

Black women's experiences of domestic work: Domestic workers in Mpumalanga

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## **ABSTRACT**

The issue of domestic work in South Africa has not received much attention. This study focuses on the experiences of black women domestic workers in Mpumalanga. Drawing upon data from 13 interviews with women domestic workers, this research explores the experiences of domestic workers in Hoyi Village, Mpumalanga. Domestic work is the second largest area of employment for black women in South Africa. This research shows that the experiences of women in domestic work vary substantially from experiences of women in other sectors, primarily because domestic workers work in the personal space of their employees. Basic conditions of employment have been set for domestic workers in South Africa. However, with no education and very little knowledge about their rights as domestic workers the workers in the study are subjected to different forms of exploitation. These include earning low wages, having unfavourable working conditions, long hours of work and no employment benefits. The study makes recommendations for future research and policy that might improve conditions for domestic workers.

Key words: domestic workers, conditions of domestic work, abuse of workers

Over the years the demand for domestic worker services has dramatically increased, with more middle class people seeking domestic workers (Cohen, 1991; de Regt, 2009). As a result a large number of women are occupying work as domestic workers. In 2004 domestic work was the second largest employment sector for black women in South Africa, employing 755 000 women (StatsSA, 2005). Domestic work is a common type of informal employment, often undertaken by marginalized women who lack formal education (Mkandawire-Valhmu, Rodrigues, Ammar, & Nemoto, 2009). In South African there have been moves to formalize the employment of domestic workers, with a minimum wage now being prescribed by law and workers being protected by labour laws of the country. Despite these progressive laws many women who work as domestic workers still continue to suffer exploitation, poor working conditions and sometimes violence from their employers (Cock, 1981).

Women from low income backgrounds find domestic work to be an attractive form of employment because it provides both income and, sometimes, shelter in the case of migrant domestic workers who live with their employers (Mkandawire-Valhmu et al., 2009). For unskilled women it is also a job that is assumed to require a low level of skill. The skills required are those that are already assumed to come naturally to women, such as the usual household chores (Gaitskel, Kimbel, Maconachie, & Unterhalter, 1983). In this respect, domestic work could be described as a gendered form of employment.

Much research has been done on domestic workers, with more focus on the nature of domestic work, revealing the exploitation of domestic workers, gender, class and racial inequalities between domestic workers and their employers (Clark, 2002; Cohen, 1991; Cock 1981; Cock, 2011; Mkandawaire-Valhmu et al., 2009; Mkandawire-Valhmu, 2010). Also a lot of research has been done on Migrant domestic workers (Griffini, 2011; Guo, Chow & Palinkas, 2011; Lycklama, 1989; Ukwata, 2010). However, little research has been done on the experiences of domestic workers working in their country of origin (Acher, 2011; Cock, 1988). There has been no research done on the experiences of rural domestic workers. This research project will explore the experiences of rural domestic workers in South Africa, Mpumalanga in Hoyi Village with regard to work and family life. In this review the following issues emerging from the literature will be highlighted: abuse and mistreatment in the lives of domestic workers;

experiences of working away from home; coping and health issues for domestic workers and working conditions for domestic workers.

### **Abuse and Mistreatment in the Lives of Domestic Workers**

Because of their position on the social hierarchy, most female domestic workers are victims of gender, class and racial oppression (Cock, 1981). Some studies have found that, in the course of their work, domestic workers sometimes experience violence from their employers. This is because of the power dynamics that exist between the worker and her employer (Cock, 1980; Cohen, 2000; Mkandawire-Valhmu et al., 2009). The employer's power over the domestic worker, due to class and race, creates a situation prevalent for abuse (Cohen, 2000; Mkandawire-Valhmu et al., 2009). In addition, many women work in cities or countries far away from home. As a result they often accept living with their employers in spite of the risk of abuse and the lack of support if abuse happens (Mkandawire-Valhmu et al., 2009). In Malawi Mkandawire-Valhmu (2010) found that the lives of domestic workers are characterised by abuse in the workplace. Abuse was sometimes in the form of food deprivation. They also found that women experienced verbal abuse (such as being shouted at or humiliated) as well as reports of physical abuse. The gender, race and inequalities that characterise domestic work create an environment in which there is great potential for abuse.

The issue of food, used as a means of mistreating and dehumanising domestic workers also emerged in the literature. Direct communication about food between workers and their employers is minimal; food provision for domestic workers is one of the important factors that define the relationship between workers and employers (Archer, 2011; De Regt, 2009; Dinat & Peberdy, 2007). Archer (2011) has recently written about the issue of food and domestic workers, arguing that they are often restricted from eating food in the homes of their employers, especially the 'luxury' or more expensive food items. Similarly, Dinat and Peberdy (2007) in their study in Johannesburg found that domestic workers had to carry their own food, because they were not offered food at work and sometimes were offered food that had been spoilt or food that the employers themselves would not eat.

The abuse in the lives of domestic workers makes an already demanding job, far away from home and a support system, even more difficult. Many women are sometimes unaware of their rights as domestic workers and therefore may be more at risk of exploitation and possible

abuse. The effects of mistreatment are compounded when the woman is working away from her home and family, an issue discussed below.

### **Working Away from Home**

Sometimes domestic work is undertaken in a city or country other than where a woman lives, where there are better economic opportunities. Working and living in another city or country, without the social support of one's family or friends, can amplify the many problems that domestic workers might already experience. Some research has shown that even though women struggle to adapt while working in foreign countries, they seek out ties and networks of support through domestic worker organisations or churches. For example, Clarke (2002) found that domestic workers in Jamaica turned to their religion and their faith as a coping strategy. The women felt a sense of belonging in their churches and they met other women working as domestic workers who they could talk to and share their experiences with. However, it is not only the women who struggle with migrant domestic work. The families of these workers also find it hard to cope while one of their members works in a different city or country. Due to women relocating to other cities because of work, their children sometimes struggle with their school work (Dinat & Peberdy, 2007; Ukwatta, 2010). A study done by Dinat and Peberdy (2007) in Johannesburg found that, even though the families of the workers struggled due to separation, they benefited economically. This was especially the case with children of the workers because, they were able to pay school fees and afford proper uniforms and stationery (Cohen, 1991; Cohen, 2000; Dinat & Peberdy, 2007; Guo, Chow, & Palinkas, 2011; Ukwatta, 2010). The situation of migrant domestic workers is complex because women have to leave their families in order to find work in a different city or country, but they are doing so in order to obtain economic benefits.

### **Coping and Health Issues for Domestic Workers**

Having to leave your family and partner and go find work in another city or country can be emotionally demanding. Many domestic workers live in fear, either of being left by their husbands or of being infected by HIV due to the fact that their husbands may be engaging in sexual relationships in their absence (Dinat & Peberdy, 2007). In addition, many women fear that if they resist bad treatment or exploitation and do not comply with what is being asked of them by their employers, they might find themselves jobless. In the case of foreign domestic workers

who are undocumented, these women live in fear of being arrested by authorities and taken back home. The fear in the lives of the workers can be detrimental on its own and can cause emotional distress. With no support this may impact negatively on the emotional well-being of the workers. Clarke (2002) and Mkandawire-Valhmu (2010), for example, found that live-in workers were concerned that their husbands back at home were cheating on them and the women were worried that they might be infected with HIV. Furthermore, the women knew about condoms and other forms of treating sexually transmitted infections, yet they found it hard to access health services.

Research has shown that women in domestic work also experienced a number of health problems associated with the physical nature of the work, for example, joint and back problems (Dinat & Peberdy, 2007; Mkandawire-Valhmu, 2010). Obtaining proper health care was also a challenge for these women because of the lack of time off work.

### **Working Conditions**

Minimum wages and basic conditions of employment for domestic workers have been set by the Department of Labour. However, working conditions of many domestic workers have not necessarily improved. Domestic workers are still exploited in their work and many work long hours for low wages. Domestic workers' job descriptions (if they have any) tend to be vague from the outset with no clear understandings of what to do and what not to do. Thus, this leads to women being subjected to unfair work which was not part of their original job description. For example, Clarke (2002) found that workers were also expected to clean the yard, clean shoes for everyone in the family, wash dogs and clean up their mess, flush toilets and cook food for the dogs. This made the workers feel unappreciated, undervalued and unrecognized, which lead to feelings of unhappiness with their jobs.

Bad working conditions made it hard for the women to find pleasure in their jobs. For example, none of the domestic workers interviewed by Cock (1981) said they derived any fulfillment or enjoyment from domestic work. This might be because black women, together with other women of color from poor backgrounds, do not have any other job opportunities. So, in order to survive, they feel forced to do repetitive jobs which they do not like, and one that requires long working hours (Cock, 1981). Domestic work is also a job in which workers are patronized and dehumanized (Cock, 1981). In understanding women's experiences of domestic work, it is important to consider that domestic workers may never feel a sense of satisfaction from their work (Clarke, 2002; Cock, 1980) because of the nature of the job. The participants in

Dinat and Peberdy's (2007) study reported that the only reason they were still working as domestic workers was because they needed to provide for their children. They saw domestic work as the only work available for them, given their lack of skills and education.

The review of the literature has illustrated that domestic workers are still faced with a number of challenges in the course of their work. Often domestic workers are treated badly by their employers, they are taken advantage of, exploited and to some extent experience abuse. The stressors of the job make it difficult for the women to cope and have any satisfaction in the work they do.

Poor black uneducated women have few opportunities to move up in the socio-economic hierarchy in societies. Therefore, these women are often left with no choice but to take on jobs as domestic workers in an attempt to support their families. A relatively large number of literatures on domestic work identify gender, race and class as factors that lead women to seeking jobs as domestic workers. The research recognizes the fact that domestic work is most often done by women who are poor and black and therefore gender, class and racial issues are highlighted. While there have been some research done on domestic work, not much has been done in South African, particularly research that explores experiences of domestic workers themselves.

### **Aims and Objectives**

The overall objective of this research is to explore the subjective experiences of domestic workers, to understand how they cope in balancing their work and personal lives. The research also aims to explore how these workers understand their work and the meanings that they derive from their work.

### **Research Questions**

How do domestic workers in Hoyi village, Mpumalanga experience working as domestic workers?

- How do women describe their lives as domestic workers? What are their experiences of domestic work?
- How do domestic workers attempt to provide some balance between their work and personal lives?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Feminist theory attempts to understand and theorise women's social, economic and political positions in society. The primary aim of this approach is to put women's issues on the



agenda (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). Traditionally, feminism has concentrated on gender as its dominant topic stressing women's experiences and knowledge (Boonzaier & Shefer, 2006). Gender is the guiding framework but feminist theory is also concerned with the analysis of other types of power and inequalities, such as race and class. Feminist theory rejects the implications that universal theories of human functioning can be derived from research with only men. However, the approach recognizes that people have multiple identities that interact, and as a result women may have different experiences to one another on the basis of differences in race and class

According to DeVoe (1990), feminism is based on the idea that individual and political spheres are unified and co-dependent essentials of women's realities. Thus, although this study explores the experiences and personal identities of women working as domestic workers, the study was conducted with the understanding that these women's identities and experiences are partly a product of broader social constraints with which women are faced. Given that domestic workers in South Africa are primarily women who are black and poor, a feminist framework was appropriate for this study as it pays attention to the issues of gender and other inequalities in the lives of domestic workers.

## **Method Design**

### **Qualitative Research Methods**

Qualitative research is appropriate to this specific research question as it shares many principles of feminist research (Watts, 2006). It is also based on the interpretation of experiences and meanings attached to these experiences (Wilson & MacLean, 2011). The aim of this approach is to understand what it is like to experience certain conditions and how people manage certain situations (Willig, 2001). Qualitative research has been seen to give power to the participants, as it raises the voice of the participants over that of the researcher (Babbie & Mouton, 2007).

Qualitative research asks open-ended questions in an attempt to understand how something is the way it is rather than why it is the way it is (Willig, 2001). Language is therefore seen as an important tool to create meaning. The overall objective of this type of research was to describe and explain events instead of predicting them (Willig, 2001).

I have chosen qualitative methods for this research because it is appropriate to exploring the daily lives and experiences of domestic workers in South Africa. Qualitative research helped

yield insight on how the women construct meaning of their identities as domestic workers, and the meaning they attach to their work.

### **Sample**

The sample for the study came from a purposive sample of domestic workers in Hoyi village, Nelspruit, Mpumalanga province. Participants were recruited from the local Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) school where many domestic workers attend after-hours lessons. Permission was requested from the center manager to talk to the women in classes and find out whether they were interested in volunteering to take part in the study. Participants were also asked to mention the study to their family and friends who may have been interested in participating.

Thirteen domestic workers were recruited for individual interviews. While this may be seen as a relatively small sample, qualitative research does not concern itself with ensuring representativeness (Wilson & MacLean, 2011). Instead, in qualitative research, the sample should be chosen in relation to how appropriate the participants are in relation to the research question. Participants chosen in this study were purposefully selected to meet the criteria that they are currently working as domestic workers (Wilson & MacLean, 2011). The criteria for women in the study was women who have been in the domestic work industry for at least the past four to five years. The reason for this is because during this period they would have accumulated some experience of being a domestic worker.

### **Data Collection Tool and Procedure**

Data was collected using individual interviews. Interviews are the most common method of data collection in qualitative research (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). They have been described as conversations with a purpose, and in qualitative research the main purpose is to explore the experiences of participants (Wilson & MacLean, 2011). For this research semi-structured interviews to collect data were used. Wilson and MacLean (2011) define semi-structured interviews as interviews whereby the researcher wishes to explore the participant's experiences and subjective views on the topic, it allows for the interview to be flexible, letting the interaction with the participant guide the direction that the interview takes. Furthermore semi-structured interviews allows for the natural connection established between the interviewer and participants,

as this often determines the quality of the data to be produced (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). In addition semi-structured interviews are in line with the feminist research principles, it places the participants as experts in their lives while providing them with an opportunity to actively participate in the interview (Corbin, 2003). The data collection method for this research was suitable because it focuses on meaning and is in-line with qualitative research. Therefore, it provided the researcher with a way to gain knowledge on how participants interpret their experiences during the interviews (Willig, 2001).

An interview schedule was constructed to cover questions relating to participants' experiences of domestic work and the meanings they attach to their work (see Appendix A). The interviews were conducted in the participants' home language, siSwati. The interview questions were treated in a way that allowed the interview to flow in a natural manner. Semi structured interviews allow for the interview to move away from the research questions following the responses given by the participants (Wilson & MacLean, 2011). I conducted the actual interview with participants for an hour or more depending on the flow of the interview and the availability of the participants. To start the interview I used the questions I prepared and took notes during the entire interview process. I also asked for permission to audio record the interview. In addition, I began the interview with general questions and moved to more private, specific questions once I had established a relationship with the participants. After the interview, I transcribed the data in a more detailed written account of the interaction between the participants and me.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis involves the analysis and interpretation of data. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data for this research. In using thematic analysis data is interpreted by identifying common patterns and themes across the whole set of data (Wilson & MacLean, 2011). Thematic analysis is flexible and versatile; it is not allied to a specific theoretical framework, and thus can be applied to a number of different research topics (Wilson & MacLean, 2011).

When using thematic analysis, it is important to decide on the type of analysis that you would like to do. Thematic analysis can be used to provide a summary of the content of the data; it may be used to examine one theme or a set of themes in a more detailed manner (Wilson & MacLean, 2011). However, the level at which to examine themes in the data can vary with thematic analysis, for this research I used latent themes which do not only focus on the meaning

of what is being said but also the underlying meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). When using latent level of analysis the researcher identifies underlying ideas, assumptions and conceptualizations that are theorized as shaping the thematic content of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thus the development of themes on this level requires interpretive work and the analysis produced is not just descriptions but it is already theorized.

Braun and Clarke (2006) identify six steps to thematic analysis that the research need to follow when analyzing their data. Please see Appendix B for a description of the steps followed in this study.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval to conduct this study was granted by the Ethics Committee in the Psychology Department, University of Cape Town.

### **Harm to Subjects**

Researchers have a responsibility to ensure that their participants are not harmed by their research. Women who experience difficulties in their working lives or in their personal lives might find it difficult to talk about their experiences of domestic work and life. However, the semi structured format of the interviews allowed the women to control the content of the interview. This means that they were able to determine the direction that the interviews took. This ensured that they only spoke about things they felt comfortable with, instead of feeling pressured to talk about issues that they found too sensitive. None of the participants appeared to be distressed during the interviews.

### **Informed Consent**

Participants were given a consent form with details of the purpose of the research (see Appendix C). The informed consent includes information about the participants' rights to refuse participation in the study and to withdraw from the research at any time. In addition the form includes any risks and discomforts related to the study as well as any possible benefits from the research. It also discusses their rights to privacy and confidentiality. The consent form was read and explained to women in their home language.

### **Privacy and Confidentiality**

The data for this research will be locked away in a secure and safe place, in my supervisor's office. Participants were informed that all the data will be confidential but that some

of it will be written up in the form of an Honours research project and might be used for publication in a scientific journal. Despite this however, participants were ensured that their identities will be protected. No real names or any identifying details were used in this research.

### **Reflexivity**

As a researcher, it is important to reflect on my role throughout the research process. Considering the fact that I had gathered knowledge on domestic workers before actually conducting the interviews, it is important to note that I might have influenced the direction the interviews took. This means that I did not enter the research process from a position of neutrality, instead I entered the research with certain ideas about domestic workers and the challenges that they might be faced with during the course of their work. I also conducted the interviews with certain ideas on the themes that might emerge. This might also have influenced the way in which I analyzed my data. It might have prevented me from exploring other factors or themes that might have emerged during the interviews.

### **Results and Discussions**

The following themes emerged from my analysis of the data, namely, conditions of employment, low wages, which emerged as a subtheme to conditions of employment, health consequences, relationship between domestic workers and employers and looking into the future.

#### **Condition of Employment**

Domestic workers are often described as forming part of the invisible labour force, because their work occurs behind closed doors in private households (Dilata, 2010). In the domestic service, workers are scattered and isolated from one another, thus it is difficult for domestic workers to be mobilized by unions. This is the reason why many domestic workers often find their working conditions unfavourable. Being subjected to long working hours, no leave or little leave and not being registered with the UIF.

A discussion about working conditions for the women emerged as an important theme in the interviews. Responses of the women indicated that many of their employers are not meeting the minimum standards set by the Department of Labour. The women had to work long hours for very low wages.

Sylvia: *“I start work at six to four o’clock...and they pay me 800”*

Sarah: *“by half past six I have to be at work...I knock off at four or five”*

Like these women, almost all the women worked more than eight hours per day, this number is in excess of the hours prescribed by the domestic workers legislation. None of the women in this study said they worked less than eight hours per day.

The above is an example of the form of exploitation that domestic workers might be faced with in their work place. It shows that the abuse of domestic workers in their work place is not something of the past but still exists, even with the new laws and regulations meant to protect domestic workers. It may be hard to monitor the working conditions of domestic workers, leaving domestic workers to be among the most exploited workers in the world (Anderson, 2000; Fish 2006). According to De Waal (2012), it is important to put pressure on the government in making sure that employers adhere to the laws and regulations of domestic workers. De Waal (2012) asserts that this can be done by ensuring that there is an adequate number of labour inspectors. In 2010 the government made labour inspection available to domestic workers, by providing a telephone number that domestic workers can call if they have a problem. However, due to the shortage of inspectors domestic workers still have very little chances of receiving help through this route (De Waal, 2012).

Conditions of employment were also not clearly specified for the women. For example, their duties were not clearly outlined for them, resulting in the women having a lot of work, some of which they felt they should not be doing.

Fezile: *“in the morning I had to make their beds...start picking up clothes from the kitchen to the rest of the house...when my employer is sick, she does not mind vomiting on the floor and I have to clean that up...when she goes to the bathroom and uses the toilet, she does not flush, I have to flush...”*

From the literature that I reviewed it was evident that domestic workers job descriptions tend to be vague from the onset, with no clear understandings of what and what not to do (Clarke, 2002). This was the case with the women in the study they reported that even if there was some form of verbal agreement of their duties; employers did not always adhere to these expectations. Therefore, the issue of no clear outline of the women's duties added even more to

the time they spent at work because employers could simply add further duties when it suited them.

Fezile: *“sometimes when you are ready to knock off, my boss would come back and ask me to do certain things for her...this troubles me because she often did this when it was past my knock off time...”*

Precious: *“my work becomes very hard when the girls are back from university. Because then they use lots of dishes and do not wash them. So I have to repeatedly wash all the dishes they use and sometimes I go home very late because I have to wait for them to finish then I wash the dishes, since I have to leave everything clean...”*

Both the women above describe instances where they are taken advantage of. This proves to be more than just a misunderstanding of their duties; it talks of an exploitation and mistreatment of some sort. Such behaviour from employers and the rest of the family members may impact negatively on domestic workers, leaving them with feelings of being in-human. A review of international studies on domestic workers shows that there are attitudes and behaviours present in the employment of a domestic worker and these are common across the globe (Du Preez, Beswick, Whittaker & Dickinson (2010). The girls' behaviour toward Precious clearly reveals the negative attitudes and behaviours described by Du Preez et al. (2010). Although Precious is not employed by the young University girls, she is still expected to clean after them. Precious does not indicate this but the young girls may lack any sensitivity towards Precious' situation not necessarily caring whether she stays late to clean after them. Similar issues emerged in Clarke's (2002) study in Jamaica. Domestic workers were expected to tolerate the rude and disrespectful behaviour of their children's employers- such behaviour even included name-calling.

The fact that domestic workers are often vulnerable and in desperate situations gives employers the power to enforce certain conditions on the workers (Dilata, 2010). For example, the fact that employers often gave food and clothes to their workers was a way of creating some sort of loyalty within the hierarchical and unequal relationship (Cock, 1980). Workers are grateful for the gifts they receive from their employers, and thus choose to stay even if they are

not always treated well. Freire (1970), states that this is false generosity from the employers side, meant to conceal the exploitative nature of the relationship. However, we cannot disregard the fact that employees view receiving gifts and food from the employers in a positive way (Arnado, 2003), and thus respond to this by being loyal to their workers. These ‘gifts’, especially food, are sometimes very necessary to the survival of domestic workers and their families.

Furthermore, getting time off from work has been a struggle for many domestic workers (Cock, 1980; Dilata, 2010). Although the legislation has laid down laws on working hours for domestic workers, overtime and leave, many workers struggle to find time to be with their families.

This was the case with the women in the study, despite the fact that many of them worked long hours Monday to Saturday, many said they had had no leave, including sick leave. According to the legislation set on domestic workers, a worker should get at least three weeks annual leave.

Prudence: *“there is no leave, I work Monday to Saturday and there is no bonus...even if u asked for a day off to go sort out something, they cut your money...”*

Fezile: *“I call and tell her I’m sick...she would shout at me, and ask if I’m not coming to work who is going clean the house...then she says she will cut my salary...”*

Employers may find it hard to give domestic workers time off; this is because domestic work has been reduced to a labour unit rather than thought of as a person (Mohutsioa-Makhudu, 1989). Many women describe entering domestic work as a means to support their children and provide good education for them (Phillips, 2011). However, in most cases it turns out that the nature of the job (long hours with no leave) isolates mothers from their children. Domestic workers are not only isolated from their families, they are also isolated from the collective, which is other women working as domestic workers, thus these women have to negotiate for better working conditions individually (Beck, 2001). The lack of time off from work (through paid leave) made it difficult for the women to spend time with their families, even when they had younger children of their own. According to Cock (1980), the conditions of employment



compromises domestic worker's quality of life, the long hours and lack of holidays for domestic workers undoubtedly also involve a substantial level of deprivation of social life

Working nine hours, six days a week is very demanding and the women could not engage in other activities that they were interested in.

Precious: *“mmmh there are things I do not get to do because of my job, like going to funerals as a mother and selling Vanda products”*

Prudence: *“if it was not for the long hours of work, I would start my own little garden...but at the moment I cannot maintain it because I'm always at work”*

Often domestic workers do not have a social life. According to Dinat and Peberdy (2007), the social lives of domestic workers are relatively constricted. Usually domestic workers activities take place in church and very rarely can they afford to visit a friend (Dinat & Peberdy, 2007). Domestic work and the unsatisfactory conditions of this work do not allow women to pursue leisure interests and have time for relaxing. This may be because employer's flexibility depends on round the clock domestic worker services (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001). Therefore, for employers to have time to relax means more hours and less leisure time for domestic workers. This might be an issue that maintains the status quo, because it means that only those people who are wealthy (have other people cleaning their houses) have more time to pursue leisure interests and engage in relaxing activities. Cock (1980) raises questions about the real cost of the time and freedom obtained by those employing domestic workers. She records that employers use their free time to play golf, undertake voluntary work, engage in community activities, and above all, devote time to their children's intellectual and emotional development. The women interviewed in Cock (1980) study revealed that the main reason why they employed domestic workers was because they wanted time to relax and flexibility to do other things. These same opportunities are not afforded to domestic workers due to the conditions of their employment.

Furthermore, out of the 13 women in the study, only one was registered with the UIF. The rest of the women mentioned that, although they had raised the issue of UIF with their employers, they remained unregistered. Lack of UIF registration was concerning for the women who feared that their children would not be financially taken care of if they were injured at work

or if they died. In addition, women were not registered in a pension fund but many felt that their employers should take responsibility for providing this.

Precious: *“although I was not registered they should have bought me a gift or something when I was leaving, as a form of appreciation that I worked for them all these years...”*

Above, Precious is asking her employer for some token of appreciation once she retires. She does not necessarily indicate that her employer should provide for her retirement. However, given the low wages women earn in domestic work they would have difficulty in saving for their retirement and would therefore continue to be in the cycle of poverty when they can no longer work.

Not being registered with the UIF was of grave concern to the women, so much so that one participant indicated that she was willing to report fewer hours than the hours she worked, just so that her employers could register her with the UIF.

Siphiwe: *“I would really prefer it if they report that I work few hours instead of the ones I’m actually working, for example maybe say I work from seven up until two or one. That would be much better, instead of them not registering me at all.”*

It would be expected that employers resist registering their workers with the UIF. This is because there are no inspectors making sure that all domestic workers are registered and that employers adhere to the conditions of employing a domestic worker. A study done by Fish (2006) revealed that government policy makers themselves were sceptical about the registration of domestic workers with the UIF. This was because “of the criticism they would receive in relation to ensuring compliance, particularly in the case of this perceived private realm of the household and the informal nature of labour in the sector.” (Fish, 2006, p.16).

Not being registered with the UIF, working long hours with no leave and being exploited made it hard for the women to negotiate better working conditions. Furthermore, considering the huge unemployment rate in South Africa, many of the women said they were grateful to have a job at all. It is evident that even after the Department of Labour has set basic working conditions

for domestic workers, the women in the study have not experienced improvement in their conditions of employment as domestic workers. Clarke (2002) found that workers had to wash shoes, dogs, flush toilets and clean after the mess made by dogs. There is no doubt that having to perform such tasks is dehumanizing and has a negative impact on domestic workers, possibly making them feel undervalued, dehumanised and unappreciated. The issue of low wages emerged as a sub-theme to the overall conditions of employment.

### ***Low Wages***

Domestic workers get very little pay for long hours and are not guaranteed paid leave if they have any (Ally, 2008; Cock, 1981). In the past there were no minimum wages prescribed for domestic workers (Hickson & Strous, 1993), which might explain why domestic workers were paid very low wages. However, it is evident that the issue of low wages for domestic workers is not a thing of the past. A discussion about the difficulty of earning a low salary as part of the bad working conditions emerged from my interviews. Almost all of the women in my sample complained about the inadequate salary they received, which ranged from R700 - R1000.

Nonto: *“...the problem with our employers is that they give us as very low salary. All we ask is that they increase our salary, the salary they are giving is too small”*

Nonto describes how she wishes that her employer would give her a raise because she could hardly do anything with the money they were paying her currently. Similarly, Sindile voiced the same concern

Sindile: *“... 1000 rands is nothing, I only buy the basics, the rest we just have to get by without”*

Many women complained that their employers were unreasonable in deciding how much they should earn. Their employers often knew their home situations, living conditions and how many children they had, yet they still chose to pay low salaries.

Siphiwe: *“sometimes she comes to my home... she sees how tough my situation is”*

Like Siphwiwe, Prudence also said that her employer had lots of money, yet he did not want to pay her more money. She felt this was unreasonable because it is not that he could not afford to pay her.

Prudence: *“these people do not want to give us money, they want the money for themselves, you see”*

According to Clarke (2002), often domestic workers feel that their employers can afford to pay more considering their high standard of living and the number of vehicles they have. The women in the study, through talking about the low wages they received appeared to feel exploited by their employers. However, given the high unemployment rate in South Africa, many women said that although they did not earn enough money, they were grateful that they had jobs. These feelings of gratefulness may explain why they stay in their jobs despite feelings of being exploited.

Sylvia: *“even though the money is too little, at least I get it, unlike not getting anything at all”*

The consequences of earning a low salary were dire for the women. They had to make difficult choices about what they will do with the money they earned. And therefore did not necessarily look forward to ‘payday’. For example,

Siphwiwe: *“it’s worse on pay day, because then I have to decide what to do with the money. I end up having a headache”*

It is interesting how although many people usually look forward to payday, the women in the study, due to the low salary they received, experienced increased stress when they received their salaries. The Department of Labour stipulates that every domestic worker who works at least 27 hours a week should earn at least R1491.86 per month (department of labour, 2002). In addition domestic workers are not supposed to work more than 40 hours per week. Furthermore, the fact that employers paid their workers very low wages as prescribed by the Department of Labour, the workers also experienced unspecified conditions of employment and often had to work longer hours, than the hours prescribed by the Department of Labour. Many of the workers in the study worked more than 50 hours per week.

It would be expected that these women experience such working conditions as exploitative; this is compounded by the fact that none of the women in the study belonged to any domestic worker organisation. This made it hard for the women to exercise and demand their rights as workers. In cases where women attempt to challenge their conditions of employment or unfair dismissal – they have to do so individually because they are not part of a collective effort that might enable them to successfully change their conditions. Hence, due to both the low wages, unfavourable working conditions and consequent exploitation, the women were subjected to a range of negative health consequences.

### **Health Consequences**

From the literature, it is evident that domestic workers experience health problems (Dinat & Peberdy, 2007; Mkandawire-Valhmu, 2010). Domestic workers may be subjected to certain health problems like high blood pressure, stress and sickness, due to long working hours, the nature of their jobs and low pay. A study done by Hickson and Strous (1993) revealed that due to exploitation and the fact that domestic workers often feel as if they are not good enough or inhuman, they might lose self-esteem and this may impact badly on their mental health. During the interviews, a discussion about the nature of the work emerged. Many of the women said that due to their work load and the fact that they earned a very low salary, they often found themselves being stressed about how to make ends meet. One woman said that she was diagnosed with high blood pressure because of the stress associated with working for such a low salary.

Siphiwe: *“due to the low pay, my blood pressure would rise, because now I’m stressed about money and what to do with the money”*

In addition to feeling stressed and complaints about high blood pressure, many of the women complained about the cold water that they had to use every day. The water caused joint pains especially in their hands and they often had flu due to constantly working with cold water, especially in winter.

Precious: *“most of the time the joints in my hands are painful, sometimes my hands go numb and sometimes they get swollen”*

Fezile: *“the frequent flues are due to the cold water”*

The women above are complaining about the consequences of cold water, however house hold chores involve usage of water, one cannot successfully do their job without the use of water. In addition, many of the women spoke of having back-pains and swollen feet, which were due to long working hours of cleaning, washing and moving heavy things around the house.

Sithembile: *“my feet get swollen, and then I have to walk barefoot”*

Sithembile had to walk a long distance to work with swollen feet and often without shoes. She found this unbearable and had to quit her job. In addition, she also had to stand the whole day at her work and walk back home again. However, it is not only Sithembile who had to quit her job due to sickness.

Sylvia: *“I would get so sick, especially during winter that I would quit my job”*

Nonto: *“due to the work, having to work with cold water and moving heavy things, I got sick and then I quit my job”*

Although the women had to quit their jobs due to sickness, this was usually temporary. At some point they had to resume work because they had children to support and they had no other sources of income or assistance.

Nonto: *“after quitting my old job, I had to go work at the farms, because sitting at home was not helping, I could not just sit there and watch my children starve”*

Sickness is one of the many challenges that the workers were faced with due to the nature of their work. However, staying at home with no form of income also impacted on the health of these women, because this meant that the families were likely to starve. Therefore, in most cases the women had to resume work despite their health because the burden of caring for their families was too great and had to be done by them alone.

Gugu: *“I was married and had three children, when my husband died I had to come back home, here at home we are 16 in total and I have to work to support everyone”*

*Teddy: “after my husband chased me out of the house because he blamed me for two of our daughter’s pregnancies, I had to start all over. He does not support the children, as a single mom I have to work to support my children because if I do not, then they go and steal”*

The above women are complaining about how hard it is to take care of children especially with no support from the husband. These women’s responses show that their problems are due to the fact that they have no other sources of assistance to help with the financial burdens of raising a family. In cases where there were husbands or partners present, many were not working and relied on the women’s income.

*Sylvia: “I have to work and provide for my children and husband, since my husband is not working”*

Women were burdened with taking care of their families (often including unemployed husbands) and this kept them in exploitative working conditions. According to Mkandawire-Valhmu (2010), the employment of women is said to remove women from health hazards of poverty. However, the women in the study still experienced ill-health despite being employed.

### **Relationship between Domestic Workers and Employers**

The relationship between domestic workers and their employers is one characterised by inequality (Hickson & Strous, 1993). It is this lack of equality between domestic workers and employers that may allow for exploitation of domestic workers (Hickson & Strous, 1993). According to Anderson (1991), in order for employers and employees to have a successful relationship, they have to ‘bond’. However, the dynamics of the relationship between domestic workers and their employers may be problematic given the class inequalities that define the relationship. Besides initiatives taken by the women in the study to build and maintain a good relationship with their employers, employers maintained a sense of distance. This was usually evident when employers addressed workers. Most of the women in the study maintained that most of the time communication was not there, especially from their employers.

*Phindile: “I know my boss by now, when talking to her I can tell if today she is willing to talk or not”*

Phindile mentioned that she has grown immune to her boss's moods. When asked how this made her feel. Her response was:

Phindile: *"when I greet her in the morning and notice that she does not want to talk, I just get straight to my work"*

It is evident that employers controlled how much and when to communicate with their workers. When they did not feel like talking they tended to restrict their conversations through one word answers and this was a sign to the worker not to engage further.

Fezile: *"...you greet her and she just says fine, nothing more..."*

Although employers did not communicate well with their workers, the workers talked of how they attempted to be open and talked to their employers whenever something was troubling them, both at work or at home. This shows that communication between workers and employers was one sided.

Banele: *"usually I tell the wife if there are certain things that bother me, at work"*

Banele talks of how she speaks to her employer whenever something happens that she feels uncomfortable with. Usually this was the case when she felt that she was made to do an unreasonable job, like cleaning her employer's husband's underwear, which she deemed unacceptable and degrading. Most of the women felt that, by communicating openly with their employers, they wanted to maintain a good working environment for themselves. Furthermore, the women also believed that by talking they freed themselves from being oppressed.

Siphiwe: *"I sat down with her and asked to not work on Saturdays because I get really tired from the work, and having only Sunday off, I do not get to rest properly"*

For Siphiwe this proves that, by talking workers can work and solve some of the issues they might be faced with at work. Also considering the fact that she had younger children, she had to use the weekend to take care of things at home. Most of the women said that in order to work satisfactory jobs, workers should talk of the things that bother them. In line with this



Siphiwe described an incident where she literally cried in front of her employer because she felt her employer could not understand her problem.

Siphiwe: *“sometimes when telling my employer about my problems, I literally cry”*

Siphiwe characterised her relationship with her employer as close, open and caring. According to Beck (2001), in exploring the relationships between workers and their employers, employer’s views of their workers ranged from invisible to family like reporting that they seek intimate relationships with their workers. This might have been the case with Siphiwe and her employer, whereby their relationship was that of sisterhood. However, according to Bell (2008), if an employer feels cared for and loved in her work place, she will supply high quality of care and labour. But it might be hard for domestic workers who view themselves as part of the family and cared for to exercise their rights. This is because it has been noted that employers have misused their care and love for domestic workers, arguing against legislation that benefits domestic workers (Bell, 2008).

Usually when the women talked to their employers about things that troubled them, employers would respond positively. However, this was not always the case. A few of women revealed that sometimes they would talk to their employers and employers would not respond to their requests.

Sithembile: *“ever since I asked her to not work one weekend per month, she has not responded...maybe she does not want to, because if she did, she would have given me one weekend off already”*

Similarly, Prudence felt the same way when she asked for a raise from her employer

Prudence: *“even if you do talk to him nicely, all he ever says is mmh mmh ok...there is nothing else that he is going to say nor will there be any actions taken on your request”*

Both the women concluded that their employers were uncomfortable with their requests, because they did not respond to them. This lack of response from employers could also be interpreted as a way of maintaining their power over their employees.

Although women problematised the lack of communication from their employees, many of them still felt that they were treated well. Most of the workers reported that they were not restricted with food; they ate what everyone was eating.

Thembeni: *“...I eat anything that everyone else is eating, whether eggs or Russians”*

Nonto: *“she treats me well, she does not shout at me when I make myself something to eat and she does not get angry”*

The fact that she could eat anything that everyone was eating proved to Thembeni that they saw her as part of the family. Both the women describe their relationships with their employers in terms of food. They feel that because their employers do not have a problem with them eating anything in the house then their relationship is good. According to Archer (2011), the issue of food provision is an important one, because it helps define the relationship between the employer and employee. It may fulfil an ideological function of inducing feelings of gratitude and faithfulness on the worker (Hickson & Strous, 1993). In addition, the women revealed that their employers gave them some food to take home and some clothes, and thus their employers treated them well. However, according to Dilata (2010), employers gave food and other things to their workers because they knew that they were paying them a lower salary than what they should be paying them. The one-sided gift giving reinforces power differentials between employers and domestic workers and places domestic workers under a further sense of obligation (Bakan & Stasiulis, 1997; Lau, 2010; Rollins, 1985; Romero 1992). In contrast Chin (1998) asserts that the offering of gifts may be a way of employers trying to instil a sense of appreciation from domestic workers, by amplifying the faults of other employers, implying that the domestic worker has a good position with them and would be foolish to go seek work elsewhere and risk bad treatment.

Being open and communicating openly with employers made the women's work easier, because then they understood and knew what is expected of them. Therefore, all the women said they preferred open communication. However, some of the women were bolder and franker than others. A relationship between two people of unequal socio-economic statuses may be hard to maintain. However, because the women were open and they had the ability to communicate well with their employers, they strived to maintain a good relationship. This may have been

influenced by the fact that language was not a barrier to communication, since all the women in the study worked for employers who spoke the same language as them.

Building a relationship based on open communication was one of the ways in which the women in the study tried to fight for what they believed in as well as deal with some of the challenges that they came across. Considering the private and isolated nature of the domestic service, it is important that domestic workers find ways to cope and deal with their situations at work (Dilata, 2010).

### **Looking into the Future**

Domestic workers have better dreams for themselves and their children in the future (Clarke, 2002; Phillips, 2011). Despite their current living conditions the women in the study had positive hopes for the future. This was seen through their willingness to educate their children in the hope that they would come back and change the situation at home.

Phindile: *“when I get paid I buy some of the building materials...when my children get paid they buy too”*

Although Phindile struggled to survive while her children went to school and had no house to sleep in, at the time of the interview her children were helping her build the house she has always wanted. The major reason why most women enter domestic work is so that they can provide for their children and also secure their future by sending them to school (Lycklama, 1989).

Regardless of the fact that the women were uneducated, they wanted a better education for their children.

Nqedile: *“I paid for my children’s education from primary...up until university. The other one is working now”*

However, the issue of money made it difficult for the women to send their children to universities. Sending a child to university might mean that the rest of the family has to live in extreme poverty. The women found it hard to focus on other things in their homes for as long as their children were still in school.

Siphiwe: *“at the moment I cannot do anything... my son is in university”*

Letting her son stay in school was not an easy decision for Siphiwe. She recalls a time when she wanted to tell her son to quit school because she could not afford it.

Siphiwe: *“...I was so close to making him quit school... I had no money to give him for food”*

The women in the study perceived their lack of education as the reason why their job options were narrow. Most of the women had either worked in farms, in shops or as domestic workers.

Sylvia: *“all my life I have been a domestic worker, I will never leave this job... I am not educated”*

Furthermore, most of the women perceived their lack of education as one of the reasons why they were sometimes subjected to abuse by their employers.

Fezile: *“it is hard working as a domestic worker...but because we are poor we have no other options”*

To the women, having positive hopes for the future meant that they had to work hard in order to improve their current situations through making sacrifices to educate their children. The reason the women were so eager to educate their children may be because the women understood that their current struggles were due to their lack of education. Thus they described entering domestic work as a way of coping with the poverty that they were faced with at home.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Based on the findings of the study, domestic workers still face huge challenges in their work place. However, we cannot conclude that all domestic workers are faced with the same challenges. The findings of the study clearly show the unequal nature of the relationship between domestic workers and employers, which might play a role in perpetuating the many problems that workers are faced with. Four themes emerged from my analysis of the data, namely conditions of employment, low wages, which emerged as a subtheme to conditions of employment, health consequences, relationship between domestic workers and employers and

looking into the future. *Conditions of employment*- it is evident that employers are not meeting the minimum standards of hiring domestic workers. The women had to work long hours, with no leave for a low salary. *Low wages*- receiving low salary was a big challenge for the women; they could hardly do anything with the money they received. *Health consequences*- the nature of the job resulted in women experiencing sickness, which ranged from back and joint pain to stress and high blood pressure. *Relationship between domestic workers and their employers*- the relationship of workers and employers was one characterised by inequality; however, most of the women had fairly good relationships with their employers. *Looking into the future*- one coping strategy that kept the women going was hope that things will get better in the future. This was because they were working so hard to educate their children, and thus the children will come back and change the situation at home. The findings of the study suggest that domestic workers still experience exploitation in their work. However, due to lack of education and the huge unemployment rate in South Africa, the women were grateful to have jobs and an income, even though it was not enough.

Although domestic workers have been awarded with rights to protect them in their work, they still face a lot of challenges in their work place, challenges which have their origins in colonial and apartheid time. It is surprising to see that most of the challenges faced by these women are those that are related to their basic conditions of employment. Therefore, there is a need to reinforce and implement the law on the basic conditions of employment of domestic workers. After the recognition of domestic work as legitimate work by the legislature, it was believed that political freedom and equality would automatically translate to freedom in the work place for domestic workers. However, the position of domestic work as part of the labour force has improved only in theory (fish, 2006). Because in reality domestic workers still go through the same issues at work that they were faced with in the past and it is clear that racial inequality is not the only challenge faced by these women. Hondagneu-Sotelo (2001) argues that exploitation is not only across racial lines but class too.

Domestic workers still continue to produce comfortable lives for the privileged population, by running their households and serving as security guards during the day when no one is home. Domestic workers also play a crucial role in helping raise children of their employers, while their own children are left uncared for. Times may have changed, however the conflict and

troublesome relationship between domestic workers and their employers remain the same (Dilata, 2010). Anderson (2000) asserts that this might be due to the fact that even with the new laws and legislation attempting to protect domestic workers, the nature of the domestic employment works against the introduction of these laws and legislature. She argues that for the relations defined in the contract or legislation for domestic workers, domestic workers might be seen as selling their labour rather than seen as a person. Fish (2006) argues that the major challenge for domestic workers has and still stems from their lack of education. Lack of education leaves these women with little opportunities to better their lives, thus they resort to domestic work. However, the women in the study understood that their suffering was due to their lack of education. Therefore, most of the women were trying hard to use the little money that they earned to educate their children. By doing this the women were trying to break the cycle of poverty by developing the future of their children and ensuring that they can take care of themselves in the future.

The findings of the study also show that while all the women in the study were working in the same area where they were living; they still had difficulty finding time to spend with their families and children. They struggled to maintain a social life because they were always at work. According to Phillips (2011), the significance of being a mother gave particular meaning and influenced women's involvement in domestic work. However, at the same time the structure of their work separated these women from their children. In addition, the findings show that many of the women did not derive any form of satisfaction from their jobs, however, they were still grateful that they had jobs and they could use the little money that they earned to support their families.

The study was limited in that I had to present my research findings and the women's words in English to an English audience. In addition, as the researcher I had to translate the study's questions into siSwati and again translate the participant's responses back to English. This may have been a problem because during translation meaning may have been lost. The size of the sample does not allow for generalisations of the results. However, the aim of the research was not to find generalisation to all domestic workers but was to explore the experiences of women from Hoyi village. In addition the study consisted of domestic workers working in rural areas.

Therefore the study does not explore how other domestic workers working in urban areas experience domestic work.

The study was important because it has essentially explored domestic workers experiences of domestic work, how these women attempted to balance their work and personal lives. The study has also shown how the participants understood their lives as well as the meanings that they derived from their work. It should be noted that the findings of the study are only experiences of rural domestic workers and in order to fully understand the dynamics of employers and domestic workers in rural areas, future research should focus on the experiences of rural employers employing domestic workers. Future research should also focus on working conditions for domestic workers in rural areas employed by middle class African families.

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## Appendix A

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself and your life. (e.g. married, children, family)
2. Tell me about your life as a domestic worker
  - a. How do you find the work?
  - b. What is your relationship like with your employer?
  - c. What are some of the challenges in your work?
  - d. How do you deal with the challenges of your work?
3. Tell me more about your family life.
  - a. How do you cope with the demands of your job and your family life?
4. Is there anything else that you would like to add about your life as a domestic worker?

## Appendix B

Six steps to thematic analysis that a researcher needs to follow when analyzing their data:

- Familiarizing yourself with the data, whereby the researcher has to transcribe the data, read through the data thoroughly and also write down ideas.
- Generating initial codes. This step involves coding features of the data in a systematic way across the whole data set and also organizing data relevant to each other.
- Searching for themes, involves organizing data into potential themes and also gathering data relevant to those potential themes.
- Reviewing themes, this fourth steps involves checking if the themes work in relation to the coded data which takes place in phase two and also if it relates to the entire data set in phase one whereby the researcher generates a thematic map of the analysis.
- Defining and naming themes, this is where the researcher has to analyze the data in order to refine the specifics of each theme and also generate clear definitions and names for each theme.
- Producing the report, this final step involves the selection of rich compelling extract examples and the analysis back to the research question. The task of writing up the final report is to tell the complicated story of the data in a way which convinces the reader of the merit of your analysis.

**Appendix C**  
**UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN**



**Department of Psychology**

**Black Women's Experiences in the Domestic Service: Domestic Workers in Mpumalanga**

**Dear Domestic workers**

**1. Invitation and purpose**

You are invited to take part in a research project on domestic workers. We are researchers from the Department of Psychology at University of Cape Town.

**2. Procedures**

This project may ask about personal details of your life. If you decide to take part in this study I will ask you about your personal details of your life. The aim of the interview is to find out more about what it is like to be a domestic worker in the new South Africa.

I will ask for your permission to record the interview but my supervisor and I are the only two people who will have access to this recording. You may refuse to have the interview recorded and you may ask to switch off the recorder at any time. All your information will be kept in a safe and secure place in my supervisor's office at the University.

Your information will be used to write up my Honours research project and may be published in an academic journal. Your identity will however stay anonymous. I will not use any real names or any other details that might identify you in any reports on this work.

**3. Inconveniences**

We don't expect that you will be distressed by the interview but if it does become distressing or uncomfortable you may stop participating at any time without any negative consequences.

**4. Benefits**

You are given an opportunity to share your views and experiences and what you tell us is also likely to help in formulating other programmes with women, particularly for women who are domestic workers. You are given an opportunity to tell us and others what is important to you and for your community.

**5. Privacy and confidentiality**

We will take strict precautions to safeguard your personal information throughout the study. Your information will be kept in a locked file cabinet in my supervisor's office without your name and or other personal identifiers.

Your information will be used to write up my Honours research project and may be published in an academic journal. Your identity will however stay anonymous. I will not use any real names or any other details that might identify you in any reports on this work.

**6. Money matters**

You will not be paid for taking part in the study but you will be reimbursed for any transports costs you may have incurred.

**7. Contact details**

If you have further questions or concerns about the study please contact my supervisor at the Department of Psychology, University of Cape Town

Dr Floretta Boonzaier 021 – 650 3429

If you have any issues or problems regarding this research or your rights as a research participant and would like to speak to the Chair of the Ethics committee, please contact Mrs. Rosalind Adams at the Department of Psychology, University of Cape Town (UCT), 021 650 3417.

If you understand all of the procedures and the risks and benefits of the study and you would like to participate in the project, please sign below:

Participant Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Agreement For Tape-Recording**

I agree to have my voice tape-recorded in the interview.

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_