Cheney had both been in the country for three years and they worked part time jobs as domestic workers. All of the women, except for Akeyo, were divorced and thus may have had to deal with various levels of shame that is attached to the status of single woman. Their divorced status also meant that many of these women had had to deal with the financial hardships of being single mothers.

The second focus group discussion was a small discussion that took place at the home of one of the *Sisters for Sisters* members. This discussion was based on violence that the women had experienced during their transition from their home country to South Africa. Participants included Lynn, Wendy, and Chadamwari. Lynn is from Kenya and at the time of the interview she was forty years old and had three children. At the time of the discussion she was working full

time and she had been living in South African for seven years. Wendy was from Congo and was fifty two at the time of the discussion and had been living in South Africa for eleven years. She had five children and ran a small business. Chadamwari was from Zimbabwe (the Shona culture) and she had one child. She was thirty one years old at the time of the discussion and she had been living in South Africa for five years and was unemployed. All of the women were divorced from their abusive partners. The women indicated that they came to South African looking for a better life with more opportunities.

In what follows I explore how these non-South African *Sisters for Sisters* members collectively worked towards transcending the trauma that they have suffered through their narrations of certain kinds of ‘selves’ in the specific space of South Africa. The analysis is structured around the three theoretical questions of the study. 1.) How do the women transform the past within these collective spaces? (Here particularly spaces in which there were no South African women present) 2.) What kinds of identities do they construct? 3.) What function do these particular ways of remembering have for the women’s sense of themselves in the world?

The migrant women linguistically created an image of the South African female ‘Other’ and a sense of their own collective ‘selves’ by drawing on their ‘experience’ living in South Africa. Here I put ‘experience’ in inverted commas because I frame my analysis through the perspective of a social remembering approach that posits that people tell their stories in particular ways for certain social purposes. Following Eisikovits & Winstock (2002), I interpret narratives as tactics that these women use to achieve certain social aims. As Davies & Gannon (2006a) argue, ‘truth’ is always a creation that is linked to the ‘self’. Along these lines, I interpret the migrant women’s constructions of South African women not as representing any ‘true’ perceptions of South African women; rather they represent something significant about the ‘inner worlds’, or the psychological strategies, of the women who narrate such images

## COLLECTIVELY CONSTRUCTING THE 'INNER WORLD' OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN FEMALE 'OTHER'

Below, I outline the different ways in which the women from various parts of sub-Saharan Africa, 'foreigners' who are currently living in South Africa, collectively constructed certain kinds of 'selves' within the space of the aforementioned collective biography discussions. These non-South African women constructed themselves in relation to certain images of the South African female 'Other'. I critically analyse what is happening on a narrative level and what purpose such reconstructions may serve for the women's sense of themselves in the world.

*"They can't do without their sex": Collectively constructing South African women's sexual character*

The migrant women constructed South African women by drawing on 'common sense' perceptions of the sexuality and the sexual behaviour of the 'typical' South African women. In this discussion all of the women (Akeyo, Chadamwari, and Cheney) were from Zimbabwe and were of the Shona culture. All were currently living in South Africa. Akeyo draws on her 'experience' of living in South Africa for more than eleven years.

**Akeyo:** So it is because uh the South African women we regard them as people who love sex a lot. They love to sleep (around) they can't do without their sex. You know (laughing) they can't do without their sex. So they need the sex so if obviously a man approaches you like that [in a sexual way] the South African women we regard them they will say yes. They will respond.

**Chadamwari:** They will respond [to men that approach them]. I am sure they do.  
(Focus group discussion 1, page 39 of research transcript).

Akeyo arrived in South Africa just over eleven years ago. One of her first jobs in the country was picking grapes on a farm in a small town on the outskirts of Cape Town. She says that it is here that she came into contact with many different people of different cultures and languages. It is significant that Akeyo begins the excerpt using the personal pronoun 'we'. Here Akeyo linguistically confers meaning that they 'exist' as part of a Zimbabwean collective. She says, 'we

regard them'. Here she narrates that they, as Zimbabwean women, share a common perspective about South African women's sexuality. She constructs her 'individual experience'/observations as 'their' common way of thinking about South African women that has been shaped by their 'experience' living in South Africa for many years.

Akeyo and Chadamwari draw on 'common sense' notions of the innate character of 'typical' South African women. Firstly, Akeyo represents their 'view' that South African women, 'love sex a lot'. Akeyo repeats the phrase, 'they can't do without their sex', seemingly to bring home her point about South African women's rampant sexual appetites. She also says, 'they need sex' and 'they can't do without sex'. This use of language conveys meaning that South African women are driven by sex and that they cannot function without sex. Their narratives insinuate that South African women have no capacity to restrain themselves because they are hedonistically driven by a want of sexual pleasure.

Akeyo then goes one step further to unpack South African women's behaviour in terms of their relational engagements with others when they have sex. Akeyo says, 'They love to sleep (around)'. This statement conveys meaning that South African women do not limit their 'rampant sexual appetites' to their husbands or partners. Through this use of language she suggests that South African women will readily have sex with many men with a disregard for the sanctity of monogamous relations and marriage. In other words, she blatantly positions South African women as sexually promiscuous. Chadamwari validates Evelyn's message by saying, 'They will respond [to men that approach them]. I am sure they do'. Chadamwari reflects back what Akeyo is saying about South African women's sexual appetite and behaviour. In a sense she affirms that what Akeyo is saying is 'true' and she strengthens the believability of their collective perspective about South African women.

Here the women theorise about South African women's responses to men's sexual advances and they describe South African women as being easy and overtly sexually responsive. The Shona culture, to which Akeyo and Chadamwari belong, values female sexual passivity, restraint, and sex within marriage (Kambarami, 2006). The women's talk about South African women is situated through this particular cultural lens. They narrate South African women as being unable to achieve 'appropriate' forms of femininity ('good sexual subjects') according to the standards

of the Shona culture of Zimbabwe. They thus position South African women as ‘faulty’ subjects within the nexus of African cultural strictures of femininity and sexuality. They narrate that these women are defying ‘respectable femininity’, along the lines of what Ferguson (2002) calls inferior female types.

A bit later on in the focus group discussion Akeyo and Cheney concur with similar statements about the sexuality of South African women. Firstly, Akeyo supports her view of South African women by providing an example of interactions that she witnessed whilst travelling on public transport in South Africa.

**Akeyo:** And in a couple of negotiations like if you are sitting around like I understand Xhosa you know if someone start to do that then the Xhosa lady would say, “Oh bhuti uyenzani?(meaning) What are you doing?”. Then the guy would say, “Ja, you know hayi it’s cold, let’s do it you know I like you I like your bums you are beautiful”. And this one [the South African woman] is like, “Oh yes bhuti ngoku singayaphi?” [Oh yes brother where are we going to go now?] and then they are negotiating now. “Let’s go let’s go”. And the people would get off on the wrong station maybe in the bush do it [sex] and then they are done and they go back on the train, and it is something normal. (Focus group discussion 1, page 39 of research transcript).

Then Cheney says the following,

**Cheney:** In South Africa..like there is no way for them to use muti because it is something easy just approach like when people can just meet on the train and they agree [to have sex]. They meet like what he was doing if she was somebody loose then there won’t be any need of using muti here [in South Africa]. So I think here in South Africa there is a low level (of “mubobobo”). (Focus group discussion 1, page 50 of research transcript)

Akeyo, who speaks in the first extract, does not own a motor car and she thus utilises the space of public transport on a daily basis. Here she gives a hypothetical example of South African women’s interactions with men in such spaces. Firstly, she says that South African women most likely approach men with an opening statement, similar to something like, ‘what are you doing?’. Then she says that if the man responds back with a sexual proposition (‘let’s do it’) or even a flirtatious compliment (‘I like your bums’, ‘you are beautiful’) then the ‘typical’ South African

woman is likely to begin negotiating with the man about sex. Akeyo narrates the Xhosa woman's hypothetical response, 'Oh yes bhuti ngoku singayaphi' (Where can we go? Where can we do it?). It is significant that she is talking about people who do not know each other and who meet one another randomly within the space of public transport. Importantly, Akeyo says that such interactions between men and women are 'something normal'. Here she conveys meaning that this practice of 'bad' sexuality is a common part of South African women's behavioural repertoire and that it constitutes a normal part of the sexual climate of South Africa. Akeyo refers specifically to Xhosa South African women ('the Xhosa lady would say') and she uses snippets of Xhosa in her example. This suggests that her constructions of South African women's sexuality is based on particular racialised and classed categories. Xhosa speaking women in South Africa are predominantly black and women who utilise public transport such as trains are predominantly poor to middle class.

Akeyo says that these South African women travelling on public transport such as buses or trains may get off at the 'wrong station' and end up having sex with a strange man out in the open in a dirty place ('maybe in the bush'). Here she describes that Xhosa women usually instigate sexual arrangements with men. Akeyo constructs this hypothetical archetype of South African women as lacking in sexual self-control and restraint-they cannot monitor or 'tone down' their sexual urges. Her narrative conveys meaning that South African women are driven by an uncontrollable urge to have sex. She also insinuates that such women are lacking the correct sexual moral values-they are nonchalant about sex-they will even have sex with strangers in open, dirty public places such as in the vegetation alongside the train tracks. This kind of behaviour bridges the normal code of conduct for women, as per the Shona culture, whereby women are not supposed to initiate sex with men (Kambarami, 2006). Akeyo conveys meaning that 'typical', poor, Xhosa South African women are not able to act as women are supposed to and they are unable to achieve the status of 'appropriate' feminine subject-they are 'faulty' feminine subjects, according to her culture at least.

In the second extract, Cheney reflects a similar sentiment about the sexual climate of South Africa. Here she mentions the topic of "mubobobo" once again. As described in detail in chapter 5, the women described "mubobobo" as an act whereby men obtain a magical muti that enable them to rape women from a distance. Cheney says that in South Africa sex is commonly available, because South African women give it away freely ('like when people can just meet on the train and they agree [to have sex]'). She says 'if she was somebody loose' then men have no

need to utilise muti to magically have sex with women because sex is freely available. Here she comments on the sexual conduct of South African women. The slang word 'loose' means someone who is promiscuous or has casual sexual encounters. She says that in South Africa there 'is no way' for men to use muti. Cheney speculates that due to South African women's promiscuous sexual characters, there is not much need for "mubobobo" in South Africa.

Ultimately, the women's 'individual experience' transformed into a unified collective 'knowledge' about South African women's sexual characters. Such a transcendence of the 'facts' of individual stories towards a cohesive representation of a 'common viewpoint' of knowing the world is common of collective biography work (Davies et al., 1997). Here individual knowledge merges with the insights of others in the collective setting, forming a thread of common meaning. Above, the Zimbabwean women draw on their 'common sense' view of South African women's sexual character. They construct the 'inner world', or the 'innate' characters, of the 'typical' South African female. Here they narrated South African women as 'loving sex', as having promiscuous sexual characters and as not in control of their sexual urges; ultimately as diverging from the standards of 'appropriate' femininity. They constructed South African women as having innate sexual characters that are 'bad'. They position them in the 'bad' domain of sexuality as 'whores' (MacDonald, 1995), or 'faulty' feminine subjects.

According to the 'rules' of the Shona culture, women who behave in such a manner are sexual anomalies, glitches in the system of how women should think and behave (Mupotsa & Mhishi, 2008). Such a positioning outside of the 'appropriate' standards of femininity are often stigmatised and shamed. Through this lens, Akeyo and Cheney position South African women as shameful beings. It is significant that through their talk about their 'experience' of the sexuality of South African women, the participants position themselves as moral onlookers of sorts who have the capacity to comment on this behaviour. The underlying thread of their narrative, or what is not said explicitly, is that they, as a collective, are very different to these South African women.

These findings were very interesting, particularly because the Sisters for Sisters women's group comprises of both migrants from other African countries and South African women. The South African women were accepted into the group as valid victims of gendered abuse and many were

close friends and confidants of the women whose voices are documented above. As mentioned above, the 'foreigner' women only spoke about South African women in this way in collective biography discussions in which there were no South African members present (except for me). However, such talk about South African women could be dangerous as it could threaten their sense of the group cohesiveness, or sisterhood. It could also be 'dangerous' to discuss such things in front of me as such talk could influence my own outsider view of the group's cohesiveness, something which in turn could (hypothetically) negatively influence the group's reputation as a successful support group. With these dangers in mind, I wondered what the value could be of collectively choosing to represent South African women in this way.

A focus on such consensus in meaning making (the collective perspective about South African women that is constructed here) can provide insight into the discursive processes behind the representation of a 'unity of experience' (Davies et al., 1997). I was interested in these discursive processes and I asked the following analytical questions: What was the narrative purpose of these tellings within these specific spaces? What particular socio-psychological functions could such ways of remembering play in terms of the women's sense of self in the world?

All of the women participants whose voices are documented above have experienced a myriad of forms of gender-based abuse throughout their lifetime and throughout the different spaces in Africa through which they have travelled. Cultural constructions of femininity and, particularly, 'abused women' are deeply associated with shame and blame (Enander & Holmberg, 2008; Reavey & Brown, 2009). The accumulated experiences of violence of the participants in the current study mean that these women may be plagued by embodied emotions such as shame and guilt. These negative emotions may take on a more damaging quality when considering the intersection of race and social status and the consequent meanings that are attached to these women's bodies. There is much stigma and shame associated with what has been constructed by Westernised discourses as the 'dirty' and 'dangerous' black female body (McFadden, 2003). The women's 'foreigner' status in South Africa could also play a role with regards to connotations of their bodies as 'out of place' or as less deserving of respect (Harris, 2002).

Such bodily and/or sexualised experiences may not be readily expressible due to cultural constraints that render women's expression of their sexuality and their sexualised experiences as taboo. I call these negative embodied emotions of shame and guilt, 'residues of gendered oppression'. These feelings/emotions constitute an 'un-interpretable known' in the sense that women may not readily have the linguistic means to interpret and narrate such embodied feelings but these feelings may nevertheless affect the ways in which women experience themselves in the world (Herman, 1992).

According to my interpretation, the Zimbabwean women's representations of South African women do not signify any 'true' perceptions of South African women; rather they represent something about the minds of the women who narrated such images. On a deeper level their stories seemed to represent their own sexual anxieties and fears that have been instilled by a culture that stigmatises women's expression of sexual pleasure and desire. The Zimbabwean women adopted certain linguistic strategies to achieve very specific narrative purposes. They linguistically transferred negative aspects of themselves that are associated with their 'abused' and sexual bodies onto this image of (Black) South African women; women that they may identify with on various levels such as poverty, race, and gendered 'powerlessness' in the world.

So according to my interpretation, the women's constructions of shameful, 'faulty', deviant, and promiscuous South African women actually signify part of their embodied selves that have been 'concealed'. The South African women here represent screens onto which they women project 'inappropriate' aspects of their 'selves' and their experiences as social beings. These 'bad' aspects of the self, what dominant scripts within the Shona culture deem to be 'impure', could be feelings of shame, self-blame, feelings of sexual pleasure/desire, and any other feelings that may be considered to transgress the boundaries of 'appropriate' femininity. Due to socio-cultural strictures, these women may have not fully integrated these aspects into their 'true selves', or their concept of self that they are willing (or able) to construct. The Zimbabwean women express their self-blame and sexual insecurities *through* the image of these South African women. However, the expression of these feelings may be in a disguised form to themselves.

In her work on the projection of the masculine onto the feminine body, Butler (1990) says that the disavowal and projection of negative embodied aspects of the self are crucial parts of the process of constructing 'Others'. Although her theoretical application of these concepts is different it can be applied to the women's strategies at hand. The Zimbabwean women project their 'unwanted' and un-interpretable embodied residues of abuse onto the image of the 'bad', 'dark whore' South African women. In this way, they narratively 'get rid' of these negative parts of themselves. They shed away these negative emotions. By doing so, they are able to disown such feelings. The underlying thread of meaning is that *they* (As Zimbabwean women) are not composed of these negative embodied aspects, *they* are unlike South African women; *they* are not shameful sexual deviants. As a consequence of this narrative strategy, the women are not psychologically 'weighed down' by the presence of these negative attributes. This is of utmost significance as it allows the women the freedom to negotiate/construct a sense of a positive, untainted self.

This narrative strategy of 'othering' South African women raises critical questions about the concept of 'ubuntu', or African unity, and also about the challenges involved in the women's struggle in South Africa. This strategy suggests that these 'foreigner' women may experience themselves as divided from other women in the African context, perhaps because of a sense of 'not belonging' in a space where xenophobic attitudes towards 'foreigners' still runs rife. These narratives also suggest an element of competition for men between women of different cultures and this could perhaps be linked to competition for material resources within the impoverished context of South Africa.

This narrative strategy of course happens within the moment of telling within this specific collective space that facilitated such strategies. However, this moment of expressing these embodied emotions encompasses a feeling that these women are, in a way, mobilising these 'residues of gendered oppression'. As such, these narrative strategies may be one of the first steps by which women can begin to make sense of the elusive 'un-interpretable known'. In the next subsection of the analysis I examine the ways in which the migrant *Sisters for Sisters* members constructed South African women as blameworthy and complicit in their own abuse and maltreatment.

*“Put some eggs where they can see.....they will volunteer to spend the night”:*

This section is based on data that was drawn from a smaller focus group discussion that was based on women’s transition from their home country to Cape Town, South Africa. The participants included Lynn from Kenya (Lou culture), Chadamwari from Zimbabwe (Shona culture), and Wendy from Congo (Waziemba culture). In the extract below Lynn draws on her ‘experience’ of living in South Africa for more than 11 years to story their ‘common perception’ of South African women.

**Lynn:** .....what I found most um women here (in South Africa) mainly the Black and the Coloureds but not everyone, they want money but they want free money. They want quick money and that’s why you find that even these Nigerians that are trafficking more often than not they use South African women. They can’t come to abuse you because you won’t accept and you are working for yourself. They kind of like take advantage of South African women.

**Wendy:** Ja. That people here (In South Africa).

**Lynn:** So what I have observed most ladies (from South Africa) they don’t want to work. They want to dress nice and to look nice and everything buy, ja not to work. So then you become (**Wendy:** Easy) you know people who do bad things it is easy for them to use you because it’s not taking them an effort or anything.

(Focus group discussion 7, page 102 of research transcript).

Lynn and Wendy linguistically create an image of South African women by drawing on aspects of their ‘experience’ living in South Africa. Lynn says that she ‘found’ that South African women want ‘free money’ or ‘quick money’. This kind of terminology usually refers to money that is made with little or no work or effort: money that cannot be readily gained from an honest day’s work. Lynn says that South African women want the benefits of working such as nice clothes and make up but they don’t want to work fairly for a wage. Here she linguistically constructs a sense of South African women as having unambitious and ‘lazy’ characters. She insinuates that South African women are fickle and shallow and want maximum rewards for minimal effort. Lynn says that these women want to dress well and look good but at the same time they don’t want to work. So to combat this catch twenty two, she says that many of these women put themselves in situations in which they can achieve material goods and ‘easy’ money in return for minimal work. They say that South African women compromise ‘good’ behaviour and their own safety for the gain of material goods. Lynn emphasises that their motivations for such actions are to gain excess financial/material goods, beyond mere survival (‘they want to dress nice and to look nice and everything buy’).

It is significant that Lynn only refers to certain raced groups of South African women in her narrative. She says, 'What I have found um here (in South Africa) *mainly the black and coloureds* but not everyone, they want money but they want free money'. The racial categories 'coloured' and 'black' represent the former apartheid systems' racial categories. Although the apartheid system was officially abolished twenty years ago, today 'coloured' and 'black' women in South Africa still represent the most marginalised and poor groups in the country. It is thus important to note that many women of these particular racial categories experience severe poverty, deprivation and limited opportunities in the South African context (see Boonzaier & de la Rey, 2003). As such, many South African women may not be able to survive on a daily basis through an honest day's work, let alone meet the image of a stylish, 'good looking' woman. Women's agency and their motivations to engage in these kinds of practices is complex. Women may have a level of agency to manipulate their own needs but these actions are deeply embedded in the social context of the disempowerment and deprivation of women and girls (Boonzaier, 2005).

Lynn and Wendy convey meaning that South African women get into certain relations with men because they are 'lazy' and they want quick rewards. They suggest that South African women's 'innate' characters cause them to behave in dangerous ways. In the words of Wendy, South African women become 'easy' in the sense that they women put themselves into situations in which it is easy for men to abuse them. Lynn concurs by saying that South African women often put themselves in vulnerable positions whereby it is easy for men (or, 'people who do bad things') to take advantage of them ('it's not taking them an effort or anything', 'it is easy for them to use you'). Here they place blame on South African women and say that these women set themselves up for abuse. Lynn draws specifically on the example of Nigerians who engage in human trafficking. She says that Nigerians will often traffic South African women because the women's characters and behaviours make it easy for men to abuse them in this way. The implied message in the narratives above is: If South African women were hard workers (like us), then they might be able to prevent themselves from being abused in certain ways.

It is significant that Lynn says that this kind of abuse is not likely to happen to 'them', 'foreigner' African women ('they can't come to abuse you'). She uses the pronoun *you* to address the other women in the discussion-Wendy and Chadamwari, essentially the pronoun 'you' signifies 'us'. By doing so she narratively construes meaning that the three of them are the

same. Although the three women come from different African cultures (Lou, Waziemba, and Shona) she linguistically places them in one homogenous category. She sets them apart as their own collective as non-South Africans by narrating a sense of 'we'/'us'. Wendy confirms this category through her comment, 'That people in South Africa'. Lynn says that 'they' will most likely not be abused in the same way as South African women because, 'you won't accept and you are working for yourself'.

Lynn makes a tacit comparison between the characters of South African women and 'foreigner' African women. She implies that South African women are lazy, fickle, and shallow while on the other hand 'foreigners' are more responsible, have higher standards ('you won't accept') and are more hardworking ('you are working for yourself') than South African women. She connotes meaning that 'they' have more pride, self-respect and moral standards than South African women. The main point that they bring across is that South African women's innate characters are to blame for a large part of the abuse that they experience while, on the other hand, 'foreigner' women ('us') naturally work towards looking after themselves and towards preventing abuse.

So they construct South African women as being culpable bodies in the nexus of relations by which men exert power over women through abusive acts. Ultimately, they construct South African women as "imaginary" feminine 'Others'-"imaginary" in the sense that in the moment of telling, the participants collectively "imagine" that all black and coloured South African women of a low socio-economic status have the same characters. They then implicitly compare the "imaginary" feminine 'Other' to 'them' and (perhaps) all 'foreigner' women of African origin.

Below, Lynn and Chadamwari continue the discussion along a similar vein,

**Lynn:** Mmm it's cheaper for men. Men from other African countries they really enjoy (it) here in South Africa. They say it is easier [to get sex].

**S:** What, to get sex?

**Lynn:** Mmm. You know and pretty women just give them sex and they get so excited when they come here and there's a lot of pretty women.

**Chadamwari:** (**Chadamwari:** laughing). You know what this other guy was saying? This other was telling me, “Oh women here [in South Africa] when you want them you just invite them to your place and buy a crate of eggs and put them there quietly. When they see them you just ask, ‘are you spending the night or are you going?’ and she will say, ‘No, I am staying?’. So they wake up the next morning you just say, ‘Make yourself breakfast’”. And they just watch they take six eggs they break them all. This guy was just standing there and saying, “Jho, you don’t know about these local ladies. You can get a lot of sex from them because it’s easy”.

(Focus group discussion 7, page 95 of research transcript)

Firstly, Lynn and Chadamwari narrate what they present to be their own perspective about how men from other African countries experience the sexual environment of South Africa. Lynn says, ‘it’s *cheaper* for men’; ‘it is *easier* [to get sex]’. Here she conveys meaning that in South Africa there is an open sexual environment. Her use of language, ‘cheaper’ and ‘easier’ suggest that men do not have to struggle to find sex and that sex is available to most men, even men who cannot afford to pay for sex. She attributes this free availability of sex to the actions of South African women ‘pretty women just give them (sex)’. Lynn suggests that this kind of behaviour is specific to South African women. She says ‘men from other African countries they really enjoy (it) here in South Africa’ and ‘they get so excited when they come here’. Here she conveys meaning that sex is not so freely available in other parts of Africa. In other words, she insinuates that *women* from other African countries (women like themselves) are not sexually promiscuous like South African women.

Chadamwari then adds detail to Lynn’s construction of South African women by drawing on her ‘memory’ of a conversation with a Zimbabwean man who had been living in South Africa for a short period. She situates this information as being the perspective of this man who has experience with South African women (‘You know what this other guy was saying?’). The constructed scenario that follows outlines a hypothetical situation in which men use food to bribe women to sleep with them. South African women, says Chadamwari’s informant, are ‘cheap’, they will give men sex in return for hardly anything – like six eggs. Through this re-narrated story Chadamwari conveys a sense that it is very easy for men to engage in casual sex with South African women.

It seems as if Chadamwari uses this example and remembers his words in this specific way to bring home their point about South African women's 'lazy' characters. Her narration of this man's 'memory', 'they take six eggs they break them all' conveys meaning that South African women are also opportunistic and the participants convey the impression that these women want as much as they can get without working for it. Through her re-narrated account Chadamwari positions South African women as 'faulty' feminine subjects- along the lines of the Shona culture at least. In the Shona culture (and, as they insinuate, the cultures of other African countries) there is greater value placed on female sexual chastity and sex within marriage and women are not so easily 'bought out' for sex. Of course, and as seen in the account above, these 'rules' about sexual restraint are applicable mainly to women and not to men of 'their' cultures.

A bit further down in the conversation Chadamwari adds to her description of South African women's sexual engagements with men.

**Chadamwari:** You don't have to give them anything because it's not like prostitution. Prostitution is different because they [South African women] don't get paid but they enjoy....

**Lynn:** it's the attention

**Chadamwari:**..... not only- for being in a better place there because maybe you sleep somewhere else different (S: So now they are in a nice bed). It's a nice bed and you just show them milk and whatever and they just keep quiet. Somebody said he was just telling me the story and we laughed it off and I was thinking like, 'Okay so that's what you do. When they there you just put some eggs where they can see, some milk (too) (Lynn: Oh my goodness. That's terrible). You just sit quietly and they will volunteer to spend the night.

**Lynn:** That is how women are being reduced. It's terrible.

**Chadamwari:** You have no value after that

(Focus group discussion 7, page 96 of research transcript).

Chadamwari differentiates between prostitution-sex for monetary exchange, and the sexual exchanges that South African women engage in. She says that South African women 'don't get paid but they enjoy'. Lynn responds to this by suggesting that South African women 'enjoy'

sexual relations with men because of the attention that they get. The connotations attached to attention-seekers run along the lines that such women are weak or insecure as they gain their sense of self worth from the interest that men show towards their bodies. Chadamwari adds to the explanation by saying that these women 'enjoy' because of the luxuries that they receive in return for sex (food and a nice place to stay). She says that South African women will 'volunteer to spend the night' just for some eggs and milk or to sleep in a bed that is more luxurious than their own.

Lynn responds to Chadamwari's statement with, 'oh my goodness' and here she conveys a sense of shock that South African women would give up their bodies for so little. Once again this resonates with the participants constructions of South African women as 'inappropriate' feminine subjects-they utilise their sexual body to obtain something beyond procreation and male's pleasure. They construct South African women as skirting the boundaries of 'bad' sexuality, according to 'their' culture women are not supposed to enjoy sex with strangers and there are negative connotations attached to women who use their bodies for 'transactional' purposes (Kambarami, 2006).

It is significant that the women also clearly construct such interactions as a form of woman abuse. Lynn says, 'that's how women are being reduced, it's terrible'. Chadamwari also comments that such relations can degrade women ('you have no value after that'). Importantly, however, they convey meaning that South African women *choose* to be in these situations in which they are so often stripped of their value. They say that these women compromise their bodies and their worth for small things such as a warm bed or some basic food items. Chadamwari's words, 'show them milk and they just keep quiet' conveys a sense that these women do not resist when they see what they will get in return for the sex. Ultimately, they construct South African women as having a lack of self-respect and a lack of values and also as opportunistic beings who want to grab whatever they can get. The women positioned South African women as feminine 'Others' who have very different characters compared to 'them'. Ultimately, they construct South African women as culpable and complicit in their own abuse.

Lynn and Wendy seem to be describing something similar to what has been identified by South African scholars as the phenomenon of ‘transactional sex’. This is an act by which women engage in sexual relations with men of a more powerful social status in return for some kind of material gain (See Shefer, Clowes, & Vergnani, 2012). Theories of why women engage in transactional sex differ; with the debate centred on women’s motivations to engage in such a practice (see Hunter, 2002). Some say that within the context of South Africa’s poverty and deprivation many women engage in transactional sex in order to survive, while others suggest that women have greater levels of agency in the world and they choose to engage in ‘transactional sex’ not as an act of desperation or survival, but to obtain a stylish image and access to fashionable goods (Hunter, 2002). The narratives of the *Sisters for Sisters* members above concur with the latter repertoires of understanding why women may engage in sex for exchange with men. Lynn and Wendy suggest that South African women are motivated to engage in such behaviours because of their love of ‘free’ money and their need to look good and stylish, not for mere survival.

Lynn’s comment about women engaging in these sexual acts for attention really struck home for me. It led me to think about my many young Black South African friends who live in deeply impoverished situations, some sharing a two roomed shack with at least five other family members. The majority of these young women face daily challenges of unemployment, crime, deprivation of basic necessities, as well as abuse. I have witnessed many of these women engaging in sexual relations with men-many men, strange men, older men. Sometimes I find myself falling into the trap of judging and blaming these women, particularly when I accompany yet another woman to a clinic for an HIV test or when one of my friends fall pregnant by mistake, having no means to look after a baby. But then on my next visit to their homes I am reminded of the state of hopelessness that many of these women live in. I am reminded that such sexual relations with men may be the only way that these young women can mobilise any sort of power in their lives. Often women seek to obtain some kind of a sense of self-worth through such engagements with men.

South Africa currently has an unemployment rate of 25.2 %, with women experiencing far higher unemployment and inactivity in the economy and 32.4 % of the country live below the food poverty line of R305 per month, most of whom are women (The South African Press Association, 2013). The reality is that many South African women do not have access to

employment and they often do not have the means to put food on the table. Such sexual, or ‘transactional’, relations with men may not be merely a choice of ‘volunteering’ to spend the night; rather they may often be a means for these women to survive.

The women above engage in an oversimplification of such situations as well as a generalisation, placing all black and coloured South African women in the same category. Their narratives neglect an acknowledgement of the complex socio-economic realities of women’s lives in South Africa. They ignore the context of poverty, the ‘reality’ of gender-dynamics as well as the potent sense of hopelessness that many women in South Africa face. It is significant that a focus on unequal gendered power dynamics was evident when the women participants were talking about their own experiences in transit. They drew on aspects of their circumstances- such as their economic situation and the effects of past abuse-to explain why they found themselves in abusive situations<sup>18</sup>. Such details are lacking when they describe the motivations and behaviour of South African women. So within the context of poverty and deprivation in South Africa and these participants exposure to extremely poor South African women through their involvement in the *Sisters for Sisters* group, I wondered why they chose to ignore the complexities of poverty, deprivation and abuse in South African women’s lives.

These migrant women have experienced a myriad of forms of gender-based violence in their lives. They are also situated in positions of poverty and they are ‘foreigners’ living at a time in South Africa in which xenophobic violence and negative attitudes to foreigners runs rife – attitudes that signal to many foreigners that they do not belong and that they are of little social worth (Harris, 2002). It is through such positions that the women may experience themselves in certain ways as powerless in relation to others within the South African context. The women may thus face a heightened sense of their own vulnerability within this particular space.

The women participants made explicit connections between the blameworthiness of South African women and South African women’s vulnerability to abuse. By doing so they imply that South African women are often not deserving of the status of ‘true’ victims (see Lamb, 1999). I wondered if the participant’s constructions of South African women as blameworthy and culpable could function to soften their sense of their own ‘vulnerability’ in the world. If so, the

---

<sup>18</sup> See analysis chapter 2, “*Crossing borders in Africa: Narrating the ‘foreigner within’*” for more detail.

reasoning could be as such: South African women are lazy, have little self-respect and are sexually deviant (they are 'bad' sexual subjects according to 'our' cultural rules). South African women are working under a system of decayed moral values and they put themselves into situations by which they can easily be taken advantage of, or abused ('it is easy for them to use you because it's not taking them an effort or anything'). 'We', women from other parts of Africa, are good hardworking women with much self-respect. 'We' behave in a way that is compatible with the values of 'respectable' femininity. 'We' are 'good' sexual subjects and 'we' do not put ourselves in dangerous situations, therefore we are less likely to be abused ('they can't come to abuse you because you won't accept and you are working for yourself').

So they construct South African women as more vulnerable to abuse than other women who have better characters and who behave in ways that are compatible with 'African cultural rules'. According to my interpretation, the function of constructing South African women as blameworthy is that it allows the participants to imagine that if they are 'good' and if they adhere to cultural 'rules' about 'appropriate' femininity (sexually restrained, cautious, hardworking) then they will be less vulnerable to abuse at the hands of men. Here South African women become the scapegoats, a target onto which the 'foreigner' women place blame. It is through this defensive process that the migrant women may manage a sense of their vulnerability in the world and, perhaps, a sense of blame that may be attached to their own experiences of gender-based violence in the South African context.

In sum, the participants constructed the 'inner world' of South African women in terms of their lazy, opportunistic and sexually 'easy' characters. Their narratives of South African women's motivations to engage in certain relations with men ignored the complex context of gender dynamics, poverty, and deprivation in contemporary South Africa. They made an explicit link between South African women's blameworthiness and their vulnerability (they are 'bad' sexual subjects therefore they are more likely to be abused). It seems as if this particular narrative strategy allowed the women to manage a sense of themselves as 'vulnerable' subjects in the world. This has implications for the women's sense of self in the world. In the next section I outline the ways in which the migrant women collectively narrated the broader social world of South Africa by constructing cultural archetypes of 'us' versus 'them'.

## **NARRATING SOCIO-CULTURAL WORLDS: COLLECTIVE CONSTRUCTIONS OF 'US' AND 'THEM'**

This section that follows is based on data that was drawn from the “mubobobo” discussion which included four Shona women from Zimbabwe who were currently living in South Africa. The women engaged in descriptions of the social world of South Africa, drawing on their ‘common sense’ view of broader social factors to narrate the sexual climate of the country. They also constructed neat homogenised categories of ‘us’ and ‘them’ and, through doing so, narratively established psycho-social borders between them and South African women. I analyse the content of these women’s narratives and explore the kinds of collective ‘selves’ that they construct in the space of the collective biography work. I then theorise about the function that such constructions play for the women’s sense of self in the world.

During the focus group discussions in which there were no South African women present the ‘foreigner’ women engaged in very specific descriptions of the sexual climate of South Africa. Here they drew on things that they have observed in South Africa and they collectively constructed a ‘common sense’ view about the ways in which South African’s behave sexually. Akeyo says the following about sexual practices in South Africa.

**Akeyo:** By the time we came [to South Africa] it was a normal thing. In [xxxx], that’s where I lived first, it was a normal thing. You would see a woman you know at the tavern drinking with friends and she would go to her girlfriend’s house you know with a part time boyfriend and have sex there. The husband is aware maybe he is at home and this woman would come home there’s no fighting, there’s no shouting. Life goes on as normal.

(Focus group discussion 1, page 41 of research transcript)

Akeyo then goes on to say the following,

**Akeyo:** I remember this other friend of ours it was a coloured family....the boyfriend came to the girl’s house and they had sex and when they came out of the house the mother asked the boyfriend if she was good in bed.

**Cheney:** The boyfriend?

**Akeyo:** Ja, the parents went outside and then this daughter they knew it was the first time [having sex]. It was an excitement; it was good news for the family. She is going to

have sex for the first time. She just turned twenty one. And then they get into the room the parents are outside smoking chatting to the neighbours knowing that their daughter is having sex for the first time in the house. And when they finished in the *daylight*<sup>19</sup> when they come out the mother asked, “was it good?”. And my mother asked her, “what culture is that? We don’t do that in our country” because we were shocked.

(Focus group discussion 1, page 41 of research transcript)

Akeyo reconstructs her ‘memory’ of the casual and open sexual environment that she witnessed when she first arrived in South Africa in 2002. First she draws on South African women’s deviant behaviour drinking at taverns and having ‘part-time’ boyfriends. She describes that many women cheat on their husbands and that such promiscuous sexual behaviour is a ‘normal’ part of life in South Africa as this behaviour is condoned by others in the women’s social sphere. The first example of people who tolerate such behaviour is the women’s friends (‘You would see a woman you know at the tavern drinking with friends’ and ‘she would go to her girlfriend’s house you know with a part time boyfriend and have sex there’). She also says that the husband of the cheating women may be ‘aware’ of her sexual liaisons but that he may tolerate this behaviour in the sense that it does not cause conflict between the married couple (‘there’s no fighting, there’s no shouting’, ‘Life goes on as normal’). Ultimately, Akeyo insinuates that there are no negative social consequences for South African women who behave in this way.

Akeyo then provides an additional example of the sexual climate of South Africa by drawing on sexual attitudes and behaviours that she witnessed among the ‘coloured’ people of South Africa. She draws on an example of acquaintances in the small town in which she worked, poor ‘coloured’ farm labourers, who let their daughter have sex with her boyfriend while they sat outside in the garden. The ‘facts’ that Akeyo chooses to weave together in this description are very significant. They all fall together to create a sense of incredulity about what she ‘witnessed’. Firstly, she explicitly states the age of the young girl (‘twenty one’) and the fact that she was having sex with her boyfriend ‘in the *daylight*’. Akeyo also says that it was the first time that the girl was having sex. She describes the social atmosphere outside the house where the parents and community members were gathered around casually (‘smoking chatting to the neighbours’) ‘knowing that their daughter is having sex for the first time’. This conveys the sense that the young girl breaking her virginity was a social event for the parents and other community members, similar to a birthday or celebratory event (‘it was good news for the family’). Akeyo

---

<sup>19</sup> The italics indicate the emphasis of the respondent. See transcribing conventions Appendix E.

says that after the sexual act was completed the mother of the girl asked the boyfriend if the sex was good. She conveys meaning that the concerns of the elders in the community are based around their daughters as sexualised beings who can perform in bed and please a man. Overall Akeyo linguistically paints a picture of these ‘coloured’ people’s sexually permissive culture in which women are valued as sexually available subjects and the intimate act of sex is publicised.

Akeyo then goes on to describe her mother’s response to this permissive sexual climate. Remember that according to ‘their’ culture-the Shona culture of Zimbabwe- Such a young girl having sex out of marriage is frowned upon and girls who engage in such behaviour may be heavily shamed and ridiculed (Kambarami, 2006). When considering the shame that is attached to young women who lose their virginity before marriage, a ‘good’ woman from the Shona culture may try to stop her daughter from having sex out of marriage, or at least they would not condone the situation and it would not be a celebratory occasion. Akeyo’s re-narration of her mother’s words is significant (‘My mother asked her, “what culture is that?”’). She narrates a sense that the South African sexual climate is strange and very different to the cultural scripts about sex that they have grown up with in Zimbabwe. Her words, ‘we were shocked’ conveys that, to them, such sexual behaviour is unbelievable. Her re-narration of her mother’s words, ‘We don’t do that in our country’ conveys meaning that they would never be complicit in such a sexual climate. Through this choice of quoted words Akeyo distances herself (and others of her culture) from such ‘immoral’ behaviour. The underlying message that she conveys through this description is that her and her mother are ‘good’ feminine subjects who observed the sexual behaviour of the coloured people from a moral high ground.

Below Akeyo and Chadamwari theorise about this very different sexual climate of South Africa in terms of the ways in which Black Xhosa South African women work with their culture.

**Chadamwari:** I think it is just happening because people (are) creating their own new thing...new livelihood because I think traditionally it wasn’t like that. Even the Xhosa people here in Cape Town that we live with, if you look at the way they are staying now it’s like a man and a woman they don’t get married first they “slaap saam” first, they stay together. But if you ask them about back home what they do, they don’t do that. They don’t actually do that but here in Cape Town they do it. They get their shack they start to stay with the boyfriend or whatever. They might get married, they might not. She can even change to another boyfriend or he can change to another woman. And then

you never know maybe they will get married to someone else after staying with different people they might have a child, they might not. So it is just a culture that is building up a new culture that people are building up and back home they don't do that. And I think it is just happening with people as time goes people are changing their cultures to something else; they are creating a whole new culture for this generation.

**Cheney:** They are creating their own worlds.

(Focus group discussion 1, page 42 of research transcript)

Chadamwari begins by describing the sexual climate of Cape Town, South Africa as characterised by casual sexual relationships, unpredictability and instability. She draws particularly on her 'views' of the sexual behaviour of Black Xhosa people and positions herself as knowledgeable about these people's behaviour ('the Xhosa people here in Cape Town that we live with'). She says that Xhosa men and women 'slaap saam'-this is Afrikaans terminology, literally meaning 'sleep together' or to have sex. According to Chadamwari, 'they get their shack they start to stay with the boyfriend'. Here she implies that these people live together and have sexual relations out of marriage. She also suggests that these relationships are characterised by unpredictability seen through her words, 'they might get married, they might not' and, 'they might have a child, they might not'. Finally she narrates a sense of the fleeting nature of such companionships that are typically characterised by the people often changing sexual partners ('She can even change to another boyfriend or he can change to another woman'). The covert message here is that such 'erratic' partnering arrangements are at odds with traditional socio-cultural rules of marriage and the nuclear family.

In the Shona culture it is taboo for women to have sex before marriage and, for a relationship to constitute as a good one that follows cultural rules, a man and a woman should be married before they consecrate the relationship (Kambarami, 2006). In many African cultures, including the Xhosa culture of South Africa and the Shona culture of Zimbabwe, women's sexuality is interwoven with ideologies of reproduction and domesticity (see Tamale, 2011b). The practices of South African Xhosa men and women that Chadamwari describes - sex before marriage and casual sexual arrangements- diverge from these cultural traditions of 'acceptable' heterosexual romantic relations. Chadamwari's comment, 'they might have a child, they might not' implies that such relationships are not necessarily geared towards starting a family. In the Xhosa culture there is much value placed on motherhood and family connections (Moore, 2013). Akeyo and Cheney, however, narrate that Xhosa women in Cape Town are diverging from these cultural

norms of what they once knew in their home place, as Chadamwari says, ‘traditionally it wasn’t like that’.

Many Xhosa men and women in South Africa have travelled from rural areas of the Eastern Cape<sup>20</sup> in search for work in urban environments such as Cape Town. This can be described as a kind of ‘internal migration’ of many Black, Xhosa South Africans. Such a transition can be compared on some level to the participant’s own transitions from their home countries of Africa to Cape Town, South Africa. The phrase, ‘back home’ is used by the participants to indicate the rural Eastern Cape, the place of origin for many Black Xhosa South Africans who are living in townships in Cape Town. Chadamwari says that these South African did not behave in sexually ‘deviant’ ways ‘back home’ in the rural Eastern Cape. She says that she has gained this knowledge from her own ‘experience’ speaking to South African women (‘If you ask them about back home what they do, they don’t do that’). She repeats this point later on, ‘They don’t actually do that but here in Cape Town they do it’ and, ‘back home they don’t do that’, seemingly to bring home her point about the place specific nature of this disintegration of cultural values.

Chadamwari narrates that South African Xhosa women have lost tradition within the urban space of Cape Town. She says that these South Africans work with cultures in ways that suggest a morphing of cultures (‘creating their own new thing’). Chadamwari says that South Africans are, ‘changing their cultures to something else’ and that, ‘they are creating a whole new culture for this generation’. Cheney concurs by echoing, ‘They are creating their own worlds’. Here Chadamwari and Cheney suggest that when these South African’s get to the city of Cape Town they begin to take on more Westernised perspectives that results in a ‘breaking up’ of their traditional ‘African’ values. The underlying message here is clear-South African’s are ‘bad’ cultural subjects they are deviants in the sense that they have ‘blocked away’ their culture and their tradition and they no longer adhere to proper culture values about sex, marriage, and motherhood.

---

<sup>20</sup> The Eastern Cape is a South African province that was formed in 1994 and incorporates rural areas from the former Xhosa ‘homelands’- the Transkei and Ciskei.

The mastery of the position of ‘good’ cultural subject holds particular benefits for individuals, and they narratively exclude Xhosa South Africans from these benefits. At the same time the positioning of Xhosa South Africans as being ‘culture-less’ connotes that South Africans have lost a sense of their unified collective identity and, in a sense, they have lost their ‘African-ness’.

Cheney’s words, ‘They are creating their own worlds’ also paints a picture that the South African way of being is very different to what these Zimbabwean women have come across in their home country. They represent this ‘other world’ as an unknown, strange (and threatening) landscape and implicitly position themselves as ‘good’ cultural subjects who brought their culture ‘with them’.

*Constructing psycho-social borders: The collective ‘self’ and the “imagined” ‘Other’*

The women’s descriptions of the sexual climate of South Africa were part of a larger and more complex story. These descriptions stood as the foundation of the women’s collective constructions of strict cultural categories of ‘us’ (African migrants living in South Africa) and ‘them’ (South Africans). Once again, these distinctions were based around ‘common sense’ notions of sexual behaviour, sexuality, and woman abuse. I explore these themes below.

**Cheney:** For a Zim<sup>21</sup> woman there has to be a relationship for you to have sex. That’s why men would rather go for what-for muti, for them to do whatever. Unlike *here*<sup>22</sup> in South Africa it is just ‘I do, I do’ [indicates agreement of both the woman and the man to have sex] and then they take each other and go. So in our country like my sister she had a baby at twenty six, she was a virgin at that time. Unlike here [in South Africa] they consent a 12 year old on her own to go and have an abortion. Of which it is a thing she agreed to go and have that sex, she will also consent to what-*abortion, termination of pregnancy*<sup>23</sup>. Unlike in our country, even abortion you will go straight to jail.

**S:** Is it?

**Cheney:** Yes, it is not allowed. Abortion you will go to jail. And we have got that thing when you are married and the husband finds out you are a not a virgin, they will make a hole on the blanket to show that your child was not what-was not a virgin. Of which it is taboo to go on your marriage bed without being a virgin when you have already...lost

---

<sup>21</sup> “Zim” is a shortening of the word Zimbabwean

<sup>22</sup> This indicates Cheney’s emphasis, see transcribing conventions Appendix E.

<sup>23</sup> This indicates Cheney’s emphasis, see transcribing conventions Appendix E.

your virginity. So that's why men maybe they will crave muti (in Zimbabwe)... for him to have that whatever [sexual availability].

(Focus group discussion 1, page 55 research transcript)

Cheney brings up the topic of “mubobobo” rape (discussed in chapter 5) and she explains her ‘view’ of why the practice is more prevalent in Zimbabwe than it is in South Africa. Cheney says, ‘For Zim(babwean) women there has to be a relationship for you to have sex’. She uses this as an explanatory point to indicate that women in Zimbabwe are not freely available in terms of sex and therefore men are motivated to practice “mubobobo” (sex via muti) in this environment so that they can have easy access to sex (‘for them to do whatever’). She says that in South Africa sexual behaviour is very different, seen through her words, ‘I do, I do’. This phrase indicates that there is agreement in terms of the sexual act on both the women and the man’s side. Interestingly, it also parodies the vernacular of an official marriage agreement and she may use it in this context to make a point about the lack of values attached to sex in the ‘South African’ culture. Her phrase, ‘then they take each other and go’ also conveys her point about the quick and easy sexual negotiations that take place between South Africans.

Cheney draws on two controversial issues, underage sex and abortion, to make her comparison clear. Firstly, she says that in Zimbabwe (‘in our country’) women do not engage in sex before marriage because it is taboo for a woman to marry a man if she is not a virgin. She uses the example of her sister in Zimbabwe who was twenty six year old and a virgin when she got married. She says that female sexual practices are very different in South Africa (‘unlike here’) where twelve year old South African girls, ‘agree to have sex’. Her example of the sexual activity of twelve year old girls in South Africa and the implied ‘acceptance’ of such sexual behaviour is quite extreme. She seems to use this example specifically to position South Africans (‘they’) in a negative way. Secondly, she draws on the issue of abortion and says that abortion is illegal in Zimbabwe (‘you will go straight to jail’) but that in South Africa they will consent to a twelve year old going to abort ‘on her own’.

Using these examples Cheney narrates their ‘common sense’ view of ‘South African-ness’ and she makes an explicit comparison between the values of the ‘culture’ of Zimbabwe and the ‘culture’ of South Africa. She ends off each description about Zimbabwean values with the phrase, ‘Unlike here’ and by doing so she emphasises her point that the values and practices in South Africa are very different from Zimbabwe. These different categories of ‘us’ versus ‘them’

are associated with differences in the values and practices around sex. She draws on an insider/outsider dichotomy and constructs clear psycho-social borders between Zimbabwe ('we', 'our country') and South Africa ('they', 'here'). Ultimately, she positions the sexual values of South Africa as less moral than those of Zimbabwe.

Cheney's representation of clear boundaries between 'South African' sexual values and Zimbabwean sexual values is overly simplistic. Cultures are morphing with boundaries that are becoming more fluid and women of different geographical locations are not static cultural subjects (Tamale, 2005). Many people resist aspects of tradition and culture because such practices do not serve a practical purpose in their modern life or because the beliefs that underlie these practices have been replaced by other beliefs (Tsanga, 2011). Such a dichotomy between the sexual values and attitudes of the people of Zimbabwe and people from South Africa may not represent the reality of the lives of people living in these locations. The background information that I received from these women over the course of my research also points to the fact that their experiences may be more complex and varied than the representation of Zimbabwe's moral values may suggest.

Cheney married when she was in her late teens due to a lack of finances and her relationship was characterised by severe emotional and sexual abuse at the hands of her husband. Sex for her thus happened at a young age, sex which was often forced upon her. I wondered what kind of morality Cheney experienced on her wedding night and during the many turbulent nights that followed. Many of the other 'foreigner' women, including those who took part in this discussion, had experienced repeated sexual abuse in childhood and therefore they were not virgins when they got married. I wondered how these women who had been raped in their younger years felt when they found themselves on the wedding bed. So in her account above Cheney ignores an analysis of the abusive and oppressive context that may lead a twelve year old girl in South Africa to have sex. She also ignores the double standards that are at play in terms of Shona cultural values and the many immoral sexual acts that are performed on women's bodies before marriage or behind the façade of a 'good moral' marriage. Ultimately, Cheney ignores that sex, according to what she has constructed as Zimbabwean values codes, is not always moral. Similarly, in South Africa women may not always have a choice about whether or not to engage in sex. I wondered why Cheney chose to ignore these complexities. I wondered why she chose to represent the 'culture' of Zimbabwe and South Africa in such static, opposing ways.

Akeyo continues along similar categories of ‘us’ and ‘them’.

**Akeyo:** To them [South African’s] like um like the cultures that we have stayed with in [xxxx] sex it’s a *need*, that is obvious. It is not something that you can shy off like we do. You know if someone is having a boyfriend they will ask you, “Are you having sex is it good?”. If you are not having sex then something is wrong with you. With *us* if you are having sex if you are not married then something is wrong with you (**Chadamwari** and **Cheney**: laugh).

**Chadamwari:** It’s the other way around now.

**Akeyo:** It’s the other way around. So it is not really a surprise why men do that [make inappropriate sexual advances towards women] because they just think that (sex) will happen because they do that with their women and they expect every woman to be like that. So they tend to wander [away from South African women] and then that’s why they are now more and more like wanting to marry foreign ladies because they know that these people have respect for their bodies they don’t just do it [sex] with anybody.

(Focus group discussion 1, page 40 of research transcript)

Once again Akeyo and Chadamwari narrate a sense that the ‘South African culture’ is very different to their own Shona culture. They do this by constructing ‘inherent’ differences between the cultures with regards to attitudes about sex and sexual practices. Akeyo narrates that South African’s are compelled by a ‘need’ to have sex. She says, ‘to them [South Africans].... sex it’s a *need* that is obvious’. Here she infers that sex is an overwhelming necessity for South Africans. Within the context of the current discussion, Akeyo situates this need as something that resides ‘within’ individual South Africans but that is caused by the environment of social others. She infers that within this cultural environment there is a web of attitudes that translate into value being placed on active sexual subjects. Such a sexual climate may, as Akeyo suggests, result in certain social pressures to engage in sexual activity. She makes this point by highlighting an example of one of the questions that someone of the ‘South African culture’ may be asked if they have a boyfriend, ‘Are you having sex is it good?’. She also says that in this sexual climate South Africans worth is associated with their engagement in sex (‘If you are not having sex then something is wrong with you’).

The phrasal verb ‘shy off’ connotes meaning about an active movement of shrinking back or moving away from something. Such a recoiling movement suggests a fast moving back from something that is ‘disgusting’ or ‘dangerous’, it is a similar movement to how one would

respond to a snake or a threatening animal. In this context it signifies energetically avoiding sexual urges and desires. Akeyo says, “it is not something they can shy off”. Here she conveys meaning that South Africans are controlled by their sexual urges, they have succumbed to cultural pressures of a Westernised world and they do not have the capacity to restrain themselves sexually. Importantly, she insinuates that this is the case because South African women no longer adhere to the traditions of their original ‘African’ cultures.

On the other hand she says that they, as Shona women from Zimbabwe, can easily ‘shy off’ their sexual urges (‘shy off sex like we do’). She implicitly conveys the sense that they as foreigners are more in control of their sexual urges because they adhere to their traditional cultures values which are moral. As Chadamwari qualifies, their culture is ‘the other way around’. Evelyn’s words above imply that they (Zimbabwean women) have learnt to respond correctly to their sexual urges (a quick ‘pulling back’ or withdrawal from ‘inappropriate’ sex)-they follow their traditional cultural rules and they are ‘appropriate’ feminine subjects.

Akeyo says that the sexual behaviours and relationship choices of South African men are driven by the sexual conduct of South African women. She positions South African women as freely sexually available and as willing to have sex with ‘anybody’. She infers that South African men often make inappropriate sexual advances towards ‘them’ (Zimbabwean women and ‘foreigner’ women) because of the unrestrained sexual behaviour of South African women (‘they expect every woman to be like that’). Here she implicitly places blame on South African women for setting the standards low (‘they’ are not ‘good enough’ because they do not monitor their sexual behaviour). In other words, she conveys meaning that South African men’s inappropriate sexual behaviour towards ‘them’ (migrant women) has not got anything to do with ‘their’ sexuality (the sexuality of Zimbabwean women); rather such behaviour is caused by the deviant sexuality of South African women.

Importantly, Akeyo implies that South African men will have sex readily with ‘their’ women but that they have developed a preference for ‘foreign ladies’ with regards to marriage. She says that the sexual behaviour of South African women has caused South African men ‘to wander’ away from their women and that South African men want to marry foreign women because they ‘have

respect for their bodies and they don't just do it [sex] with anybody'. Here they position themselves as having more value than South African women.

With the migrant women's positions as 'foreigners' may come a sense that they 'do not belong' in South Africa (Harris, 2002). Their positioning of their collective 'self' as having value through being wanted by South African men could be a response to such a position. So too could their positioning of South African women as 'unwanted' in terms of marriage. Along these lines, South African women have what they want, they 'belong' in the space of South Africa. Such narrative disruptions of the mainstream positions could help these African migrants gain a sense of belonging and worth within the South African context (it is significant that 'foreigner' men did not feature in this part of the discussion). Interestingly, we see that Akeyo's narrative is structured around discourses that 'allow' men to behave along double standards of sleeping with any women they like but at the same time wanting a wife that they can keep under control on a sexual level.

Akeyo uses the term 'foreign ladies' to stand as a collective 'us' that she narrates as a homogenous group who share the same sexual attitudes and values and who are custodians of their culture, keeping cultural values in place. She implies that they are sexually restrained and cultured (the 'good' feminine subject'). At the same time she lumps South African women into the same blanket category-as mirror opposites (the 'bad' feminine subject). Their construction of neat categories of 'us' and 'them' is based on essentialised socio-cultural characteristics. The women ignore the complex differences 'within' cultures and the many agentic ways in which women engage with their culture. On a surface level their narratives seem to suggest a very parochial view of South Africans. However, I had a sense that something deeper was going on.

#### *The narrative function of constructions of 'us' and 'them'*

The women constructed strict psycho-social borders between 'us' and 'them' based on a homogenisation of 'their' own culture on the one hand and 'South African culture' on the other. They seemed to narrate themselves as more African than South African women and this is at odds with 'ubuntu', an African philosophy of one-ness (Mkhize, 2004). However, I interpret such narratives as serving a particular function for these women in the moment of telling. According to my interpretation, the women's construction of static categories of 'us' (non-South

Africans) and ‘them’ (South Africans) was a narrative strategy, a kind of ‘tactical’ homogenisation’, in the sense that it allowed the women to set themselves up as mirror opposites of the South African female ‘Other’. It is in contrast to this cultural alterity they were able to collectively weave a positive sense of themselves in the world.

Davies et al. (1997) talk about ‘tapestries of growing understanding’ (p. 75) of topics that emerge in collective biography work. In such work individual history and experience (here what they represent as their ‘perceptions’ of the South African sexual climate) become intertwined with the understandings and perceptions of other women in the group setting. The construction of ‘selves’ emerges via a creative process and in tandem with others who are participating in the same discussion. As Kraus (2007) asserts, it is only in relation to others and in relation to normative social repertoires of meaning that one can narratively produce a sense of their own social self.

This narrative strategy seems to signify a deeper process of splitting. The women ‘split’ their collective self-concept into two opposing entities, here the all ‘good’ collective ‘us’ and the all ‘bad’ collective South African ‘Other’. The ‘bad’ entity manifests itself in the image of the “imagined” South African female ‘Other’ and it represents parts of themselves that they cannot tolerate. It suggests that there is a strong cultural pull to not acknowledge certain embodied feelings. This process of splitting may enable the women to ‘dis-identify’ with aspects of the self that contradict certain cultural values and that may cause tension ‘within’ the self and, possibly, a significant amount of anxiety. The image of the “imagined” ‘Other’ then ‘holds’ these negative aspects of their selves that are associated with the feminine and with past experiences of abuse; including blame, shame, and feelings of sexual ‘inappropriateness’. In this way they are able to express these feelings, intuitions, and memories without ‘owning’ them as parts of themselves. This process of splitting could allow for the women to psychologically distance themselves from these ‘dangerous’ and unsettling emotions.

Importantly, through this process of splitting the women were able to get these embodied feelings, intuitions, and memories ‘off their chest’ without putting themselves in danger of being judged or shamed by ‘others’. By ‘others’ I refer to the listening ‘others’ who took part in these specific collective biography discussions (particularly me, the researcher) and hypothetical

‘others’ ‘out there’ who adhere to similar hegemonic repertoires of understanding masculinity and femininity.

The narratives of the migrant African women represent a collective strategy of placing themselves (‘us’) in positive subject positions but, as is typical of such collective biography work (see Davies & Gannon, 2006b), it shows how they are at the same time ‘stuck’ in their own cultural webs mastering the subject positions of ‘good’ cultural subject. It is these very positions of ‘appropriate’ femininity and ‘good’ cultural subject that form the basis of their subjection and much of their oppression (see Davies & Gannon, 2006a). Profitt (2000b) has called this, ‘the desire and will not to know’ (p. 88). She outlines this as a kind of resistance to undoing the ‘foundation of identity’ which is not a fixed identity but rather what society has instilled in us about what it is to be a ‘good’ woman. Such resistance says Profitt (2000b), happens because of the costs of ‘breaking away’ from such an identity. In particular, when one goes against cultural norms they face danger of being blamed or ostracised by society. However, unlike Profitt (2000b) who conceptualised this ‘desire and will not to know’ as an individual strategy of maintaining a positive sense of self, we see that the African migrant women in the current study worked energetically in a collective process to retain the identity of ‘good’ feminine subject, according to the rules of the Shona culture. The next and last analysis section of this chapter provides a very different sort of picture.

*“The colours that I really feel”: Fractures in constructions of ‘good’ collective ‘self’*

I consider the stories above as narrative strategies that were drawn on for particular narrative and psychological purposes. They represent the dominant thread of meaning making that took place during the focus group discussions during which there were no South African women present. There were moments, however, when these scripts were interrupted fleetingly, yet powerfully. Akeyo, a Zimbabwean woman of the Shona culture, whose voice is documented extensively above, sheds insight into such disruptions. Her narrative below offers a brief glimpse into a very different sort of picture, a crack or ‘fault line’ (Davies, 2005: p. 1) in the women’s neat representations of themselves as ‘good’ cultural subjects.

**Akeyo:** It's natural. I think that...we confuse our feelings our normal beings with our cultures, you know with our values, with our form of values from parents and parents and parents. You know it's.. it's quite confusing. Speaking out with the words you know you are blaming yourself. You are being ashamed. But naturally you know you needed it you wanted it. You saw him and you wanted it. So what? They (men) also do that. So ja it's quite confusing it's really I think this is the most difficult thing to like write, i don't know how Sammy is going to write about that, because the things that we want written and the things that we want seen are not the things that we feel, are not the things that we need. The things that we want to know or want to say are not the things that our body needs, you know. And to compromise the two its ja...it's a pain, it's a pain. But always I have realised in life that the body wins. (S4S group laughing)

(**Akeyo:** laughing). The body wins. No matter how you preach you know and all that but ja the body wins you get to do what needs to be done. At the end of the day no matter what you say you might want to do things. You might not want to do things (with men). But sometimes there are things that just happen and you don't know why or how they happen. And you maybe can't stop them from happening.....

**S:** The body is powerful.

(Focus group discussion 5, page 39 of research transcript).

Akeyo's narrative above is a response to a fellow Zimbabwean women's story about having sex with a man that she hardly knew. This Zimbabwean woman seemed to be experiencing trouble constructing her 'self' in a positive way after her sexual engagements with this male stranger. Akeyo provides a response that reassures the woman that she may take up a positive subjectivity. She indicates her observance of the blame and shame that is coming through in this other women's narratives-feelings that could be caused by acknowledging that one is behaving in a sexual way that does not fit in with the hegemonic scripts of 'appropriate' femininity, as defined by the Shona culture. In other words, that one is behaving as a 'faulty' feminine subject. Akeyo responds to this women conveying meaning that such negative emotions are not a necessary reaction to her sexual engagement with this man. She says 'naturally you needed it and you wanted it' and, 'So what? They (men) also do that'. She situates sexual urges as normal part of women's repertoire and says that they are sexual beings who need sex, just as men do.

Akeyo outlines a sense of a clash between women's sexual desires and the available ways of being that they have been taught by their culture. Akeyo says, 'I think that...we confuse our feelings our normal beings with our cultures'. She conveys meaning that women like them ('we') learn values from their parents that have been passed down through intergenerational

transmission ('from parents and parents and parents'). Through this narrative she reflects that these cultural values shape their thinking and ways of being to such an extent that they may feel what they don't really want to feel and that they are confused about the nature of their 'real self'.

Akeyo also narrates a sense of confusion about the ways that they, as women of the Shona culture, decide to present themselves. She says that the ways that they want to present themselves in the research, i.e. as 'good' feminine and cultural subjects ('the things that we want written and the things that we want seen') are at odds with what they really feel ('are not the things that we feel, are not the things that we need'). In other words, she says that they want to know themselves as 'good' feminine subjects who self monitor and control their sexual urges. She also says that they want to represent themselves as 'good' but their bodies create problems for such ways of knowing.

It is significant that Akeyo expresses a sense of her awareness that I, as someone who has worked with the women for quite some time, may be able to see through the façade of their neat constructions of 'collective self' as 'good' feminine subjects that adhere to their cultural values about femininity and sexuality (she says, 'I think this is the most difficult thing to like write'). Her words, 'i don't know how Sammy is going to write about that' convey a sense of the difficulties of documenting such things but also suggests an implicit anxiousness about what kinds of things will be documented by me, the researcher.

Akeyo narrates a tension that, she says, is caused by the two opposing forces of culture and body. She talks about 'pain' as a visceral feeling that occurs as a result of living with this contradiction of covering up one's true feelings. However, she stresses the power of the underlying force of the body and sexual needs/desires ('the body wins'). She says, 'sometimes there are things that just happen and you don't know why or how they happen' and 'you maybe can't stop them from happening'. In doing so, she suggests that these bodily forces may manifest in ways that women may not necessarily be able to control.

Akeyo continues as follows:

**Akeyo:** Ja. I think it is a matter of a choice..connection inside your body. But otherwise what we say I believe a lot of the things that I say I was taught to value it. I look forward to keep the train going you know to maintain and keep watering the flower. But is it really blooming the colours that I really want or the colours that I really feel? It is difficult sometimes to make a different decision. You know to stand up for your choice, it is really difficult. You will look in people's eyes like you are a rebel you know you are changing things. But who knows maybe we are going to start changing the generation. We need to start changing it [culture] ourselves.

(Focus group discussion 5, page 39 of research transcript).

Akeyo then gives an explanation of why this Zimbabwean woman had a sexual encounter with a male stranger. She says, 'I think it is a matter of choice' and then she changes her use of words to, '*connection*<sup>24</sup> inside your body'. Her choice of words is significant. She infers that this happened not because the woman randomly chose to engage with her sexual urges but rather because this woman is *connected* to her body. Such a connection to the body suggests that this woman is aware of her sexual feelings and that these feelings run as a strong force that cannot be ignored.

Akeyo says that many of her beliefs are shaped by things that she was taught and that adhering to such cultural values produces a life that is not perfectly compatible with her feelings. She says on the one hand that she looks forward to continuing a life of upholding her cultural values ('keep the train going' and 'keep watering the flower'). Here 'flower' seems to stand as a metaphor for her embodied self as cultural subject. She 'waters' this flower in the sense that she practices cultural values and uses these to enrich her life. On the other hand she boldly states the contradiction that this cultural adherence presents. She says, 'But is it really blooming the colours that I really want or the colours that I really feel?'. Here she infers that her enmeshment in the values of the Shona culture does not 'cultivate' her body in the ways that she wants and it is not compatible with her embodied feelings.

---

<sup>24</sup> My emphasis

Akeyo highlights the challenges of making decisions that diverge from her cultural values- decisions like expressing ones sexuality or acting overtly on one's sexual urges. She says that if you make your own choices about your sexuality then people will perceive you in a negative way ('You will look in people's eyes like you are a rebel') because you are now acting in different ways, 'you are changing things'. This resonates with what Proffitt (2000) has outlined as the challenges of resisting the 'foundation of the self'- what women have come to know as an integral part of themselves (here sexual passivity and passion-lessness). It is important that Akeyo ends off by making a call to the other women that they should start changing the ways in which they engage with their culture ('We need to start changing it [culture] ourselves').

Akeyo's narrative above provides insights into the cracks, or 'fault lines' (Davies, 2005: p. 1) in the women's neatly constructed picture of their 'collective self' as 'good' feminine subjects who adhere rigidly to the sexual values of the Shona culture. This is what Davies et al. (1997) call, 'ruptures in the skin of silence' (p. 1). Akeyo represents an awareness of things that are concealed 'below the surface' but that nevertheless, as she suggests, have great power over her sense of self. Her narrative suggests a tension between wanting to achieve mastery of the position of 'good cultural subject' and on the other hand the force of her sexual urges and desires (see Davies & Gannon, 2006b).

Her narrative represents the complexity of a subjectivity that is infused by socio-cultural 'rules' and expectations but that is also deeply driven by embodied desires. It is significant that earlier in this chapter along the lines of their dominant threads of meaning, or narrative strategies, the women described Xhosa South African women as 'changing' their culture when they moved from their home place to Cape Town, South Africa. They portrayed this change in a negative light and constructed these South African women as 'faulty' feminine subjects. However, here Akeyo responds in what seems to be a sympathetic way to her fellow Zimbabwean woman. She narrates the complexity of the clash between cultural values and embodied feelings. She implies that 'change' on 'their' part is positive, and even necessary ('we need to start changing it [culture] ourselves'). She also narrates a disjuncture between a need to engage in the 'ideal' presentation of self (according to her cultural values) and her embodied feelings.

## CONCLUSION

In sum, the narratives in this chapter have been collectively weaved together from ‘threads’ of individual ‘experience’. Such tapestries, or collectively woven products, symbolise something beyond the sum of the individual parts (see Davies et. al, 1997). Their stories represent something that may not have been “imagined” by individuals who are separated from such a micro-setting/collective process. The women co-narrated the ‘inner world’ of ‘typical’ black and ‘coloured’ South African women of a low socio-economic status. They also collectively constructed their ‘common sense’ view of the sexual climate of South Africa. They linguistically established strict categories of ‘us’ (non-South Africans) and ‘them’ (South Africans) that were based on essentialised features of each culture. In doing so they narrated psycho-social borders between themselves and the “imagined” South African female ‘Other’.

These narratives of collective ‘self’ and “imagined” female South African ‘other’ hold important insight within the power nexus of gendered, classed, and ‘raced’ relations in contemporary post-apartheid South Africa. I interpret their narratives to signify a struggle for positive meaning as women ‘foreigners’ and ‘abused women’ within the South African socio-political landscape. From a social remembering perspective such narrations do not represent any ‘true’ perceptions of South African women; rather they signify something about the ‘inner worlds’ of the women who narrate such images. These narrative strategies allowed the women to express their ‘residues of gendered oppression’ in a communicable form and to construct a positive sense of self in the moment of their tellings.

According to my interpretation, these narrative strategies also signified deeper psychological processes that were at play. The strategies of projection and splitting enabled the women to psychologically mobilise their ‘past residues of abuse’ and other embodied (sexual) feelings. This process of mobilisation may be the first step in the journey to begin to engage with these embodied feelings in critical ways that are not confined by dominant cultural scripts. Thus, women may begin to rework and re-imagine oneself as a gendered being in the world. This is linked to resisting the strong pull of culture and ‘un-becoming’ what society and culture has taught one to be, a process that Davies et al. (1997) have referred to as, ‘ruptures in the skin of silence’ (p.1). We see a glimpse of such a ‘rupture’ in Evelyn’s narrative above about resisting culture. If women are provided with more collective spaces through which they can safely

engage in such narrative strategies, they may be able to move towards new critical understandings-towards a new, more positive, experience of 'self' characterised by reduced tension and an increased sense of belonging and worth in the world.

# CHAPTER 8: SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

## SUMMARY

This study utilised a collective biography research methodology to explore the ways in which abused African women migrants living in South Africa work with ‘memory’ to collectively transform their past experiences of abuse and maltreatment. It explored the co-construction of identities among this group of women and how they may gain strength through their shared narratives. The analysis closely follows three specific theory questions that were developed over time during the research process. 1.) In what ways did the women transform their past within these collective spaces? 2.) What kinds of identities were (co)-constructed through this collective process? 3.) What function did these ways of remembering have for the women’s sense of ‘self’ in the world? I addressed these questions using a feminist poststructuralist framework of multiple and changing ‘selves’ that are constructed through language. The analysis was also done through the lens of a social remembering approach that focuses on the functional and transformative potentials of memory.

The results/discussion chapters of this thesis are structured according to three themes that emerged as central motifs in the women’s collective meaning making. They are reflective of the women’s ‘experiences’ at different temporal moments and spaces throughout the trajectory of their lives. Chapter 5, *Culture, Femininity, and Woman ‘Abuse’: The Case of “Mubobobo” rape* is a case study of the participant’s stories of “rape from a distance”. I draw on one specific focus group discussion that consisted of Zimbabwean women and the chapter is geared towards a more in-depth study of the women’s meaning making about this kind of violence. The theme of “mubobobo” was tied into the women’s retrospective stories about their lives ‘back home’ in Zimbabwe.

Chapter 6, *Crossing borders in Africa: Collectively narrating the 'foreigner within'* is based on another central theme, that of self in transit through Africa. This chapter draws on the voices of women from Zimbabwe, Kenya, and Congo and centres on the participants' stories of women's encounters with men at border posts in Africa. This theme was based around a particular time of the women's lives when they travelled through the space of transit from their home countries to Cape Town, South Africa. They 'looked back' and collectively narrated their own and others experiences in transit.

The final results chapter, *Psycho-social borders and the "imagined" female other: Collectively constructing 'selves' in the South African context*, draws on the voices of women from Zimbabwe, Kenya, and Congo. It outlined the ways in which participants narrated the 'inner worlds' of South African women, and the morals of 'South African culture', and the ways in which they constructed themselves in relation to these images. The main theme of this chapter is the women's account of their 'selves' as situated in the current moment and within the socio-political space of South Africa. Each chapter contributes unique knowledge about African women migrants' collective meaning making about themselves as abused women. The results showed that the women worked creatively with culture and space in ways that allowed them to narrate their experiences in their own ways, and to negotiate agency as authors of their stories.

Feminist poststructuralist work in the field of women's agency and gender-based violence has contributed significantly to understandings about the complexity of abused women's agency and identity. By challenging static notions of 'victim' and 'survivor', work in the field has contributed to a move away from engaging in oppressive representations of women that do not fall in line with dominant discourses of abused women's powerlessness and pathology. This work has offered valuable insights into the complexity of abused women's subjectivities, particularly about the ways in which women may negotiate power in terms of their victimhood and their agency, and the ways in which such narrations are shaped by particular socio-cultural contexts.

Hydèn (2005) found that women drew on and resisted dominant discourses about abused women at different moments and that they spoke from different positions that sometimes indicated 'powerless' in relation to their abusers but at other times suggested a sense of 'power' in relation

to their abusers. Boonzaier (2008) found that at certain moments women construct themselves as victim to a dominating partner and at other moments they were able to draw on discourses of power; indicating a blurring of boundaries and ambiguous, and often contradictory, constructions of victim and perpetrator. Ultimately, these studies suggest that at certain moments women resist dominant discourses of femininity and abused women by positioning themselves as active agents in their lives. Scholars in the field have also identified a changing consciousness of social power structures among abused women that leads to women negotiating new, more positive subjectivities and a greater sense of power in relation to real and imagined abusers.

The current study draws on the foundations of this work by exploring how women negotiate agency through the ways in which they position themselves in relation to dominant socio-cultural discourses. However, my work has contributed significantly to this field of work in a number of important ways. Firstly, this study examines the meaning making processes of African women migrants who are living in South Africa and who have come together of their own accord to form a grassroots women's group, this group of women has not been extensively researched in feminist poststructuralist studies of abused women's agency that has largely focused on women from the North who have utilised shelters or social services agencies. The current study also provides information about the process of 'selving' in relation to others and, as such it offers important insight into what agency and the processes of identity transformation may look like for African women who are situated within restrictive cultures.

*"Looking back": Drawing on shared cultural resources of "mubobobo"*

In chapter 5, *Culture, Femininity, and Woman 'Abuse': The Case of "Mubobobo"* the results showed that the women drew on the cultural narrative of "mubobobo" rape in dynamic ways that allowed them to express certain aspects of the 'self' that may have been concealed due to social cultural strictures of the Shona culture that render certain expressions taboo. The "mubobobo" narrative provided Cheney with a means to present ambiguity in her accounts of 'wet dreams' and it is through this ambiguity that she could discuss aspects of her sexuality. She narrated a "whispering" return of her sexual desire and an acknowledgement of her own sexual subjectivity-things which may have been silenced by cultural strictures. These findings obviously contradict those of Gwandure (2009) who argued that Zimbabwean women will always interpret aspects of their sexual desire as "mubobobo" because their perspective is rigidly moulded by cultural scripts that say that women cannot experience such desire. The findings of

the current study suggest that women do find ways to express aspects of their sexuality from within their culture. However, Cheney's narrative also suggests the pernicious hold of culture, a strong pulling back, seen through the contradictory way that she represents aspects of her sexual pleasure-something that I interpreted as signifying her discomfort with discussing these issues. Ultimately, it seemed as if the "mubobobo" narrative was an accepted cultural tool whereby Cheney could express these aspects of her sexuality.

Secondly, it seemed as if the "mubobobo" narrative stood as a metaphor through which Akeyo could express certain embodied feelings and emotions that are associated with the trauma of her position as a woman in a patriarchal world and within a culture that is restrictive towards women. According to my interpretation, it is through the language of "mubobobo" that she was able to express traumatic memory that has been imprinted onto her (sexualised) body and mind. This narrative allowed Akeyo to engage in a gendered analysis of her position and thus she was able to contextualise and make sense of her emotions and intuitions that make up her worldly experience.

The "mubobobo" narrative functioned as a metaphor for the women's sense of themselves as vulnerable beings in the world- for their feelings and intuitions that are associated with various forms of bodily and psychic disruptions of female boundaries. They conveyed a sense of the invasion of the masculine onto feminist material bodies that happens across time, space, and class. The feelings that came through in the women's stories about "muti rape" perpetrators provided rich insight into how these women perceive the ways in which their bodies are used by men and the ways in which vulnerability affects their lives. This reflects the nature of these women's subjective experiences in a patriarchal and culturally restrictive world, a world within which every man is a potential threat. Often these feelings and intuitions are not easily expressible, as many violations have blurred interpretive boundaries. The "mubobobo" narrative functioned as a language of convenience whereby the women could express these things.

In the women's stories they constructed the "mubobobo" perpetrator type as powerless, shameful and as not being able to achieve cultural standards of 'appropriate' masculinity. According to my interpretation, the women's constructions of the negative social and material bodies of "mubobobo" perpetrators signified a process whereby they narratively projected their own

internalised feelings about their abused bodies/minds onto these men. The linguistic images of “mubobobo” perpetrators represented the ‘tainted’ parts of themselves that they may have internalised through socio-cultural messages about abused women. It is significant that by narratively ‘getting rid’ of these ‘tainted’ parts of themselves the women were able to negotiate more positive ‘selves’ in their tellings – ‘selves’ that are more powerful in relation to these male perpetrators and also ‘selves’ that are not ‘weighed down’ by the negative aspects of female sexuality and desire.

It is significant that the narrative strategy of “mubobobo” allowed the women to express certain “un-speakable” embodied feelings and emotions. These expressions were connected to a larger narrative and psychological purpose. Through the “mubobobo” shared narrative the women were able to reclaim the right to express previously concealed emotions and memories. This may be the first step towards re-integrating such traumatic feelings and emotions as part of the ‘self’. Culbertson (1995) says that to return to a social self that has often been lost through trauma the recollection of memory is not enough, one needs to tell what happened, they need to disembody memory in front of and in relation to listening others.

The women were all of the same cultural background and they were all therefore familiar with the concept of “mubobobo”. Their memories were expressed via this socially constructed reality; a ‘reality’ that the other women could recognise and identify with because of their shared positioning within the Shona culture. Similarly, Davies (2000) says that collective biography research comprises of imagined stories, or creative narratives of a combination of various ‘truths’. She says that these are valuable resources as they hold the potential to disrupt and decentre old discourses and narratives and to ‘unstash’ old patterns of desire, creating new patterns of desire and new opportunities for the transformation of the self. The narrative of “mubobobo” was one such narrative resource.

Ironically, the women worked with the cultural resource of “mubobobo” in ways that allowed them to transcend, albeit briefly, the restrictions that are imposed on them by their culture. We see this through their expression of aspects of their sexual pleasure/desire and through the naming of certain ‘un-narratable’ emotions/memories. The women’s voices suggests that views of static and ‘powerless’ cultural subjects may not be appropriate for understanding their

subjective experience in the world and provided a much more complex picture of the creative and agentic ways in which women may engage with aspects of their culture. They worked with this narrative resource in creative ways to achieve certain goals. The findings suggest that we cannot rely on strict dichotomous views about women's engagement with culture.

Research that has examined the experiences of migrant women living in the United States has largely focused on dichotomous views of women as either acculturated into the views of the new culture or as 'custodians of culture' that conservatively rely on the views of their culture of origin (such as the work of Muttic & Bouffard, 2008; Kallivayalil, 2010; Shiu-Thornton, Senturia, & Sullivan, 2005). Researchers should move away from static theories about women's engagement with culture. New questions should be asked about the ways in which women work with culture, questions that can be answered by engaging in creative research approaches, such as the collective biography method, that allow women to make their own meaning in relation to significant others.

The findings of the current study resonated with work that has been done in certain parts of Africa. In her work in Zanzibar, Thompson (2011) found that Zanbari women drew on a cultural narrative of "popobawa" (a mythical bat like creature that sexually violated men and women) to construct themselves as sexual and discursive agents, within a culture that does not condone the expression of female sexuality. In addition, in her work in Uganda, Tamale (2005) looked at the practice of SSenga whereby older women teach young women about the rules of femininity and she says that women have evolved this practice to suit their own needs. Tamale (2005) argued that the evolution of this cultural practice has allowed women to negotiate agency in terms of increased engagement with their own sexuality. These studies shed important insight into the different ways in which women negotiate agency from 'within' their culture.

The current study adds to this field of work by exploring the creative and functional ways in which migrant Zimbabwean women who are living in South Africa drew on the "mubobobo" script from the culture 'back home' to give voice to their embodied experiences. The results suggest that women can and do negotiate agency when they have 'brought' their culture with them to a new country. Importantly, they negotiate this agency using their own cultural tools,

and not aspects of Westernised cultures that are often viewed to be a more progressive means through which women can negotiate agency.

However, the results show that the women were not able to name their experiences outright and their narrative signified a struggle to making meaning about their past experiences of abuse and aspects of the sexualised nature of their bodies-these were only expressible through the shared resource of the “mubobobo” cultural script. Certain studies in North America have conceptualised leaving as signifying an act of women’s agency (Wuest & Meritt-Gray, 2001; Taylor, 2002). However, the findings of the current study suggest that agency in itself is more complex than simply leaving an abuser and ‘moving on’ towards the identity of ‘survivor’. These African migrant women have managed to leave abusive intimate partners but their narratives show that a multitude of other ‘residues’ of abuse continue to shape the meaning that they make about themselves in the world.

These findings concur with studies such as that of Enander and Holmberg (2008; 2011) and Towns and Adams (2009) who have argue that leaving an abuser does not constitute a final move to the identity of ‘survivor’ and that the process of claiming positive subjectivities may be a complex journey that extends long after leaving. This may be particularly true for poor African migrant women. Their experiences of multiple forms of abuse across the lifetime and their status as ‘foreigners’ within the South African context mean that they may face continued challenges in the world and their journey of healing may be a complex and unique one that may not be so easily categorisable into distinct stages of healing.

#### *Narratives of space/place and the ‘foreigner selves’*

In chapter 6 the results show that the participants found ways to narrate encounters with men at border posts without compromising their position as ‘good’ feminine subjects according to their cultures. They collectively drew on the image of what I have called *recognisable feminine others*, weaving shared narratives about their own experiences in relation to the experiences of other women who travel through Africa and they situated their experiences in transit within the broader context of unequal gendered power dynamics. They also drew on psychological discourses of trauma and abuse. In this way they were able to define their experiences with men at border posts as abuse. This definition of their experiences of abuse is significant as it serves to

dis-locate blame from women (from themselves as ‘African women’) and instead situates blame on the environment of transit, which the women described as a place within which women’s vulnerability in relation to men is heightened. In this way the women managed their representations of self, portraying themselves as non-culpable subjects (‘good’ cultural subjects) with regards to their encounters with men in the space of transit.

Various scholars in North America and Europe have conceptualised women’s agency in terms of their ability to define their experiences as abuse. Wuest and Meritt-Gray (2001) argued that ‘putting abuse in its rightful place’ (defining experiences as abuse) is a concrete stage of women’s process of recovery that leads to women ‘moving on’, towards the identity of survivor. Enander and Holmberg (2008) described a ‘process of understanding’ whereby women relay aspects of their past experience and reinterpret these experiences as abuse. They argued that this process is a central part of women’s agency in breaking emotional ties of guilt that are attached to the abusive event. In addition, Proffitt (2000b) argued that the naming of experiences as abuse leads to a self-acceptance and the refusal to carry the burden of shame-something which she says can lead to abused women’s investment in more positive subjectivities.

The naming of abuse is, of course, an important aspect of women’s meaning making about their experiences but the position of ‘victim’ also often has negative connotations of ‘powerlessness’ and a lack of agency and as such, the identification with ‘victim’ status may often hinder women’s sense of themselves as capable agents. These studies lack a critical engagement of the concept of ‘abuse’ which has multiple meanings depending on the context within which it used. The participants in the current study utilised the definition of abuse in a strategic way in order to position themselves as non-culpable, ‘good’ cultural subjects. At the same time they distanced themselves from the sense of ‘powerlessness’ that is associated with a ‘victim’ label. They did this by through collectively utilising the narrative strategy of ‘foreigner selves’ (the ‘desperate self’ and the ‘pathological self’) and by positioning these ‘other selves’ as the powerless victims in transit. This narrative strategy emerged via women narratively connecting their ‘experience’ in transit to other women’s experience through a dynamic collective process (as opposed to the individualised frameworks of the studies outlined above).

The results show that place associations were a central element of the women's meaning making about their experiences in transit. It is through these space associations that they constructed linguistic images of the 'foreigner selves' (the 'desperate self' and the 'foreigner self'). They associated the 'foreigner selves' with the 'bad' behaviour in the space of transit while, on the other hand they associated their 'true' moral 'selves' with the space of South Africa. The linguistic images of these 'foreigner selves' seemed to signify a narrative strategy whereby the women were able to explain women's sexual engagements with men in transit while at the same time representing themselves and other African women migrants, positively as 'good' cultural subjects who do not use their sexuality in inappropriate ways. This strategy may have helped the women to manage any negative emotions and stop any emotions of shame about these experiences from penetrating their selves. It is through these narrative strategies that the women were able to narrate their experiences on their own terms and in their own way and position their 'true selves' in positive ways.

The agentic potentials of space associations have been highlighted by scholars working in the field of social remembering and abused women's agency. Reavey and Brown (2007; 2009), for example, argued that women draw on aspects of space to produce ambiguities in their talk that allow them to grapple with their own agency, even in the face of stories of victimisation and disempowerment. Reavey and Brown (2007) refer to the constitution of the 'self' as 'ethical work' (p. 12) in that narrators choose what aspects of the past to select and make relevant within a given time and a given audience. Taylor (2010) has also identified place associations as a central tool through which individuals construct a sense of 'self' in the world.

The women in the current study seemed to have engaged in such 'ethical work'. They transformed their past by constructing 'common sense' meanings about the dangerous and sexualised space of transit that, they suggest, shapes women into very different kind of beings. The findings of the current study suggest that space/place associations constitutes a crucial part of the meaning making of African women who have travelled through transit to South Africa. The results showed that this was a useful resource via which the women could express and make sense of their complex experiences in transit-experiences that do not fit neatly into dominant scripts of what constitutes 'abuse' and 'true victim'. These findings suggest that space associations may be an important meaning making resource, particularly for women, such as the participants, who have travelled through Africa to find a 'better life' in South Africa.

*The shared South African 'experience' and the "imagined" female 'other'*

Chapter 7 examines the ways in which the women engaged in narrative strategies in order to construct their 'selves' within the space of South Africa. They drew on their 'common' experience in South Africa to co-construct an image of the "*imagined female other*" who they described as shameful and immoral sexual beings. They also engaged in a kind of tactical homogenisation via which they constructed strict categories of 'us' ('good', moral, foreigner women) and 'them' ('bad', sexually immoral South African women). The women constructed themselves as opposites to these images of the "*imagined female other*" and conveyed a sense that they, as 'foreigner' women, are 'good' cultural subjects who adhere to their cultural rules about 'appropriate' femininity.

This seemed to signify a deeper process of splitting whereby the women 'split' their collective self-concept into two opposing entities; here the all 'good' collective 'us' and the all bad collective South African 'other'. The 'bad' entity manifests itself via the image of the "imagined" South African female 'other' and it represents parts of themselves that they cannot tolerate. This process may help the women dis-identify with aspects of their 'selves' that contradict certain cultural values and that may cause tension within the 'self' and possibly large amounts of anxiety. In this way they are able to express these 'bad' aspects of their sexuality without 'owning' them as parts of themselves. In other words, they were able to mobilise taboo sexual feelings, albeit in a disguised form to themselves, while at the same time maintaining the identity of 'good' cultural subject.

The categorization of 'us' and 'them' that women use to make sense of their current abused 'selves' in South Africa resonates with the categorisation that is often made within the context of xenophobic violence in South Africa- South African nationals construct categories of 'us' and 'them' ('foreigners') (Hayem, 2013). This is an interesting parallel and it sheds rich insight into the ways in which abused women's 'foreigner' status, that is often attached to notions of shame and blame, may significantly shape the ways in which these women make sense of themselves within the socio-political space of South Africa. This concurs with the assertion of Prins (2006) that an intersectional approach is the most useful one for understanding the construction of identities. Different categories such as gender, class, race, and 'foreigner' co-construct one another in significant ways and one's identity as abused women cannot be separated from these other pertinent dimensions of experience.

The results from chapters 6 and 7 highlight that the women linguistically drew clear parallels between the motivational context of their own encounters with men and South African women's motivations for similar encounters. In chapter 7 the migrant African women described South African's women's motivations for engaging in sexual relations with men as being a result of their immoral position (loving sex) and, on the 'fact' that Black South African women are 'inappropriate' cultural subjects who do not adhere to their traditional cultures. They construct South African women as 'bad' sexual subjects according to their cultures-a position, I have argued throughout this thesis, which is deeply associated with negative connotations. The African migrant women constructed South African women as the 'other' in terms of their promiscuous and immoral sexual nature. Ultimately they place blame on South African women's characters.

On the other hand in chapter 6 the participants explain that their own behaviour and the behaviour of other 'foreigner' women was caused by external factors- poverty/deprivation, the effects of a lifetime of abuse, and the space of transit. In this way they construct themselves as non-culpable beings. In this case they explained that it was the 'foreigner selves' who behave in unrespectable ways (and not their 'true selves'). The migrant women's very different interpretations of women's motivations speak volumes about these women's subjectivities as abused women, poor women, 'foreigner' women, who are living in a different space to their home place- that of South Africa, a space within which different cultural rules abide.

This process of 'othering' South African women raises critical questions about the concept of 'ubuntu', or African unity, and also about the challenges involved in the women's struggle in South Africa. This narrative strategy of 'othering' suggests that these 'foreigner' women may experience themselves as divided from other women in the African context, perhaps because of a sense of 'not belonging' in a space where xenophobic attitudes towards 'foreigners' still runs rife. There narratives also suggest an element of competition for men between women of different cultures and this could perhaps be linked to competition for material resources within the impoverished context of South Africa. Such issues need to be further explored in ways that can shed light on the obstacles to cohesion and a sense of sisterhood among women in the South African context. More research needs to be conducted with abused 'foreign' migrants living in South Africa to explore the unique ways in which the 'foreigner' experience may shape women's transformative journey.

An important finding in the current study was that notions of sexuality and meanings around the female body were central to the meaning that the women made about themselves as abused women, and about others. They drew on socio-cultural meanings around sexuality and constructed themselves as ‘appropriate’ sexual subjects that adhere to normative cultural ‘rules’ of female sexual practice. The issue of sexuality has largely been ignored in studies that address abused women’s agency. Further studies need to examine this link in a more in-depth way to explore how women work with issues of sexuality and what this means in terms of their agency and capacity for transformation.

*Transformations of ‘selves’: The possibilities (and limits) of agency in the South African context*

A common theme throughout the women’s narratives was what seemed to be a strong desire to present themselves as moral beings that engage in sexually ‘appropriate’ ways. They worked to position themselves along the lines of ‘appropriate’ femininity and as ‘good’ cultural subjects. At the same time, however, by using certain narrative strategies the women were able to give voice to previously ‘un-narratable sexual feelings and ‘residues of gendered oppression’ without moving into ‘dangerous’ territory. It is through these narrative strategies that the women were able to reclaim the right to express previously ‘concealed’ emotions and memories. They mobilised certain ‘residues of gendered’ oppression and other embodied feelings that are largely rendered taboo by their cultures.

According to Davies’ (1991) definition of agency, women need to have access to a subject position in which they have a right to be heard, the person needs to be constituted as author of their own meanings and desires, and they need to be have the opportunity to work with discourses in new ways in order to imagine what is not yet, but what might be. In line with such a definition the results of the current study showed that women were able to work collectively in agentic ways. They utilised narrative strategies that enabled them to tell their own stories in their own ways, using their own voices. Within the space of the collective biography discussions with fellow group members their stories were acknowledged and the ‘truth’ of their accounts were validated. In other words, they were able to reclaim a sense of self through their tellings.

The taking up of position of agent who is able to re-create one's past may be an invaluable resource for these 'foreigner' women who are situated within the South African context of poverty, lack of resources, and socio-cultural strictures that offer limited subject positions to abused 'foreigner' women. The women positioned themselves as authors that conveyed the complexity of their experiences and that mobilised their desires in linguistic forms, albeit in possibly unrecognised ways-through the language of metaphor, projection, and splitting. The mobilisation of such 'concealed' emotions and memories seemed to signify a move *towards* the third requirement of agency that Davies (1991) outlines –to work with discourses to imagine new ways of being in the world.

However, the achievements above were dependent on the 'shared memory' of others in the collective biography settings in which there were no South African's present. This collective process of theorising made visible the ways in which the women's understandings of lived experience are discursively constituted (Davies & Gannon, 2006a) and the power that certain socio-cultural scripts may have over the possible meanings that abused women can make about themselves in the world. As Reavey and Gough (2000) have noted, the meanings that women make about their agency are tightly structured by social repertoires that associate women's agency with blame and shame and, as such, the meaning that women can make about their experiences is often very limited. The current findings suggest that women who are situated 'within' restrictive cultures may experience additional restrictions on the sense that they can make about their experiences.

The women's narratives show that the ways in which they transformed the past were significantly shaped by the strong 'pull of culture' - to not openly acknowledge certain 'shameful' aspects of their 'selves'. Certain rationalities of power governed their talk about their own conduct and the conduct of others. These were largely discourses about ways of conducting oneself, as African women, in particular spaces and socio-cultural scripts of 'appropriate' femininity. They strove to present themselves as 'good' cultural subjects who behave in 'appropriate' ways. In this ways they presented positive 'selves' and may have managed negative feelings that are associated with positioning oneself along the lines of 'bad' cultural subject. Similarly, Davies et al. (2006c) have highlighted the ambivalent processes of subjectification in which the mastery of certain moral subject positions holds benefits but at the

same time this mastery is very proof of one's subjection, of the way in which individuals are stuck in the web of dominant discourses.

Davies (1990) says that the effects of being positioned differently within new discourses can bring about dramatic personal changes but there can also be a resistance to such changes, even when on a rational or intellectual level the change is regarded as desirable. Similarly, Profitt (2000b) has outlined women's resistance to 'undo' foundational identities-aspects of the self that has been instilled by society. She calls this the 'desire and will not to know' (Profitt, 2000b: p. 88). Importantly, Profitt (2000b) argued that the transformation of identity involves more than the mere re-interpreting of one's experiences. She says that transformation involves recognising conflict and making *conscious* the invisible 'unspeakable' aspects of one's experience and recognising contradiction between what one has been taught and what one 'feels'. She says that critical engagement with these contradictions has the potential to shift women's consciousness about abuse and themselves in the world. She also says that women's transformation involves overcoming the 'desire and will not to know' (p. 88) about certain aspects of themselves.

So although the women in the current study managed to narratively mobilise certain 'residues of gendered oppression' and embodied feelings of sexuality, they did not necessarily do so in conscious ways and they largely did not 'connect' with these embodied feelings (they narratively projected these feelings onto other linguistic images). The strong 'pull' of culture was in place and their dissociation from certain aspects of their experiences seems to signify something similar to Profitt's (2000a) concept of the 'desire and will not to know'. They could only narrate certain 'residues of past abuse' by drawing on culturally acceptable explanations which they achieved through the narrative strategies of "mubobobo", 'foreigner selves', and the image of the "imagined" female other. It is through these strategies that they narrated these embodied memories but at the same time they did not take them on as their own.

However, at certain moments in the women's narratives the women displayed evidence of cracks, or fissures in their neat constructions of 'selves' as 'good' cultural subjects. This can be seen most powerfully through Akeyo's questioning of the nature of their representations and her open acknowledgement of the contradiction between what one 'wants to be' and cultural pressures which suppress their 'true selves'. At these moments the women overtly represent a

tension between wanting to achieve mastery of the position of ‘good’ cultural subject and on the other hand knowledge that these ways of being may contradict certain urges about who they want to be. Davies et al. (1997) have identified similar cracks in women’s stories within collective biography spaces, what they call ‘ruptures in the skin of silence’ (p. 1). Davies and Gannon (2006b) have suggested that such moments hold the potential for women to begin to openly deconstruct certain socio-cultural discourses, understand the ways in which they are positioned within such discourses and begin to ‘unmoor’ themselves and imagine themselves in different ways.

The next step of such a transformative journey may be facilitating spaces within which women can interrogate and engage with such ‘cracks in meaning’. In this way women would be given the opportunity to acknowledge and work with such contradictions and make them conscious. Profitt (2000b) suggests that such processes require unique, safe spaces in which women may overcome certain socio-cultural obstacles that impede the meaning making process. This study has shown that a collective biography methodology is a good place to start opening up these ‘cracks’ and to start examining a deeper level of meaning making whereby women can begin to examine certain disjunctures between cultural expectations and their embodied intuitions and feelings. Such spaces can facilitate movement towards an ‘unbecoming’ of certain restrictive social understandings of what one can be. This could go a long way in working towards healing and transformation for abused women who do not readily have the opportunity to engage with such issues in the South African context.

### *Methodological insights*

The collective biography method offered a useful way to explore both the individual and collective dimensions of these women’s experiences-individual ‘experience’ was woven in with the ‘experience’ of others and this resulted in a dynamic collective meaning making process. The women’s narrations in this chapter shed light on the process of ‘selving’ whereby individual experience is moulded into a collective representation of the world. The collective biography space functioned as an interactive site in which the women connected their experiences to the experiences of others and were stimulated by points in each other’s narratives. As is common of collective biography work, they threaded one ‘experience’ onto the last (see Davies & Gannon, 2006) and narrated a ‘shared understanding’ of their ‘experiences’. The women drew on the shared cultural resource of “mubobobo”, their shared experience of travelling through Africa, as

well on their experiences of living in South Africa and they co-constructed knowledge about the world. In these ways, they co-constructed 'selves' in relation to each other. Their stories no longer signified individual identities but rather common collective 'selves' that drew on social discourses and what they represented as their 'common sense' understandings of the social world. It is through such 'shared understandings' that they managed to transform their past in 'safe' and intelligible ways.

The collective biography sessions seemed to offer novel opportunities for the women to make sense of their past experiences of abuse. The first phase of the data gathering comprised of interactive activities through which the women could engage with issues of abuse in novel ways and it seemed to facilitate the emergence of certain 'silenced' topics. These themes were brought back to the women during the focus group discussions that were not structured by any pre-set questions. These spaces offered the women the space to engage with these issues on a deeper level and to work creatively together and develop new strategies through which they could transform their abusive past.

They did this by drawing on their common experience as 'foreigner' and African migrants and they 'found' different ways of representing themselves. They were able to collectively construct themselves as 'good' cultural subjects while at the same time they mobilised certain emotions and feelings that are largely rendered 'un-interpretable' and often taboo. Davies et al. (2006c) have highlighted that collective biography spaces are useful sites within which women can collectively take up and resist certain discourses and constitute themselves in concert with one another, co-creating 'selves' that may not be imagined by isolated independent beings. The results of the current study suggest that collective biography methodologies may be particularly useful for the study of self in relation, which is an important concept among many African cultures.

This study also highlights the usefulness of a narrative-discursive approach to women's stories of abuse. Similar, to what Reavey & Brown (2009) have suggested, this analysis shows that such an approach is useful as it treats subjectivity as defined by cultural discourses and cultural textuality, thus moving to the externalisation of individual problems and also acknowledging the social nature of individual problems.

### *Practical contributions*

I believe that my work has adhered to my feminist ethics and has achieved some benefits for the women who took part in the study. To contextualise my thoughts about the social impact of my research project I draw on Lempert Bex's (2007) notion of 'give and take'. She says that who will give and who will take is not a planned or formally adopted process of reciprocity, rather it is an interactional subtext that is continually negotiated by all participants in the research process and it continually emerges through the opportunities that present themselves in this context. In addition, Davies and Gannon (2006a) have outlined that participants have described collective biography sessions as having certain therapeutic effects (although this is not the main aim of such spaces). I feel that the social sites that were facilitated during this project have been of benefit to the individuals involved as well as to the *Sisters for Sisters* group as a whole.

The results of this study suggest that the participants experienced certain gains from being involved in the collective processes of this research project. The space was one that was filled with energetic emotional mobilisation whereby the women expressed the 'un-interpretable' and 'un-narratable' aspects of their experiences as a gendered being in the socio-cultural and physical landscape of their lives. As such, I interpret the process as one that had certain transformative potentials in that it offered women an important space within which to begin to engage with aspects of their traumatic past. The engagement in such meaningful interactions can offer the potential for individual transformation. Camden-Pratt (2009) describes relational spaces as being about unfolding and openness to difference and change, involving a strategy of attention to 'many small moments of individuation' (p. 64). These small escapes, or what Camden-Pratt calls 'lines of flight' (p. 64) are slides towards the not yet known of becoming in which there is also a, "constitution of new ways of being in the world, new ways of thinking and feeling-new ways of being a subject" (Roffe, 2007: p. 43, as cited in Camden-Pratt, 2009: p. 65).

Within the spaces of this collective biography project the women were given the opportunity to reclaim their experiences of violation through the narrative reconstruction of these experiences. Certain 'unspeakable' experiences may leave fissures in a life story. Within the spaces of this research the women engaged in collective narrative processes via which they were able to give expression to previously 'unnarratable' experiences. This kind of storytelling may have functioned to repair certain gaps in their life narratives. Such spaces are of critical importance in the current socio-political space of South Africa which is characterised by a lack of resources for

abused women, and especially ‘foreigner’ women. Spaces such as these can contribute significantly to abused women’s transformative journey within this context.

Through participating in these interactive sites, the women were also able to situate their individual stories in relation to others experiences. This relational practice seemed to offer something beneficial for the women. I observed that during these discussions the women began to work with discourses in very different ways from what I had observed in my previous research that conducted individual interviews with women. Such construction of ‘new’ life narratives may signify changes in women’s self-understandings and the way that they experience themselves in the world (Gavey, 2005). In this sense I feel that my research was transformative in the sense that it facilitated what can be considered as a move towards certain changes in self-consciousness that may have contributed to the *Sisters for Sisters* members developing an increased sense of their right to respect and their capacity for agency in the world. As Haaken (1999) states, “some of the pleasure in social remembering, in the sharing and creation of a common stock of stories, is the sense of strength that the group provides in protecting against previously overwhelming experiences, thus making them more emotionally manageable” (p. 24).

I believe that the research project was also of benefit to the *Sisters for Sisters* group as a whole. The process of engaging with narratives in the group environment afforded the group power through the acknowledgement of the validity of the group’s perspectives. This is particularly evident when considering that as a result of being part of the research they came into contact with many academics and community service workers that were affiliated with the university. Ong (1995, as cited in Pratt, 2004) says that these kinds of processes are beneficial as they help marginal groups “intervene in global narratives by putting into circulation alternative circuits of discursive power” (p. 173)

## LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study apply specifically to these spaces of the collective biography discussions with these specific women and they cannot be generalised to other groups of women within the South African context. Future work in the field should utilise the methodological and theoretical insights gained here as a base to explore these issues further with women from different settings. This study may have been enriched by follow-up focus group discussions that brought the data back to the women. Such a collaborative analysis could have provided the space for reflection and rich dialogue that would undoubtedly have yielded interesting and important insights. This could have also facilitated a more critical reflexivity on my part in terms of interrogating not only my position but also my analysis and interpretations.

With this said, the challenges of such work are significant, particularly considering work with women who have not been versed in theories of feminism and feminist poststructuralist theory. However, the possibilities are endless and such an endeavour would contribute significantly to knowledge about the possibilities and pitfalls of working with women of different cultures. This raises some critical questions. In what ways can we involve women in an on-going analysis? How can we, as scholar-activists, facilitate such spaces without imposing our own views on the process? Is teaching women theories of feminism and feminist poststructuralism a possible way to do this? If so, is this appropriate? In what ways could such work enrich or hinder projects of empowerment that are embraced by grassroots women's groups in the African context? These are important questions, which do not have any simple answers. From my experience working with the women's group I have gained important insights into the challenges involved with egalitarian work but at the same time I felt a sense of the need for such collaborative work-as a way of conducting research that holds the potential for deepening the kind of knowledge that we gain from doing gender research.

Further work needs to be done on the ways in which African women migrants work collectively and creatively to make meaning about their abusive experience. In particular, work needs to be done to explore the particular 'cracks' in women's neatly constructed narratives-spaces within which women explore the disjunctures between certain socio-cultural expectations and their own

embodied feelings and wants. Such research needs to be open to different cultural views as well as the different cultural resources that women may use to achieve certain levels of agency.

Speaking of such work in the African context, Thompson (2011) contends that researchers need to address the ways in which the transformation of discourses that silence women can be sustained beyond certain isolated conversations. More work needs to be done on the community level with women and men in South Africa to inform alternative avenues of working towards transformation in this context. Insights from such work can be used to inform ways of working with women in schools, communities, and other social sites that will be more relevant for women who identify with various African cultures. An important 'thread' through this thesis was various levels of underlying "tensions" between 'foreigner' women and local women in the South African context. Further work should explore issues of difference within women's collective goals of transcending their victimhood and their efforts to achieve social transformation. Future work should also explore the meanings that women of various African cultures make about their sexual body and the ways in which such meanings may shape women's agency and their transformative journeys. I aim to explore issues of sexuality further in my post-doctoral work.

## **CONCLUSION**

The results shed insight into important broader questions in the field of gender-based and women's agency in South Africa. How can women break free from negative internalisations and claim a more positive sense of self in the world? What potentials are there for women's agency within impoverished contexts of the developing world where social resources such as women's shelters and other social service agencies are scarce and poverty a harsh reality of life? What do women's strategies of agency look like long after they have left abusive partners? What are the unique sites of feminist knowledge production in feminist and gender studies in Africa? What are the shifting sites of these avenues of inquiry when the focus is on questions of African women's agency among migrant/refugee women who have fled some of the violent conflicts on this continent? This thesis makes an important contribution to global feminist scholarship with an emphasis on broadening knowledge across national boundaries in Africa/on the African continent.

This study has contributed important insights into the ways in which African women migrants are able to negotiate agency in their own ways, even in the face of cultural strictures that render certain experiences taboo. It shed insights into important aspects of women's agency, seen through the ways in which they worked collectively with their cultural tools to transform their past experiences of abuse in creative and meaningful ways. The findings suggest that African migrant women living in South Africa engage in unique meaning making processes that cannot be suitably addressed with the use of individualistic methods. The findings also show that the transformative journey of these African women who have experienced an accumulation of abuse throughout time and place in their lives and who exist in vulnerable positions within the current socio-political space of South Africa cannot be easily explained through existing definitions of agency offered by the literature in the field.

The women drew on their 'common' cultural experiences and adopted particular narrative strategies in order to narrate their past experiences in acceptable ways that were familiar to the others in the collective biography spaces. It is through such narrative strategies that the women were able to narrate certain 'un-interpretable' embodied feelings. However, at the same time they did not take these embodied emotions and feelings on as their own and they strove to represent themselves as 'good' cultural subjects. A strong cultural 'pull' was at play and the women strictly monitored what can be said and how.

The expression of such 'concealed' and 'un-interpretable' material may be the first step towards transforming the self in "unimaginable" ways that are not confined by hegemonic scripts of femininity; however this may be a long and complex journey. More work needs to be done to examine the 'cracks' in women's meaning making and their processes of beginning to interrogate contradictions between social cultural expectations and their embodied sense of who they want to be in the world. As researchers, activists and grassroots community members, we need to work towards developing more connections with women 'on the ground' through which such spaces can be co-facilitated. It is through such a process whereby women may work towards the right to conceptualise themselves as deserving of respect and worth, even while they embrace certain feelings that do not fall in line with dominant scripts of femininity.

This study has shed insight into the potentials of a collective biography approach for studying the emergence of ‘self’ in relation to others and for facilitating spaces within which women can engage in new ways. In particular it has highlighted the ways in which a methodological approach can be adopted to suit the needs of non-academic communities. Further work needs to be done to examine the intersections between ‘foreigner’ status and sexuality and the ways in which these positions may shape migrant women’s experiences and the meaning that they make about themselves as abused women. There needs to be more work in this area that can provide insight into women’s strategies ‘on the ground’ and that can inform knowledge about alternative avenues of agency.

This study outlines my own journey—a struggle to make research more meaningful and the challenges and rich potentials of following women into what Andrews (2008) calls ‘unanticipated places’ (p. 25). I hope that the space was just as beneficial for the *Sisters for Sisters* members and I wish them good luck with their onward journey. I hope that researchers, activists, and community-based workers will take up the theoretical and methodological insights offered here to work towards further studies that will explore these processes in a more in-depth way. Scholars in the field of gender-based violence need to think critically about the processes via which they conduct research and think of ways that can be geared towards more collaborative meaning making. Such work has the potential to contribute significantly to the project of women’s transformation in the South African context—both through the generation of rich knowledge that can inform theory and practice *and* through the direct effects that such research has on the lives of the participants involved.

We need to work together to create spaces within which women can openly express and engage with contradictions, and these need to be safe spaces occupied by women who are on the same transformative journey. The (re)-creation of ‘selves’ may have a significant impact on the ways in which women experience themselves in the world. As such it is a crucial step of women’s journey towards a life that is no longer shaped by the negative imprints of abuse and degradation but one in which women can experience the benefits of feeling fully human. As Davies eloquently asserts,

“Agency is never freedom from discursive constitution of self but the capacity to recognise that constitution and to resist, subvert and change the discourses themselves through which one is being constituted. It is the freedom to recognise multiple readings such that no discursive practice, or positioning within it by powerful others, can capture and control one’s identity” (Davies, 1991: p. 51).

## REFERENCES

- Adames, S. B. & Campbell, R. (2005). Immigrant Latinas' conceptualisations of intimate partner violence. *Violence Against Women, 11*, 1341-1364.
- Ahrens, C. E. (2006). Being silenced: The impact of negative social reactions on the disclosure of rape. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 38*, 263-274.
- Anderson, M.A. (2000) Rape in South Africa *Georgetown Journal of Gender & Law 1*: 789-821.
- Anderson, D.K & Saunders, D.G. (2003). Leaving an abusive partner: An empirical view of predictors, the process of leaving, and psychological well-being. *Trauma, violence, and abuse, 4*, 163-191.
- Andrews, M. (2008). Never the last word: Revisiting data. In M. Andrews, C. Squire, & M. Tamboukou (Eds.), *Doing narrative research* (pp. 86-101). London: Sage.
- Armstrong, L. (2012). Reflections on a research process: Exploring violence against sex workers from a feminist perspective. *Women's Studies Journal, 26* (1), 1-10.
- Bacchus, L., Mezey, G., Bewley, S. (2006). A qualitative exploration of the nature of domestic violence in pregnancy. *Violence against Women, 12*, 588-604.
- Bakare-Yusuf, B. (2011). Nudity and morality: Legislating women's bodies and dress in Nigeria. In S. Tamale (Ed.), *African sexualities* (pp. 116-129). Cape Town: Fahamu.
- Baker, P.L. (1997). And I went back: Battered women's negotiation of choice. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 26*, 55-75.
- Baker, J. (2010). Claiming volition and evading victimhood: Post-feminist obligations for young women. *Feminism and Psychology, 20*, 186-204.
- Bennett, J. (2010). "Circles and circles": Notes on African feminist debates around gender and violence in the c21. *Feminist Africa, 14*, 21-47.
- Bhuyan, R., Mell, M., Senturia, K., Sullivan, M., & Shiu-Thornton, S. (2005). "Women must endure according to their karma": Cambodian immigrant women talk about domestic violence. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 20*, 902-921.
- Bohler-Muller, N. (2002). Really listening? Women's voices and the ethic of care in post-colonial Africa. *Agenda, 54*, 86-91.
- Boonzaier F and de la Rey C (2003) "He's a man and I'm a woman": Cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity in South African women's narratives of violence. *Violence Against Women 9*(8):1003-1029.
- Boonzaier, F. (2005). Woman abuse in South Africa: A brief contextual analysis. *Feminism & Psychology, 15*(1), 99-103.
- Boonzaier, F. (2008). "If a man says you must sit, then you must sit": the relational construction of woman abuse: gender, subjectivity and violence. *Feminism and Psychology, 18*, 183-202.
- Boonzaier, F. & van Schalkwyk, S. (2011). Narrative possibilities: Poor women of color and the complexities of intimate partner violence. *Violence Against Women, 17*, 267-286.

- Blackman, L., Cromby, J., Hook, D., Papadopoulos, D., & Walkerdine, W. (2008). Editorial: Creating subjectivities. *Subjectivity*, 22, 1-27.
- Brockmeier, J. (2002). Remembering and forgetting: Narrative as cultural memory. *Culture & Psychology*, 8(1), 15-43.
- Brown, R. (2012). Corrective rape in South Africa: A continuing plight despite an international human rights response. *Annual Survey of International & Comparative Law*, 18(1), 45-66.
- Burman, E. & Chantler, K. (2004). There's no place like home: emotional geographies of researching 'race' and refuge provision in Britain. *Gender, Place and Culture: A journal of feminist geography*, 11(3), 375-397.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble*. London: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1997). *The psychic life of power: Theories in subjection*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Callaghan, J. & Clark, J. (2006). Feminist theory and conflict. K. Ratele (Eds.), *Inter-group relations. South African perspectives* (pp. 87-110). Cape Town: South Africa: Juta & Co.
- Camden-Pratt, C. (2009). Relationality and the art of becoming. In B. Davies & S. Gannon (Eds.), *Pedagogical encounters* (p. 52-68). New York: Peter Lang Publishers.
- Campbell, S. (2003). Respecting rememberers. In S. Campbell (eds.), *Relational remembering. Rethinking the memory wars* (pp. 25-45). Rowman & Littlefield Publishers: Oxford, UK.
- Clare, M., & Johnson, R. (2000). Method in our madness? Identity and power in a memory work method. In S. Radstone (Eds.), *Memory and Methodology* (pp. 197-224). Oxford, United Kingdom: Berg Publishers.
- Chigeza, S., De Wet, A., Roos, V. (2013). African migrants' experiences of xenophobic violence in South Africa: A relational approach. *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 23(3), 501-506.
- Cowman, K. (2012). Collective Biography. In S. Gunn & L. Faire (Eds.), *Research methods for history* (pp. 83-100). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Culbertson, R. (1995). Embodied memory, transcendence, and telling: Recounting trauma, re-establishing the self. *New Literary History*, 26(1), 169-195.
- Daimon, A. & Nyamunda, T. (2013). Smuggling through Fluid and Porous African Borderlands and the State's Response: The Case of the Zimbabwe-South Africa Border during the crisis in Zimbabwe, 1998-2009. Unpublished Manuscript.
- Davies, B. (1990). The problem of desire. *Social Problems*, 37(4): 801-816.
- Davies, B. (1991). The concept of agency. *Social Analysis*, 30, 42-53.
- Davies, B. (1992). Women's subjectivity and feminist stories. In C. Ellis & M.G Flaherty (Eds.), *Investigating subjectivity. Research on lived experience*. London: Sage.
- Davies, M. (1995). *Childhood sexual abuse and the construction of identity: Healing Sylvia*. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Davies, B., Dormer, S., Honan, E., McAllister, N., O'Reilly, R., Rocco, S., & Walker, A. (1997). Ruptures in the skin of silence: A collective biography. *Hecate-A Women's Studies Interdisciplinary Journal*, 23, 62-79.

- Davies, B. (2000). *A body of writing 1990-1999*. Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press.
- Davies, B. & Gannon, S. (2006a). The practices of collective biography. In B. Davies & S. Gannon (Eds.), *Doing collective biography* (pp. 1-15). New York: Open University Press.
- Davies, B. & Gannon, S. (2006b). A conversation about the struggles of collaborative writing. In *Doing collective biography* (pp. 114-144). New York: Open University Press.
- Davies, B., Dormer, S., Gannon, S., Laws, C., Lenz Taguchi, H., McCann, H., & Rocco, S. (2006a). Becoming schoolgirls: The ambivalent project of subjectification. In B. Davies & S. Gannon (Eds.), *Doing collective biography* (pp. 16-34). New York: Open University Press.
- Davies, B., Gannon, S., Laws, C., Lenz Taguchi, H., McCann, H. & Rocco, S. (2006b). Reading fiction and the formation of feminine character. In B. Davies & S. Gannon (Eds.), *Doing collective biography* (pp. 35-60). New York: Open University Press.
- Davies, B., Browne, J., Gannon, S., Honan, E., & Somerville, M. (2006c). 'Truly wild things': interruptions to the disciplinary regimes of neo-liberalism in (female) academic work. In B. Davies & S. Gannon (Eds.), *Doing collective biography* (pp. 79-87). New York: Open University Press.
- Davies, B., Brown, J., Gannon, S., Honan, E., Laws, C., Muller-Rockstroh, B., & Bendix Peterson, W. (2006d). The ambivalent processes of subjectivity. In B. Davies & S. Gannon (Eds.), *Doing collective biography* (pp. 88-113). New York: Open University Press
- Davies, B., Brown, J., Gannon, S., Hopkins, L., McCann, H., & Wihlborg. (2006e). Constituting 'the feminist subject' in post-structuralist discourse. In B. Davies & S. Gannon (Eds.), *Doing collective biography* (pp. 167-181). New York: Open University Press
- Davies, M. (1995). *Childhood sexual abuse and the construction of identity: Healing Sylvia*. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Dawes, A., de Sas Kropiwnicki, Z., Kafaar, Z. & Richter, L. (2004). *Partner Violence: A South African Survey*. Cape Town: Human Sciences Research Council.
- De Fina, A. (2003). *Identity in narrative: A study of Immigrant discourse*. Philadelphia, U.S.A: John Benjamins.
- De Lauretis, T. (1987). *Technologies of Gender: Essays in Theory, Film, and Fiction*. Indiana University press: Bloomington.
- Dobash, R. E., & Dobash, R. (1979). *Violence against wives. A case against patriarchy*. New York: The Free Press.
- Doherty, K., & Anderson, I. (1998). Talking about rape: Perpetuating rape supportive culture. *The Psychologist*, 111-115.
- Doucet, A. (2007). "From her side of the Gossamer wall(s)": Reflexivity and relational knowing. *Qualitative Sociology*, 31, 73-87.
- Doucet, A. & Mauthner, N.S. (2008). What can be known and how? Narrating subjects and the listening guide. *Qualitative Research*, 8, 399-409.
- Dunkle, K.L., Jewkes, R.K., Brown, H.C., Yoshihama, M., Gray, G.E., McIntyre, J.A., & Harlor, S.D. (2004). Prevalence and patterns of gender-based violence and revictimisation among women attending antenatal clinics in Soweto, South Africa. *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 160, 230-239.

- Du Toit, L. (2009). *A philosophical investigation of rape: the making and unmaking of the feminine self*. London: Routledge.
- Dutton, D.G. & Painter, S. (1993). Emotional attachments in abusive relationships: A test of traumatic bonding theory. *Violence and Victims*, 8, 105-120.
- Eisikovits, Z & Winstok, Z. (2002). Reconstructing intimate violence: The structure and content of recollections of violent events. *Qualitative Health Research*, 12, 685-699.
- Enander, V. & Holmberg, C. (2008). Why does she leave? The leaving process(es) of battered women. *Health Care for Women International*, 29, 200-226.
- Enander, V. (2011) 'Leaving Jekyll and Hyde: Emotion work in the context of intimate partner violence', *Feminism and Psychology*, 21(1): 29-48.
- Ewick, P. & Silbey, S. (2003). Narrating social structure: Stories of resistance to legal authority. *American Journal of Sociology*, 108, 1328-1372.
- Ferguson, A. (1996). Can I choose who I am? And how would that empower me? Gender, race, identities and the self. In A. Garry and M. Pearsall (Eds.), *Women, knowledge, reality: Explorations in feminist philosophy* (pp. 108-126). New York: Routledge.
- Ferguson, A. (2002). On conceiving motherhood and sexuality: A feminist-materialist approach. In N. Holstrom (ed.), *The socialist feminist project* (pp. 128-136). New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Fish, J. (2006). *Domestic democracy: At home in South Africa*. New York, U.S.A: Taylor & Francis Group.
- Fox, A.M., Jackson, S.S., Hansen, N.B., Gasa, N., Crewe, M., & Sikkema, K.J. (2007). In their own voices. A qualitative study of women's risk for intimate partner violence and HIV in South Africa. *Violence Against Women*, 13, 583-602.
- Franchi, V. & Duncan, N. (2003). Introduction. In V. Franchi & N. Duncan (Eds.), *prevention and Intervention practice in post-apartheid South Africa* (pp. 1-9). U.S.A: Haworth Press.
- Frith, H. & Kitzinger, C. (1998). 'Emotion work' as participant resource: A feminist analysis of young women's talk in interaction. *Sociology*, 32 (2), 299-320.
- Fuller A (2010) Mandela's Children. *National Geographic* 217: 80-108.
- Gavey, N. (1989). Feminist poststructuralism and discourse analysis. Contributions to feminist psychology. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 13, 459-475.
- Gavey, N. (1999). "I wasn't raped but....". Revisiting definitional problems in sexual violence victimisation. In S. Lamb (eds.), *New versions of victims: Feminists struggle with the concept* (pp. 57-81). New York: New York University Press.
- Gavey, N. (2005). *Just Sex? The cultural scaffolding of rape*. New York, U.S.A: Routledge.
- Gill, A. (2004). Voicing the silent fear: South Asian women's experiences of domestic violence. *The Howard Journal*, 43, 465-483.
- Gobodo-Madikizela, P. , Fish, J., & Shefer, T. (2014). Gendered Violence: Continuities and Transformation in the Aftermath of Conflict in Africa. *Signs: Journal of Women and Culture in Society*, 40 (1), 81-99.
- Goldblatt, B. & Meintjies, S. (1997). Dealing with the aftermath: Sexual violence and the truth and reconciliation commission. *Agenda*, 36, 7-18.
- Gonick, M., Walsh, S., & Brown, M. (2011). Collective Biography and the question of difference. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 17(8), 741-749.

- Gordon, J.S. (1996). Community services for abused women: A review of perceived usefulness and efficacy. *Journal of Family Violence, 11*, 315-329.
- Gqola, P. (2007). How the 'cult of femininity' and violent masculinities support endemic gender-based violence in contemporary South Africa. *African Identities, 5*(1), 111-124.
- Gready, P. (2008). The public life of narratives: Ethics, politics, methods. In M. Andrews, C. Squire, & M. Tamboukou (Eds.), *Doing narrative research* (pp. 137-150). London: Sage.
- Gwandure, C. (2009). Mubobobo: Women can have no sexual fantasies in their sleep. *The Open Anthropology Journal, 2*, 74-81.
- Gwandure, C. (2012). Sexual desire and expression among girls in a traditional Shona context. *Anthropologist, 14*(5), 415-423.
- Haaken, J. (1999). Heretical texts. In S. Lamb (eds.), *New versions of victims: Feminists struggle with the concept* (pp. 13-31). New York: New York University Press.
- Haaken, J. & Reavey, P. (2012). Why memory matters: Disturbing recollections. In J. Haaken and R. Reavey (Eds.), *Memory Matters: Contexts for understanding sexual abuse recollections* (pp. 1-13). New York: Routledge.
- Haaken, J. & Yragui, N. (2003). Going underground: Conflicting perspectives on domestic violence shelter practices. *Feminism and Psychology, 13*, 49-71.
- Hage, S.M. (2006). Profiles of women survivors: The development of agency in abusive relationships. *Journal of Counselling and Development, 84*, 83-94.
- Ham-Rowbottom, K.A., Gordon, E.E., Jarvis, K.L., & Novaco, R.W. (2005). Life constraints and psychological well-being of domestic violence shelter graduates. *Journal of Family Violence, 20*, 109-121.
- Hamber, B. & Lewis, S. (1997). An overview of the consequences of violence and trauma in South Africa. Johannesburg: Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation.
- Harned, M.S. (2005). Understanding women's labelling of unwanted sexual experiences with dating partners: A qualitative analysis. *Violence Against Women, 11*, 374-413.
- Harris, B. (2002). Xenophobia: A new pathology for a new South Africa. In D. Hook & G. Eagle (eds.), *Psychopathology and social prejudice* (pp. 169-184). Cape Town, South Africa: Cape Town University Press.
- Harvey, M. (2007). Towards an ecological understanding of resilience in trauma survivors: Implications for theory, research, and practice. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment, and Trauma, 14*, 9-32.
- Hayem, J. (2013). From May 2008 to 2011: Xenophobic violence and national subjectivity in South Africa. *Journal of Southern Africa Studies, 39*(1), 77-97.
- Haug, F. (1987). Memory-work. In F. Haug (Ed.), *Female sexualisation: A collective work on memory* (pp. 33-72). Norfolk, London: Thetford Press.
- Heise, L., & Garcia-Moreno, C. (2002). Violence by intimate partners. In E. G. Krug, L. L. Dahlberg, J. A. Mercy, A. B. Zwi & R. Lozano (Eds.), *World report on violence and health* (pp. 89-121). Geneva: World Health Organization.

- Herman, J. (1992). *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. U.S.A: Basic Books.
- Hindin, M. J., & Adair, L. S. (2002). Who's at risk? Factors associated with intimate partner violence in the Philippines. *Social Science & Medicine*, 55, 1385-1399.
- Hodza, F. (forthcoming). Beyond heteronormativity: Doing gender and sexuality in university contexts. In P. Gobodo-Madikizela & S. van Schalkwyk (2014). *A reflexive inquiry into gender and gender-based violence: Toward a new paradigm of knowledge production across multiple divides*. Bloemfontein: Sun Media.
- Holibaugh, A. (1996). Desire for the future: Radical hope in passion and passion. In S. Jackson and S. Scott (eds.), *Feminism and Sexuality: A Reader* (pp.). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hollway, W. & Jefferson, T. (2002). *Doing Qualitative Research Differently. Free association, narrative and the interview method*. London: Sage.
- Hydén, M. (1994). *Women battering as marital act: The construction of a violent marriage*. Sweden: Scandinavian University Press.
- Hydén, M. (2005). 'I must have been an idiot to let it go on': Agency and positioning in battered women's narratives of leaving. *Feminism and Psychology*, 15, 169-188.
- Hydén, M. (2008). Narrating sensitive topics. In M. Andrews, C. Squire, & M. Tamboukou (Eds.), *Doing narrative research* (pp. 121-136). London: Sage.
- Hungwe, C. (2006). Putting them in their place: "respectable" and "unrespectable" women in Zimbabwean gender struggles. *Feminist Africa*, 6, 33-47.
- Hunter, M. (2002). The materiality of everyday sex: Thinking beyond 'prostitution'. *African Studies*, 61(1), 99-120.
- Imam, A. (1997). Engendering African social sciences: An introductory essay. In A Imam, A. Mama, & F. Sow (Eds.), *Engendering African social sciences* (pp. 1-30). Wiltshire, Great Britain: Antony Rowe Ltd.
- Irigaray, L. (1985). *The sex which is not one*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Israel, B.A., Schultz, A.J., Parker, E.A., & Becker, A.B. (1998). Review of community-based research: Assessing partnership approaches to improve public health. *Annual Review of Public Health*, 19, 173-202.
- Jagger, A. M. (2000). Globalising feminist ethics. In U. Narayan & S. Harding (Eds.), *Decentering the Centre. Philosophy for a multicultural, postcolonial, and feminist world* (pp. 1-25). Bloomington, U.S.A: Indian University Press.
- Jewkes, R.K., Dunkle, K., Nduna, M., & Shai, N. (2010). Intimate partner violence, relationship inequity and incidence of HIV infection in young women in South Africa: A cohort study. *The Lancet (online version)*, 1-8. [accessed on the 12 August 2010].
- Jewkes, R., Levin, J., & Penn-Kekana, L. (2002). Risk factors for domestic violence: findings from a South African cross-sectional study. *Social Science & Medicine*, 55, 1603-1617.
- Jinnah, Z. (2012). Entering sacred spaces: understanding the meanings of, and claims for sexual and reproductive health rights amongst Somali women in Johannesburg. Working paper presented at the British Academy workshop : The (Un)healthy Body in Southern Africa:

- multi-disciplinary approaches to corporeal dimensions of health. Wits Reproductive Health and HIV Institute, Johannesburg, South Africa April 2nd-4th 2012.
- Kallivayalil, D. (2010). Narratives of suffering of South Asian immigrant survivors of Domestic violence. *Violence Against Women, 16*, 789-811.
- Kambarami, M. (2006). Femininity, sexuality and culture: Patriarchy and female subordination in Zimbabwe. Africa Regional Sexuality Resource Centre, Understanding Human Sexuality Seminar Series, 1-10.
- Kistner, U. (2003). Gender-based violence and HIV/AIDS in South Africa: A literature review. Centre for AIDS Development, Research and Evaluation (CADRE) for the Department of Health, South Africa.
- Kelly, L. (1988). *Surviving sexual violence*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.
- Kuhn, A. (2000). A journey through memory. In S. Radstone (Eds.), *Memory and Methodology* (pp. 179-196). Oxford, United Kingdom: Berg Publishers.
- Kraus, W. (2007). The narrative negotiation of identity and belonging. In M. Bamberg (Ed.), *Narrative-State of the art* (pp. 123-132). Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing.
- Krishan, S.P., Hilbert, J.C., McNeil, K., & Newman, I. (2004). From respite to transition: Women's use of domestic violence shelters in rural New Mexico. *Journal of Family Violence, 19*, 165-173.
- Kvale, S. (1996). *InterViews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Lafta, R.K. (2008). Intimate-partner violence and women's health. *Lancet, 371*, 1140-1142.
- Langellier, K. M. & Peterson, E.E. (1992). Spinstorying: An analysis of women storytelling. In E.C. Fine & J.C. Speer (Eds.), *Performance, culture, and identity* (pp. 157-179). Westport, U.S.A: Praeger Publishers.
- Langellier, K.M. (2001). "You're marked": Breast cancer, tattoo, and the narrative performance of identity. In J. Brockmeier & D. Carbaugh (Eds.), *Narrative and identity: studies in autobiography, self, and culture* (pp. 145-184). Philadelphia, U.S.A: John Benjamins.
- Langellier, K.M. & Peterson, E. E. (2004). *Storytelling in daily life*. Philadelphia, U.S.A: Temple University Press.
- Lamb, S. (1996). *The trouble with blame: Victims, perpetrators and responsibility*. President and fellows of Harvard College: U.S.A.
- Lamb, S. (1999). Constructing the victim: popular images and lasting labels. In S. Lamb (eds.), *New versions of victims: Feminists struggle with the concept* (pp. 108-138). New York: New York University Press.
- Lazar, M.M. (2005). Feminist CDA as political perspective and praxis. In M.M Lazar (Ed.), *Feminist critical discourse analysis: gender, power and ideology in discourse*. New York: Palmgrave MacMillan.
- Lebowitz, L. & Roth, S. (1994). "I felt like a slut": the cultural context and women's responses to being raped. *Journal of Traumatic stress, 7(3)*, 363-390.

- Lempert, L.B. (1996). Language obstacles in the narratives of abused women. *Mid-American Review of Sociology*, XIX (1& 2), 15-32.
- Lempert, L. B. (2003). Shelters: for abused women, or abusive men? As aids to survival, or as rehabilitation sites? *Agenda*, 57, 89-100.
- Lempert L.B. (2007). Cross-Race, Cross-Culture, Cross-National, Cross-Class, but Same-Gender: Musings on Research in South Africa. *NWSA Journal*, 19(2), 79-103.
- Lykes, M.B. (1997). Activist participatory research among the Maya of Guatemala: Constructing meanings from situated knowledge. *Journal of Social Issues*, 53, 725-746.
- Lynch, S.M., Keasler, A.L., Reaves, R.C., Channer, E.G., & Bukowski, L.T. (2007). The story of my strength: An exploration of resilience in the narratives of trauma survivors early in recovery. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment, and Trauma*, 14, 75-97.
- Macdonald, M. (1995) *Representing Women: Myths of Femininity in the Popular Media*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Macleod, C. (2008). 'Who? What?: An unindicted view of towards a new psychology of women from post-apartheid South Africa. *Feminism & Psychology*, 18, 347-357.
- Machonachie, M., Angless, T., & van Zyl, M. (1993). *Battered women seeking solutions: A study of women who have taken refuge at the rape crisis shelter in Cape Town*. Pretoria, South Africa: HSRC.
- Mahoney, M. A. & Yngvesson, B. (1996). The construction of subjectivity and the paradox of resistance: Reintegrating feminist anthropology and psychology. In R.B Joeres & B. Laslett (Eds.), *The second signs reader. Feminist scholarship 1983-1996*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Mama, A. (1995). *Beyond the masks. Race, gender and subjectivity*. London, U.K: Routledge.
- Mama, A., Pereira, C. & Manuh, T. (2005). Editorial: Sexual cultures. *Feminist Africa*, 5, 1-8.
- Mankowski, E.S. & Rappaport, J. (2000). Narrative concepts and analysis in spiritually-based communities. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 28, 479-493.
- Mason et al. (2008). "Violence is a national language": Tamil women's perceptions of intimate partner violence. *Violence Against Women*, 14, 1397-1412.
- Matsinhe, D.M. (2011). Africa's fear of itself: the ideology of Makwerekwere in South Africa. *Third World Quarterly*, 32(2): 295-313.
- Matthews S, Abrahams N, Jewkes R, Martin LJ, Lombard C and Vetten L (2008). Intimate femicide-suicide in South Africa: A cross sectional study. *Bulletin of the World Health Organisation* 86(7): 552-558.
- Mauthner, N.S. & Doucet, A. (2003). Reflexive accounts and accounts of reflexivity in Qualitative data analysis. *Sociology*, 37(3), 413-431.
- McFadden, P. (2003). Sexual pleasure as a feminist choice. *Feminist Africa 2: Changing Cultures*, 50-60. <http://feminist Africa.org/index. php/sexual-pleasure-as-feminist-choice>, accessed 12 November 2013.

- Melucci, A. (1995). The process of collective identity. In H. Johnston and B. Klandermans (Eds.), *Social movements and culture* (pp. 41-63). Minneapolis, U.S.A: University of Minnesota Press.
- Mendelsohn, M., Zachary, R.S., & Harney, P.A. (2007). Group therapy as an ecological bridge to new community for trauma survivors. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment, and Trauma, 14*, 227-243.
- Mendoza, B. (2002). Transnational feminisms in question. *Feminist Theory, 3*(3), 313-332.
- Michau, L. (2007). Approaching old problems in new ways: Community mobilisation as a primary prevention strategy to combat violence against women. *Gender & Development, 15*, 95-109.
- Mills, T. (1985). The assault on the self: Stages in coping with battering husbands. *Qualitative Sociology, 8*, 103-123.
- Misago, J.P., Landau, L. & Monson, T. (2009). *Towards tolerance, law, and dignity: Addressing violence against foreign nationals in South Africa*. Arcadia, South Africa: International Organisation from Migration.
- Morgan, D.L (1997). *Focus groups as qualitative research*. London: Sage.
- Msimang, S. (2002). African Feminisms II: Reflections of politics made personal. *Agenda, 54*, 2-15.
- Mkhize, N. (2004). Psychology: An African perspective. In D. Hook (eds.), *Critical Psychology* (pp. 24-52). Lansdowne, Cape Town: university of Cape Town Press.
- Moane, G. (1999). *Gender and Colonialism*. London, UK: Macmillan Press LTD.
- Moore, E. (2013). Transmission and change in South African motherhood: Black mother's in three-generation Cape Town families. *Journal of Southern African Studies, 39*(1), 151-170.
- Morris, A. (1998). 'Our fellow Africans make our lives hell': The lives of Congolese and Nigerians living in Johannesburg. *Ethnic and Racial Studies, 21*(6), 1116-1136.
- Mupotsa, D.S. & Mhishi, L. (2008). This Little Rage of Poetry /Researching Gender and Sexuality. *Feminist Africa, 11: Researching for life: Paradigms and power*, 97-107.
- Muttic, L.R. & Bouffard, L.A. (2008). Bosnian women and intimate partner violence. *Feminist Criminology, 3*, 173-190.
- Naidu-Hoffmeester, R. & Kama, R (2013). "South Africa, the world's rape capital available on <http://www.unisa.ac.za/news/index.php/2013/02/south-africa-the-worlds-rape-capital/>, accessed 4 June 2014.
- Narayan, U. (2000). Essence of culture and a sense of history: A feminist critique of cultural essentialism. In U. Narayan & S. Harding (Eds.), *Decentering the center: Philosophy for a multicultural, postcolonial, and feminist world* (pp. 80-100). Bloomington, U.S.A: Indiana University Press.
- Oakley, A. (1996). Sexuality. In S. Jackson and S. Scott (eds.), *Feminism and Sexuality: A Reader* (pp.). New York: Columbia University Press.
- O' Dell, L. (2003). The "harm" story in childhood sexual abuse: contested understandings, disputed knowledges. In P. Reavey & S. Warner (eds.) *New Feminist Stories of child sexual abuse: Sexual Scripts and dangerous dialogues*. London: Routledge.

- Okin, S. M (2000). Feminism, women's human rights, and cultural differences. In U. Narayan & S. Harding (Eds), *Decentering the centre: Philosophy for a multicultural, postcolonial, and feminist world* (pp. 26-46). Bloomington, U.S.A: Indiana University Press.
- Oravo, T.A., McLeod, P.J., & Sharpe, D. (1996). Perceptions of control, depressive symptomatology, and self-esteem of women in transition from abusive relationships. *Journal of Family Violence, 11*, 167-186.
- Palmary, I. (2006). Family resistances: Women, war, and the family in the African Great Lakes. *Annual Review of Critical Psychology, 5*, 54-65.
- Park, Y.J., Peters, R., & De Sá, C. (2000). More than simply a refuge: Shelters for abused women in South Africa. In Y.J. Park, J. Fedler, & Z. Dangor (Eds.), *Reclaiming women's spaces: New perspectives on violence against women and sheltering in South Africa* (pp. 243-286). Johannesburg, South Africa: Nisaa Institute for Women's Development.
- Parker, I. (2005). *Qualitative Psychology: Introducing radical research*. New York, U.S. A: McGraw-Hill.
- Patton, M.Q. (1987). *How to use qualitative methods in evaluation*. Newbury Park, California: Sage.
- Pereira, C. (1997). 'No seamless narrative': A gender analysis of psychology in Africa. In A. Imam, A. Mama, & F. Sow (Eds.), *Engendering African social sciences* (pp. 219-249). Wiltshire, Great Britain: Antony Rowe Ltd.
- Pereira, C. (2000). "Feminist knowledge". *African Transitions, 490*, 77-85.
- Pereira, C. (2002). Between knowing and imagining: What space for feminism in scholarship on Africa? *Feminist Africa Intellectual politics*. Cape Town, South Africa: African Gender Institute.
- Phillips, L.M. (2000). *Flirting with danger: Young women's reflections on sexuality and domination*. New York, U.S.A: New York University Press.
- Pinnegar, S. & Daynes, J.G. (2007). Locating narrative inquiry historically: Thematics in the turn to narrative. In D.J. Clandinin (Ed.), *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry: Mapping a methodology* (pp. 3-34). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Pinnewala, P. (2009). Good women, martyrs, and survivors: A theoretical framework for South Asian women's responses to partner violence. *Violence and Victims, 15*, 81-105.
- Posel, D. (2011). 'Getting the nation talking about sex': reflections on the politics of sexuality and nation-building in post-apartheid South Africa. In S. Tamale (Ed.), *African sexualities* (pp. 130-144). Cape Town: Fahamu Press.
- Potgieter, C., Strebel, A., Shefer, T., & Wagner, C. (2012). Taxi 'sugar daddies' and taxi queens: Male taxi driver attitudes regarding transactional relationships in the Western Cape, South Africa. *Journal of Social Aspects of HIV/AIDS, 9*(4), 192-199.
- Potter, J. & Hepburn, A. (2005). Qualitative Interviews in Psychology: Problems and possibilities. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 4*, 281-303.
- Powell, C. (1996). Whose voice? Whose feelings? Emotions: The theory and practice of feminist methodology. In K. Carter & S. Delamont (Eds.), *Qualitative research: The emotional dimension* (pp. 1-11). Vermont, U.S.A: Ashgate Publishing Company.

- Pratt, G. (2004). *Working Feminisms*. Edinburgh, United Kingdom: Edinburgh University Press.
- Prins, B. (2006). Narrative accounts of origins: A blind spot in the intersectional approach? *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 13(3), 277-290.
- Profitt, N. J. (1994). Resisting violence against women in central America: The experience of a feminist collective. *Canadian Social work review*, 11, 103-115.
- Profitt, N. J. (2000a). *Women survivors, psychological trauma, and the politics of resistance*. New York: The Haworth Press.
- Profitt, N. J. (2000b). Survivors of woman abuse. *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, 11(2), 77-102.
- Radan, A. (2007). Exposure to violence and expressions of resilience in Central American women survivors of war. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment, and Trauma*, 14, 147-164.
- Reavey, P. & Brown, D. (2007). Rethinking agency in memory: Space and embodiment in memories of child sexual abuse. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 21(1), 5-21.
- Reavey, P. & Brown, S.D. (2009). The mediating role of objects in recollections of adult women survivors of child sexual abuse. *Culture & Psychology*, 15(4), 463-484.
- Reavey, P. & Gough, B. (2000). Dis/locating blame: Survivors' constructions of self and sexual abuse. *Sexualities*, 3(3), 325-346.
- Reavey, P. (2010). Spatial markings: Memory, agency and child sexual abuse. *Memory Studies*, 3(4), 314-329.
- Reavey, P. (2012). The spaces of memory. In J. Haaken & P. Reavey (eds.), *Memory matters: Contexts for understanding sexual abuse recollections* (pp. 131-141). New York: Routledge.
- Reissman, C.K. (1993). *Narrative Analysis*. London: Sage.
- Reissman, C.K. (2008). *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*. London: Sage.
- Rice, C. (2009). Imagining the other? Ethical challenges of researching and writing women's embodied lives. *Feminism & Psychology*, 19(2), 245-266.
- Ronai, C. R. (1999). In the line of sight at Public Eye" In search of a victim. In S. Lamb (Eds.), *New versions of victims: Feminists struggle with the concept* (pp. 139-157). New York: New York University Press.
- Rowlands, J. (1997). *Questioning empowerment: Working with women from Honduras*. Oxford, UK, Oxfam.
- Sadiqi, F. (2010). Domestic violence in the African North. *Feminist Africa*, 14, 49-62.
- Schijvers, J. (1999). Fighters, victims, and survivors: Constructions of ethnicity, gender and refugeeness among Tamils in Sri Lanka. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 12, 307-333.
- Schlegoff, E.A. (1997). Whose text? Whose context? *Discourse and Society*, 8(2), 165-187.
- Seaton, E.E. (2008). Common knowledge: reflections on narratives in community. *Qualitative Research*, 8, 293-305.

- Sharp, J. (2008). 'Fortress SA': Xenophobic violence in South Africa. *Anthropology Today*, 24(4), 1-3.
- Shefer, T. (2004). Psychology and the regulation of gender. In D. Hook (Ed.), *Critical psychology* (pp. 187-209). Lansdowne, South Africa: University of Cape Town Press.
- Shefer, T., Crawford, M., Strebel, A., Simbayi, L.C., Dwadwa-Henda, N., Cloete, A., Kaufman, M.R., & Kalichman, S.C. (2008). Gender, power and resistance to change among two communities in the Western Cape, South Africa. *Feminism and Psychology*, 18, 157-182.
- Shefer, T., Clowes, L., & Vergnani, T. (2012). Narratives of transactional sex on a university campus. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 14(4), 435-447.
- Shillingford, A. (2006). Data collection protocols and participatory research techniques. Training of trainers manual. Department for International Development Caribbean. (p. 1-171)
- Shiu-Thornton, S., Senturia, K., & Sullivan, M. (2005). "Like a bird in a cage": Vietnamese women survivors talk about domestic violence. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 20, 959-976.
- Sokoloff, N.J. & Dupont, I. (2005). Domestic violence at the intersections of race, class, and gender: Challenges and contributions to understanding violence against marginalised women in diverse communities. *Violence Against Women*, 11, 38-64.
- Sliep, Y., Weingarten, K., & Gilbert, A. (2004). Narrative theatre as an interactive community approach to mobilising collective action in Northern Uganda. *Families, Systems, and Health*, 22, 306-320.
- Squire, C. (2008a). Experience-centred and culturally-orientated approaches to narrative. In M. Andrews, C. Squire, & M. Tamboukou (Eds.), *Doing narrative research* (pp. 41-63). London: Sage.
- Squire, C. (2008b). Approaches to narrative research. National Centre for Research Methods, NCRM Review Papers. Economic and Social Research Council.
- Squire, C., Andrews, M., & Tamboukou, M. (2008). Introduction: What is narrative research? In M. Andrews, C. Squire, & M. Tamboukou (Eds.), *Doing narrative research* (pp. 1-21). London: Sage.
- Stephenson, N., Kippax, S., & Crawford, J. (1996). You and I and she: Memory-work and the construction of self. In S. Wilkinson (Ed.), *Feminist social psychologies* (pp. 182-200). Bristol, U.S.A: Open University Press.
- Stephenson, N. (2001). "Speaking like a woman": Agency in intersubjective communication. *Australian Psychologist*, 36, 19-26.
- Strauss, H. (2011). Cinema of social recuperation: Xenophobic violence and migrant subjectivity in contemporary South Africa. *Subjectivity: International Journal of Critical Psychology*, 4(2), 103-120.
- Sullivan, M., Senturia, K., Negash, T., Shiu-Thornton, S., & Giday, B. (2005). "For us it's like living in the dark": Ethiopian women's experiences with domestic violence. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 20, 922-940.

- Tamale, S. (2003). Out of the closet: Unveiling sexuality discourses in Uganda. *Feminist Africa 2: Changing Cultures*, 42-49. <http://www.feministafrica.org/index.php/out-of-the-closet>, accessed 12 November 2013.
- Tamale, S. (2005). Eroticism, sensuality and “women’s secrets” among the Baganda: A critical analysis. *Feminist Africa*, 5, 9-36.
- Tamale, S. (2011a). Introduction. In S. Tamale (Ed.), *African sexualities. A reader* (pp. 1-7). Cape Town: Fahamu Press.
- Tamale, S. (2011b). Paradoxes of sex work and sexuality in modern-day Uganda. In S. Tamale (Ed.), *African sexualities. A Reader* (pp. 145-173). Cape Town: Fahamu Press.
- Taylor, J. (2002). “The straw that broke the camel’s back”: African American women’s strategies for disengaging from abusive relationships. *Women and Therapy*, 25, 79-94.
- Taylor, S. (2010). *Narratives of Identity and Place*. London: Routledge.
- Téllez, M. (2008). Community of struggle: Gender, violence, and resistance on the U.S./Mexican border. *Gender & Society*, 22, 545-567.
- Thompson, K. (2011). Zanbari women’s discursive and sexual agency: violating gendered speech prohibitions through talk about supernatural sex. *Discourse & Society*, 22(1), 3-20.
- Towns, A. J. & Adams, P.J. (2009). Staying quiet or getting out: Some ideological dilemmas faced by women who experience violence from male partners. *British Journal of Social Psychology* 48(4): 735-754.
- The South African Press Association. (2013, March 15<sup>th</sup> a). Calls to end xenophobic attacks. *News 24*. Retrieved from <http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/Calls-to-end-xenophobic-attacks-20130315>
- The South African Press Association. (2013, July 5<sup>th</sup> b). Unemployment, illiteracy higher for women – Stats SA. *City Press*. Retrieved from <http://www.citypress.co.za/news/unemployment-illiteracy-higher-for-women-stats-sa/>
- Tsanga, S. (2011). Dialoguing culture and sex: Reflections from the field. In S. Tamale (Eds.), *African sexualities* (pp. 57-72). Pambazuka Press: Cape Town, South Africa.
- Tutty, L. M., Weaver, G. & Rothery, M.A. (1999). Residents’ views of the efficacy of shelter services for assaulted women. *Violence Against Women*, 5, 898-925.
- van Schalkwyk, S., Boonzaier, F., & Gobodo-Madikizela, P. (forthcoming). ‘Selves’ in contradiction: Power and powerlessness in South African shelter residents’ narratives of leaving abusive heterosexual relationships. *Feminism & Psychology*.
- Vetten, L. (2000). Invisible girls and violent boys: gender and gangs in South Africa. *Development Update*, 3(2).
- Vogelman, L. & Eagle, G. (1991). Overcoming endemic violence against women in South Africa. *Social Justice* 18, 209-229.
- Vogelman, L. & Lewis, S. (1993). Gang Rape and the Culture of Violence in South Africa. Published in German under the title, *Illusion der Stärke: Jugendbanden, vergewaltigung und kultur der gewalt in Südafrika*, in *Der Überblick*, No. 2.

- Walker, L.E. (1979a). How battering happens and how to stop it. In D. Moore (Ed.), *Battered women* (pp. 59-78). California, U.S.A.: Sage.
- Walker, L. E. (1979b). *The battered woman*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Weedon, C. (1987). *Feminist practice and poststructuralist theory*. New York, U.S.A: Basil Blackwell Ltd.
- Wilkinson, S. (1998). Focus groups in feminist research: Power, interaction, and the co-construction of meaning. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 21(1), 111-125.
- Williams, S. (2010). Report Finds Zimbabwe's Gays Face Threat of 'Corrective' Rape. Care2. Accessed from: <http://www.care2.com/causes/gays-and-lesbians-face-corrective-rape-in-zimbabwe-report-finds.html>, 8 May 2014.
- Wood, J. T. (2001). The normalization of violence in heterosexual romantic relationships: Women's narratives of love and violence. *Journal of Social & Personal Relationships*, 18, 239-262.
- Wood, K., Lambert, H., & Jewkes, R. (2008) "Injuries are beyond love": Physical violence in young South Africans' sexual relationships. *Medical Anthropology*, 27, 43-69.
- Woodiwiss, J. (2012). 'Alternative memories' and the construction of a sexual abuse narrative. In J. Haaken & P. Reavey (Eds.), *Memory matters: Contexts for understanding sexual abuse recollections* (pp. 105-127). New York: Routledge.
- Worthen, M., Veale, A., McKay, S, & Wessels, M. (2010). 'I stand like a woman': Empowerment and human rights in the context of community-based reintegration of girl mothers formerly associated with fighting forces and armed groups. *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, 1-22. [Advance access version]
- Wright, S. & Nelson, N. (1995). Participatory research and participant observation: Two incompatible approaches. In N. Neslon & S. Wright (Eds.), *Power and participatory development: Theory and practice* (pp. 43-59). Southampton, London: Intermediate Technology Publications.
- Wuest, J & Merritt-Gray,M. (2001) Beyond survival: Reclaiming self after leaving an abusive partner. *Canadian Journal of Nursing* 32(4): 79-94.
- Yoshioka, M.R. (2008). The impact of the cultural context on the experience of domestic violence. In K. Keeling & t. Mason (Eds.), *Domestic violence: A multi-professional approach for healthcare practitioners* (pp. 81-89). Berkshire, U.K: Open University Press.
- Yuval-Davis, N. (1994). Women, ethnicity and empowerment. *Feminism and Psychology*, 4, 179-197.
- Yuval-Davis, N. (1997). *Gender and Nation*. London: Sage.

# APPENDIX A: SISTERS FOR SISTERS GROUP LETTER OF CONSENT

Dear (name of the group leader)

## **Re: Letter of consent for research with the Sisters for Sisters group**

This form stands as an agreement of the partnership between the Sisters for Sisters non-profit organisation (no. 072 094) and myself, [xxxx].

My research with the group will stand towards the fulfilment of my doctoral degree in Psychology. The data gathering will involve the conduction of workshops and group interviews with the group members. I commit to continue my volunteer work with the group throughout the course of my data gathering work and beyond the data gathering of my three year doctoral work.

During the data gathering stage I will be working closely with two members (women's names) who will acts as co-facilitators during the conduction of the workshops. Both women have expressed their commitment to working on this project.

I agree to uphold the Universities' ethical standards for researching human subjects. At the beginning of the data gathering stage all of the women will be briefed about what the study is about and why I think the study is important, particularly for women in the South African context. The women will be informed verbally and in writing (by means of a consent form) that they have the right to confidentiality and to have their identities remain anonymous. They will be told that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. They will also be informed that they have the right to refuse to take part in certain activities if they do not feel comfortable at the time. They will also be told that they have the right to refuse to answer certain questions that may entail the disclosure of particularly sensitive information.

The women will be briefed about the importance of respecting other women's stories and about the fact that all disclosure that happens during these sessions needs to be treated in a confidential manner. They will also be informed that due to the nature of group discussions, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. They will also be told that the use of the name Sisters for Sisters in my final write up may compromise their confidentiality.

I commit to maintaining my voluntary involvement with the group for a minimum period of the duration of my doctoral studies (3 years). I also agree to uphold the integrity of the group at all times and to keep group matters confidential. You will be provided with a copy of my final research project, for your own records. The group Sisters for Sisters will be formally acknowledged in the final research product as well as in all other publications.

By signing this form you agree to a partnership with myself, [xxxx], for a minimum duration of three years. You also give consent to the data gathering procedures that will be used in this research. This includes the audio-recording of these sessions. Finally, you give permission for the name Sisters for Sisters to be used in the final write up of my research project and in any other publications that may be produced as a result of this work.

Thank you for your partnership. I look forward to working with you.

Wishing you all the best,

[xxxx]

**Name  
(print)**.....

**Signature**.....

**Date**.....

**Witness:**

**Name  
(print)**.....

**Signature**.....

**Date**.....

# APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORMS

## PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM FOR WORKSHOPS & FOCUS GROUPS

Dear (Participant name)

Thank you for agreeing to take part in my research. As you know I am a researcher and this study is aimed towards my doctoral degree in Psychology. I will be exploring your experiences of abuse across the lifetime. I would like to address how the group members make sense of their experiences of violence together in this group setting.

This workshop will involve activities that are geared towards the topic of violence against women. It will involve group discussions and other disclosures about aspects of your own experiences of violence.

Please note that should you at any time feel uncomfortable during this group session, you need not continue in the study. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. You also have the right to anonymity. A pseudonym (fake name) will be used instead of your own name. The name of the Sisters for Sisters group will be used in the final write up of this study. Please note that the use of the name of the group may compromise your confidentiality as readers may be able to recognise you based on this information. Any other information about you will be kept confidential at all times. The names of your family and friends will be left out so that people will not be able to identify you.

We will be discussing sensitive topics in a group environment. It is very important that all of us agree to respect each other's experiences and stories and to maintain a level of confidentiality. This means that we will not talk to family, friends, and other members of the group about what we have discussed here. Please note that, due to the nature of the group work, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed as not all members of the group may respect everyone's right to confidentiality.

Talking about painful parts of our lives can often produce negative emotions. If this occurs it is very important that you speak to someone. Please contact myself on [xxx] or (the name of the group leader). If you feel any distressing emotions either during or after the workshops or focus group interviews we will arrange a private counselling session for you. Alternatively, you can phone the Family and Marriage Association of South Africa at 021 447 0170, should you wish to arrange a counselling session for yourself. This will be free of charge. Also, please do not hesitate to contact us should you need any further information about some of the issues that we have discussed in the workshops.

By signing this form you agree to take part as a participant in the study. You also agree that the workshop can be audio-recorded, transcribed, and used in the final write up of my project, or any other papers that may be drafted for publication.

Thank you for your support, wishing you all the best,

[XXXXX]

**Name (print)**.....

**Signature**.....

**Date**.....

# APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION SHEET

<p><b>*Name</b>..... .....</p> <p><b>Surname</b>..... .....</p>
---

*Please answer all questions...*

**\*These details will be kept anonymous during the write up of the research**

- 1.) Where were you born?
- 2.) In what country did you grow up?
- 3.) How long have you been in South Africa? (if not born in South Africa)
- 4.) What languages do you speak?
- 5.) What was the reason you came to South Africa?
- 6.) How old are you?
- 7.) What is your relationship status?      Married     Single     Divorced
- 8.) Do you have any children? If so, how many?
- 9.) Do you have any family living in South Africa? If so, in which areas do they live?

- 10.) What is your highest level of education?
- 11.) Are you currently employed?
- 12.) Have you ever stayed at a women's shelter?
- 13.) What sources of support have you used since you have been living in South Africa? (for example, legal services, counselling etc?)?
- 14.) How long have you been part of the group *Sisters for Sisters*?
- 15.) How did you hear about the group?
- 16.) Have you ever been in an abusive relationship? If so, please specify what kinds of abuse you experienced. How long did this go on for? Please state if you are currently in an abusive relationship.
- 17.) Have you ever experienced any other kinds of abuse (for example, at the hands of family members or at the hands of a stranger)? Please specify.

***Thank You***

## APPENDIX D: EXAMPLES OF WORKSHOP ACTIVITIES

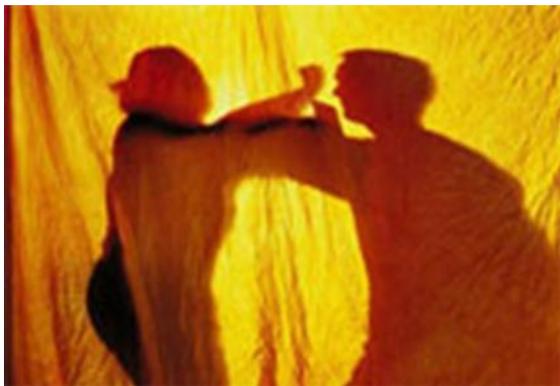
### Photo-Narration Exercise

The participants were asked to select a picture and to provide their own interpretation of the image as well as to comment on the relevance of the scenario to their own lives.





**PHOTO STORY:** *This young girl was attacked and branded on the arm by Janjaweed militia in the remote western Sudan province, Darfur. Many women are not so lucky. They are abducted and raped. Women who have been raped are stigmatized within this society. "A woman who has been raped is like a piece of spoiled meat," said one man, "Who would have her?"*



## APPENDIX E: TRANSCRIBING CONVENTIONS:

( <u>Underlined text</u> )	Name of person or place that has been omitted to ensure anonymity
<i>Italics Text</i>	Indicates a vocal emphasis made by the participant
[block brackets ]	Indicates the researcher's description/explanation
(Plain text)	Additional word/s so that the reader can better understand the sentence/paragraph
.....	Indicates a pause in speech. The longer the ellipses, the longer the pause
....<....	Indicates that the line of speech has been interrupted by another speaker
(xxxxxxx)	Indicates names or locations that have been deleted to ensure anonymity
(inaudible)	Indicates an indecipherable word
(inaudible patch)	Indicates an indecipherable patch of talk
(S: text)	Indicates the researcher's narrative/comments
Gonna Wanna	Certain words have modified spellings. This indicates the variation in the participant's pronunciation