Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Research Aims

The central aim of this study is to investigate the nature of social reproduction in single, working class black\(^1\) woman-headed families in post-apartheid South Africa, through an in-depth case study of a group of woman-headed families in the community of Bophelong in Gauteng. The woman-headed family form is not a new configuration, but earlier forms were the outcome of segregation and the apartheid state’s legislative restrictions on black family life.\(^2\) Now that all racist and restrictive legislation has been removed, the prevalence of woman-headed families in post-apartheid South Africa raises a number of issues that require explanation through research and theorisation.

The increasing prevalence of this family form has been acknowledged in various quarters such as: a study on the structure and needs of the family commissioned by the Department of Social Development (Amoateng, Richter, Makiwane and Rama, 2004); a discussion document from the South African Presidency’s Policy Co-ordination and Advisory Services (2006); Statistics South Africa (Stats SA, 2004);\(^3\) a number of social researchers on the social grants (De Koker, De Waal and Vorster, 2006); and Posel’s (2001) study on the concept of headship in South Africa.

The single-black-woman-headed family form is particularly significant within the context of contemporary social comments about ‘the demand for family life’ (Department of Welfare, 1997), that ‘the family is in decline’ (Mabetoa, 2004: cited in Amoateng \textit{et al}., 2004), and that ‘the family is in trouble’ (Chipkin, 2006). In many of these research reports and publications the reference to ‘family’ is to the ‘nuclear

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\(^1\) The term ‘black’ is used here to refer narrowly to African people.

\(^2\) Apartheid’s restrictions included rigid influx controls like the Pass Laws to restrict African urbanisation and prohibit African men and women from living together in the cities together with their families (see Kraak, 1993).

\(^3\) Instead of woman-headed, Stats SA (2004) discusses the ‘female-headed household’ in relation to a number of aspects, for instance, higher levels of adult and child hunger than male-headed households, and home ownership.
family’, which is allegedly in trouble and in decline. These comments reflect a particular partisan attachment to the nuclear family form as the ‘norm’ over other family forms.\(^4\) The observations about the ‘disruption to the African family structure’ (Stats SA, 2010: 9), when viewed against the growing prevalence of the woman-headed family form in South Africa and internationally, attests unambiguously to this bias.\(^5\)

1.2 Research Questions
The main research questions that this study seeks to answer are:

1. What is the structure of the ‘new’, single-black-woman-headed family in contemporary South Africa? Is there a defined family structure? Are there variations and differences within this family form?

2. What are the social relations within single-black-woman-headed families? What are the similarities, differences and variations among and within these families if any?

3. What is the role of the single-black-woman-headed family in the reproduction or transformation of the South African social formation? In particular, what is its role in the reproduction of, or in the challenge to, gender inequality and patriarchy in post-apartheid South Africa? Feminist authors such as Barrett (1988) have identified the role of the ‘male breadwinner’ (or income-earner) as the conduit for women’s oppression and patriarchy within the family under capitalism. In South Africa, Ramphele (1989: 2) points to the family where men’s domination is secured at the expense of women; and Campbell (1990: 8) observes that in ‘female households patriarchal ideals often dominate’. What are the implications for the reproduction of patriarchy in single-black-woman-headed families, and for capitalist social relations in their totality, given the absence of a male-head in the family?

\(^4\) Kristiansen (2003) discusses how female-headed families were initially seen as deviant in Iran.

\(^5\) The prevalence of woman-headed families is not an indication that people are no longer interested in family and its importance. For instance, the South African Broadcasting Corporation’s popular television programme, ‘Khumbule-kaya’ (Remember your home) expresses ordinary people’s sincere and hopeful search for lost family members - a long lost mother, a daughter, a father, an uncle, a sister, and an aunt. The point though is that the woman-headed family form and its significance, needs to be studied and understood as a family form.
The concept of *social reproduction* is used as the nexus, to link and answer all the research questions in the theoretical framework, developed in Chapter 2. While social reproduction refers to the reproduction of all social classes within a particular mode of production, in this case the capitalist mode of production, this thesis focuses on social reproduction of only one section of the working class, black woman-heads. The view of the totality does not preclude the study of the moments of that totality, as long as care is taken to avoid creating a hermetic seal between the moment under study and the totality itself. See Thompson’s (1982) *Making of the English Working Class*, as an example of this.

### 1.3 Rationale and Assumptions

This study is necessary and important for a number of reasons.

#### 1.3.1. The national and international prevalence of the woman-headed family form

From a phenomenon regarded as episodic and even ‘deviant’ (Kristiansen, 2003) a few decades ago, there is now international and local (South African) recognition that this family form is growing across the world and in South Africa. This recognition is notwithstanding the fact that in many cases the evidence for this growth is circumstantial. In South Africa, national statistics have begun to take this phenomenon seriously, albeit from the vantage point of the study of single-woman-headed ‘households’.⁶

Internationally a vast literature exists on the proliferation of woman-headed families, indicating that this is not a phenomenon confined to South Africa. Bakker (2003) notes the changing structure of families, especially the increase in the single women and children family form internationally, as a result of the reconfiguration of the world economy from the 1970s. It is interesting that Wennerholm, (2002) traces the origins of the concept, the ‘feminisation of poverty’ to the late 1970s, which also coincides with the reconfiguration of the world economy.

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⁶ Below (see Chapter 2) I will return to the distinction that I think needs to be made between families and households, and the importance of this distinction in the context of this thesis.
The growth of woman-headed families is noted globally (Chant, 2007a); in the United States (Lichter, Ribar and McLaughlin, 1997; Broward County Florida, 2005; Snyder et al, 2006); in Mexico (Chant, 2002); in Jamaica (Moser, 1993); in the Caribbean (Lehman, 2000); in Ethiopia and Egypt (UNDP, 2010); in Latin America in general (Arias et al, 2000); in Guatemala and Botswana (Datta and McIlwaine, 2000); in Brazil (Sorj and Fontes, 2001); in Tanzania (Katapa, 2006 and Vahakangas, 2004); in Nigeria (Sanni, 2006); in Iran (Kristiansen, 2003); and the Philippines (Morada et. al., 2001).

The literature on woman-headed households internationally is vast and diverse, covering many aspects, from poverty to the conception of headship, the nature of leadership and the quality of that leadership with regard to children. The literature is also from diverse countries and cultures such as the United States, Iran, the Philippines, Nigeria and Brazil. All these countries are different from each other, and do not share similar historical, social and cultural backgrounds. The rise and prevalence of woman-headed families in South Africa is therefore not an isolated phenomenon, and neither can it be dismissed as ‘Western’ or specific to a particular culture. There is no doubt that the woman-headed family is a significant form worthy of study.

In South Africa, the prevalence of woman-headed households or families is now firmly established as a significant family or household form. Up to now, the evidence for the extent and the nature of woman-headed households in South Africa was circumstantial, and was a product of studies focusing on related issues like poverty, housing, the feminisation of labour, and other social issues (see for example the work of Venter and Marais (2006); Posel (2001); Armstrong et. al., (2008); Casale and Posel (2002); and Budlender (2003), among others). In this context, Statistics South Africa’s (2010) Social Profile of South Africa, 2002-2009 (SPoSA), a new annual report that focuses on the situation of children, youth, women, the elderly and people with disabilities, is both important and welcomed. The SPoSA (Stats SA, 2010) is based on the General Household Survey dated from 2002 to 2009 and focuses on key aspects such as household characteristics and living arrangements, vulnerability to hunger, health, poverty, social grants, economic participation, education, housing and
access to basic services. The SPoSA (Stats SA, 2010) provides important benchmarks to potentially systematise the study of woman-headed families in their own right.  

Based on the SPoSA report (Stats SA, 2010: 75), female-headed households comprise 38% of the total households in South Africa. Female-headed households tend to be extended households that contain other family members (brothers, sisters, and nieces and nephews) and are more likely to contain children (ibid: 5). It is significant that almost four out of ten households in the country are female-headed and Table 1.1 below illustrates their distribution and prevalence within the country’s nine provinces (where in some provinces their proportion is at times even higher).

Table 1.1: Distribution of households headed by females by province, 2002-2009 (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Western Cape</td>
<td>29.4</td>
<td>29.8</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>32.0</td>
<td>31.1</td>
<td>30.5</td>
<td>29.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Cape</td>
<td>47.4</td>
<td>47.6</td>
<td>46.9</td>
<td>47.6</td>
<td>47.1</td>
<td>46.9</td>
<td>45.5</td>
<td>44.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Cape</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>31.2</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>36.6</td>
<td>36.3</td>
<td>34.3</td>
<td>37.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free State</td>
<td>31.3</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>29.8</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>34.9</td>
<td>36.2</td>
<td>39.1</td>
<td>38.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kwazulu Natal</td>
<td>43.5</td>
<td>43.7</td>
<td>44.2</td>
<td>43.7</td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td>43.1</td>
<td>42.9</td>
<td>44.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North West</td>
<td>36.5</td>
<td>34.3</td>
<td>34.3</td>
<td>32.9</td>
<td>33.9</td>
<td>34.9</td>
<td>33.9</td>
<td>33.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gauteng</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>29.1</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>28.1</td>
<td>27.7</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td>29.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mpumalanga</td>
<td>37.2</td>
<td>35.7</td>
<td>38.0</td>
<td>37.6</td>
<td>39.9</td>
<td>38.0</td>
<td>40.1</td>
<td>38.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Limpopo</td>
<td>50.3</td>
<td>49.6</td>
<td>49.3</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>50.7</td>
<td>48.9</td>
<td>50.3</td>
<td>48.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>37.4</td>
<td>37.4</td>
<td>37.5</td>
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<td>37.5</td>
<td>37.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>N (000)</td>
<td>11013</td>
<td>11362</td>
<td>11712</td>
<td>12075</td>
<td>12476</td>
<td>12901</td>
<td>13351</td>
<td>13812</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


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7 This might itself be a result of the growing prevalence of this family form for the country.
8 Stats SA (2010) uses ‘female’ and not ‘woman’.
1.3.2 Social vs. juridical change in post-apartheid South Africa

Unlike under apartheid, the legal framework in South Africa no longer systematically and structurally undermines African families from living together. Indeed, some of the most enduring stories of personal struggle and sacrifice in South Africa were stories of struggle by women to be reunited with their husbands or partners.¹ Why is there the growing prevalence of the single woman-headed family form in South Africa, when legislation no longer restricts African men and women from living with each other? The rise of woman-headed families is therefore important in understanding the relationship between social change and juridical (legal and constitutional) change in contemporary South Africa.

1.3.3. A challenge to government policies on the family

In the context of pessimistic claims about the family in South Africa (see for example Amoateng et. al. (2004) and Chipkin (2006)), the prevalence of woman-headed families is important in the discussions on family. This study will attempt to illuminate how single-black-woman-heads are organising family life and the social relations within their families. This will hopefully contribute to a broader understanding of the social processes under way within South African families today.

Since some of these pessimistic claims about the family were policy studies by the Department of Social Development (Amoateng et. al., 2004), the Department of Welfare (1997), a discussion document from the South African Presidency’s Policy Coordination and Advisory Services (2006), and Statistics SA, (2004), among others, a study of woman-headed families will challenge the implicit bias in these studies towards the ‘traditional’ nuclear family. There is a contradiction between social policy and the realities of single-black-woman-headed families. Discussing the White Paper for Social Welfare, Hassim (2005) argues that state policy is based on ‘conventional familialism’. The South African Presidency’s Policy Co-ordination and Advisory Services Report (2006), A Nation in the Making: A Discussion Document on Macro Social Trends in South Africa, recognised four main family forms (namely, the nuclear family, the female-headed family, the extended family, and other

¹ These struggles are captured not only in numerous studies on apartheid, but in literature as well. See for example Elsa Joubert’s Poppie Nongena (1980) and Lauretta Ngcobo’s And they didn’t die (1999).
miscellaneous forms), but the South African government promotes the nuclear family (Amoateng, et. al., 2004). This highlights the need to assess the appropriateness of the government’s policies and support for contemporary black, working class families, taking into account their different forms. While this study will not focus on social policy analysis as such, given the prevalence of woman-headed families nationally, it will contribute to this debate.

1.3.4 Changing social norms in post-apartheid South Africa

The prevalence of single-black-woman-headed families points to changing social norms and social mores within South African society. Against the background of a violent family culture in significant sections of South Africa’s population, a study of these new mores and norms within woman-headed families may contribute positively to the search for more caring and non-violent family cultures in contemporary South Africa.

1.3.5 Gender and patriarchy in post-apartheid South Africa

Gender inequality, patriarchy, and the struggles against both of these remains a strong theme in post-apartheid South Africa. In the study of single-black-woman-headed families the sample was restricted to woman-heads and their adult children (including sons and daughters), and their grandchildren. Woman-heads who lived with male adult partners and/or other male kin were excluded. The absence of adult men therefore raises issues about the presence and continuity of patriarchy, and the social processes of its transmission and reproduction. An understanding of woman-headed families and the dynamics of patriarchy within woman-headed families may provide indices related to their potential, though circumscribed, emancipatory possibilities.

1.3.6 The persistence of poverty in post-apartheid South Africa

One of the enduring challenges of post-apartheid South Africa is the persistence of poverty on a massive scale. With increasing unemployment, rising food prices and poor service delivery, many working class families are struggling to survive. Important studies on households and survival strategies do not reflect specifically on
different family forms (Smith and Wallerstein, 1992; Ross, 1996; Budlender, 2003; Mosoetsa, 2005). This study hopes to contribute to the gendered nature of the struggle for survival and survival strategies within working class communities in South Africa today. The study hopes to contribute to an understanding of how the working class mitigates poverty and its socially negative effects, and in this way may provide an understanding of possible strategies that link survival to the transformation of structures of power that produce and perpetuate poverty.

1.3.7 Single woman-heads, agency and history

An underlying assumption of this thesis is that all people – men and women – no matter what their social position or history, are agents of their own emancipation. This assumption is a product of many years of activism for social change, and has been borne by having observed ordinary and very poor people engage – and succeed – in a struggle to change the structures of power that held them in subjugation. Without at all idealising the women who are the focus of this study, and without at all downplaying the enormous odds stacked against them, the study is grounded in the belief in the innate capacity of all individuals to change their lives.

1.3.8 Why a focus on black-woman-headed families?

The fact that black woman-heads of families are significant in South Africa is but one, and not even the most important, reason for choosing to focus on this section of the South African population.

The history of South Africa since the mining revolution and the processes of proletarianisation that followed it have consistently demonstrated the resilience of the black section of the working class in the face of adversity, poverty and struggle. This history has influenced the focus of this study on black working class women who have taken the road of being heads of families. This trend – that of being single woman-heads – is by no means restricted to black working class women. Women of all ‘population groups’ and of all classes are walking this road. As the section of the South Africa population that has experienced the most intense and longest (over time) processes of proletarianisation this section has experimented with the most diverse
forms of family and living-together arrangements. Throughout its history there has been a rich intersection of the search for family forms and the struggle for survival, and because of this history, I thought it reasonable to look to this section to get a glimpse of the new possibilities for struggle and social innovation in the search for forms of co-habitation that best respond to the challenges posed by neoliberal globalisation.

1.3.9 Why Bophelong: The Peculiarity of the Research Site

Bophelong was chosen as my research site after many hours of reading, interviews with local people and visits to the site. I was surprised that Bophelong was relatively unexplored.

Given the interest in woman-headed families, there was a need for a research site, a township, that was relatively established, but there was also the need for features of the ‘new’ South Africa. Besides their enormous size and therefore potential for yielding interesting research, townships such as Soweto and Sebokeng, for example, are now settled townships (the former becoming a significant middle class suburb in some respects), and have not experienced the kinds of inward migration in post-apartheid South Africa that a township like Bophelong has experienced.

Bophelong was built in 1948 and was part of the Vaal region - a microcosm of capitalist development in South Africa’s minerals and energy complex. As a result, Bophelong also shared features of the broader apartheid political economy: proximity to key parastatals, the Iron and Steel Corporation (ISCOR) today Arcelor Mittal; proximity to hostels and compounds; a township that interacted with migrants and migrant labour; and was a classic dormitory township in close proximity to a white and affluent suburb, that of Vanderbijlpark that they serviced.

Despite being relatively established, Bophelong also has features of a ‘new’ post apartheid township, in particular the presence of RDP houses. Unlike the more settled

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10 Chapter 4 contains a detailed discussion on the history and the socio-economic and cultural profile of Bophelong Township. In this section the discussion focuses on why this township was chosen as the research site.
12 Vanderbijlpark’s white suburbs are literally separated from Bophelong by one street.
Soweto, the new RDP housing development was completed in 1998/99 and engulfed the old apartheid township. A huge influx of people, including many women, moved into Bophelong from surrounding townships, peri-urban areas and small-holdings. Two small informal settlements sprang up in 2003/4 and the lack of service delivery resulted in new post apartheid organisations formed to campaign for service delivery.

Bophelong and the region holds an important place in the country’s history of struggle stretching back to the beer boycotts in Vereeniging in the 1930s (Bonner, 1990), the Sharpeville massacre in 1960, and its participation in the 1984 Vaal uprising that arguably kindled the 1985 struggles nationwide. Bophelong’s history and its participation in the resistance to apartheid was important in terms of shaping the community, the people, the organisations which arose and the development of popular (molecular) consciousness. This collective memory is important in shaping people’s attitudes, and represents important social footprints for a researcher of social issues.

Bophelong is also atypical of the relatively wealthy Gauteng province in which it is situated. Bophelong township is much poorer, and its socio-economic profile is seemingly more representative of black townships in the country’s poorest provinces. It would seem that possible lessons and insights on social policy that are derived from this study may be applicable to other provinces of which Bophelong is more ‘typical’.

The relatively small compact township, despite containing key indices of having experienced the political economy of South Africa over a period of more than fifty years, appeared as a decided advantage.

I was therefore drawn to this research site, to its rich history and its potential store of multi-layered human experiences, human relationships and popular struggles. Bophelong is a melting pot of South Africa’s social policies: housing, gender inequality, social grants, families and woman-headed families.

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13 For instance, unemployment in the Emfuleni region in which Bophelong is based is much higher than the rest of Gauteng, and where household income is also much lower (IDP, 2007).
1.4 Methodology

1.4.1 Research approach

1.4.1.1 Overview

An investigation into a national (and international) phenomenon such as single-woman-headed families poses serious challenges of methodology. Burawoy’s (2000) extended case method provides a useful approach. Burawoy argues that, through the extended case method, a local investigation can contribute to knowledge about society in general, at the national and the global levels. The concept of the extended case method has four dimensions, which among other things highlight key pitfalls of power that the researcher/observer should be aware of.

The first dimension is the extension of the observer into the world of the participant (Buraway, 2000: 26). The observer is deeply immersed in the world of the participant, and observes participants within their ‘own environment’. However, a relationship of inequality objectively exists between the observer and the participant: the participant has to provide important information to the observer, which the latter then ‘assesses’.

The second dimension, extensions of observations over time and space, entails living and immersing oneself with the subject over long periods of time, so that ‘situational observations’ are minimised, and the subjects are understood within their social process(es) (Burawoy, 2000: 27).

The third dimension, extending out from micro processes to macro forces, requires the observer to move beyond the specific ‘space-time rhythms’ of the research site (Burawoy, 2000: 27). It is fundamental for the observer to understand the geographical and historical context, including the ‘external forces’ of which the research site is an integral whole. External forces need to be historicised and understood, and not fetishised (Burawoy, 2000).
The fourth dimension, *the extension of theory*, is fundamental to the method (Burawoy, 2000). Before entering the field, a ‘lens’ – theory – is needed to make sense of the world being examined and to seek out variation, anomalies and lacuna, and not to ‘normalise’ the world. Theoretical engagement provides an understanding of the world and prevents ‘fatalistic and naturalistic interpretations’ (Burawoy, 2000: 28). The method implies a continuous dialectical dialogue between ‘theory’ and ‘the field’. In the process of the research, the field sharpens the theory, which enables a deeper understanding of ‘the field’, and enables the observer to see beyond the immediacy of ‘the field’, to unravel the potential and the possible (Burawoy, 1985: 28).

Burawoy’s extended case method involves extending micro-processes to macro-forces. The subject is not confined to the ‘locale’ but is extended to structural relations and social processes (in contemporary South Africa).

### 1.4.1.2 Some criticisms of ethnography

Katz (2004) critiques ethnographic researchers as three ‘genres’ – namely, the worker ethnographer, the aristocratic researcher and the bourgeois professional. The worker ethnographer describes the detail of social life and respects the subjects as full human beings (Katz, 2004). This genre is generally theoretically weak, and the study’s significance is juxtaposed between the ethnographer’s documented social realities and those maintained by the people in power (Katz, 2004). In the second genre, the aristocrat researcher does not spend much time with the subjects, avoids the drudgery of research and fails to present textual variation of the lives of the subjects that are directly linked to the theory offered (Katz, 2004). In the third genre, the ‘bourgeois professional’, is the least formally political of the three genres, and works as a specialist studying a social process, analysing variations between similar events and types of social action (Katz, 2004). This style flourished in the 1940s and 1950s, and was politically ‘neutral’.

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14 Katz (2004:288-9) is particularly critical of Burawoy and Hochschild.
Anthropology, progenitor of ethnography, is associated with the study of ‘the Other’ or ‘the exotic and the primitive’ (Marcus, 1992: 42). Marcus develops alternatives to ‘remake’ ethnography while acknowledging anthropology’s past history, its complicity in colonialism and contributions to fields such as the cognitive sciences.\(^{15}\)

At the centre of the debate is how and why knowledge is produced, the broad historically determined social relations that contextually shape social inquiries and the acquisition of knowledge, the role and social position of the observer and the observed, and how observers are subject to the influences of power and social determinants such as class, gender and colour.

### 1.4.1.3 Strategies for the observer/researcher

Two strategies are proposed in order to remake classic ethnography: reflexivity, on the one hand, and resistance and accommodation, on the other (Marcus: 1992: 46). Researchers need a self-conscious approach to the conditions in which knowledge is being produced - in the field and in their writing - accompanied by a conscious shift from assumptions of objectivity and ‘unmediated realism and an explicit treatment of reflexivity in ethnographic analysis’ (Marcus, 1992: 45). The use of ‘dialogic’ relationships between the observer and the observed is proposed; this should be based on fieldwork, which leads to intellectual collaboration (Marcus, 1992: 45).

With regard to resistance and accommodation, the importance of the ‘coherence and locality of place’, and being open to and acknowledging ‘world systems and consumer economies’, is stressed (Marcus, 1992: 45).

The observer cannot concentrate on one particular locale as identity is produced in various locales by different agents, for different reasons (Marcus, 1992). To capture the multiple identities of a person or group in different sites, is to recognise the

\(^{15}\) This included measuring human brains, putting pencils into subjects’ hair as a basis for classification, the notion of many ‘races’ to support the theory of a superior white ‘race’, and the inferiority of the ‘Other’ (see, Montagu, 1974). Further, the term ethnography is derived from the Greek *ethnos*, meaning *nation*, and is still socially and politically problematic in the context of recent accounts of genocide against the ‘Other’ in Serbia/Bosnia, Rwanda, Gaza, and also the rise of xenophobia more generally in ‘Western’ countries and in South Africa itself.
‘dispersal of the subject in multiple overlapping fragments of identity that characterise modernity’ (Marcus, 1992: 47). The particular context of political economy – the state, the economy and social relations in their totality – are important in understanding the totality of the person or society.

The past includes both the individual and collective memory, crucial for the self-recognition of identity (Marcus, 1992). While the link between history and identity formation is well known, analytical and methodological thinking related to this is undeveloped (Marcus, 1992).

The observer needs to be ‘open’ to a polyphony of voices to navigate problems of representation and analysis. Voices are not products of local structures, based on community and tradition alone, or privileged sources, but are products of ‘complex sets of associations and experiences which compose them’ (Marcus, 1992: 49).

1.4.1.4 Incorporating criticisms and alternatives into the research

In this study I attempt to take Katz’s (2004) criticisms into account, and emphasise variation and evidence. The empirical research and theoretical discussions on woman-headed families were categorised into different generations in order to historicise and to seek variations and similarities within the totality that is the lived experience of single-woman-headed families in South Africa today. The theoretical engagement together with the principle of triangulation was used to verify both micro and macro processes and to interrogate my observer’s ‘lenses’ and the observed. This was also to ensure that the focus on social processes – over time, space and depth – yielded congruent conclusions, irrespective of their political consequences, and certainly not to ensure political neutrality. The research on single-black-woman-headed families is located at the outset within the context of the evolution of South African capitalism’s various phases: from segregation, to apartheid to neoliberal capitalism.

The alternatives proposed by Marcus (1994) were incorporated into the research in various ways. The ‘probabilistic certainty’ of this study was based on the principle of triangulation, using different research methods to verify conclusions. The research was organised into three phases, described below, with clearly defined logical
objectives to integrate the research and to facilitate an understanding of the woman-headed families at community, national and global levels.

The approach and methodology in this study enabled me to historicise and contextualise the subjects, to enable a ‘polyphony of voices’ to emerge and to reflect on the ‘totality of social relations’ and the ‘complex sets of associations and experiences which compose them’ (Marcus, 1994: 49).

While the extended case method is a reflexive one, this study also draws on a positivist method in the form of a survey of Bophelong. As Burawoy (2009) notes, ‘Just as reflexive methods can serve survey research, so positivist methods can serve the extended case method’. The role of the survey is subsidiary and limited to provide a particular focus on family-households, especially woman-headed family-households. The study also draws on participatory observation and in-depth interviews.

Callinicos’ (1986: 2) insights on the writing of popular history are relevant when writing up research based on in-depth interviews and participant observation: the writer ‘…has a responsibility to pursue careful and thoughtful scholarship on behalf of readers [and subjects] who might not have the resources to follow up the research, but also because, like academic radical scholarship, their work is apt to be subjected to sharp attacks by hostile critics (always very useful for concentrating the mind!)’.

1.4.2 Research methods

1.4.2.1 A variety of methods

The research questions were investigated at several different levels using different methods such as documentary and literature reviews, participant observation, a socio-economic survey, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Each of these is discussed below.

i. Primary and secondary sources were reviewed to provide a contextual analysis of contemporary South Africa since the demise of legal apartheid in the early 1990s,
historicising capitalist development, the position of African women and the rise of
African woman-headed families historically and within contemporary South Africa
(discussed in Chapter 3).

ii. Regular participant observation from 2006 to 2009, a period of almost four years,
gave the researcher considerable time and space to understand the research site and to
carry out the research. Participant observation is a ‘truer picture of life’ than a survey,
but is only one method of collecting data (McNeill, 1985: 4). This approach included
immersion in the community for a two-month period, working as a full-time volunteer
for the African Skills and Economic Development Initiative (ASEDI) a local
community-based organisation, which enabled regular door-to-door visits and
conversations with township residents. This informed the understanding of the
research site (in Chapter 4).

iii. Given the important relationship between families and households, a socio-
-economic and cultural survey of the research site, Bophelong Township, was
implemented. The survey included a focus on the composition of family-households,
family-heads and woman-headed family-households. The survey was based on 5
percent of the housing stock in Bophelong, and was carried out in December 2007.
There are three different housing forms in Bophelong: the old apartheid 4-roomed
houses, the RDP houses and the shacks or the informal settlement. Five percent (5%)
of each housing form was geared to ensure that the total population living in
Bophelong was included, and to ensure randomness.

A socio-economic and cultural profile of Bophelong within the Emfuleni
municipality and the broader Vaal region was developed, based on primary and
secondary material such as the Integrated Development Plan (IDP, 2007); Stats SA
and other local researchers, to determine national trends and the socio-economic
conditions prevailing, especially in relation to African women. The survey findings

16 ASEDI is a local initiative whose stakeholders include businesses, community organisations, individual
community members and government. The premises of ASEDI also house satellite offices for the Departments of
Home Affairs and Social Development. This ensures more accessibility for the community who don’t have to
travel to the former white town of Vanderbijlpark where their offices are situated. ASEDI also provides training
for members of the community in baking, sewing and carpentry; and provides care services for vulnerable children
such as lunch after school.

17 Discussed in the conceptual framework in Chapter 2.

18 The survey forms part of the discussions in Chapter 4 on the research site.
are selectively engaged to provide insight into the research site, and especially woman-headed families.

iv. A total of 43 in-depth interviews were conducted:

a. Five interviews with key informants from the Bophelong community in 2006 focused on the research site and are included in Chapter 4.\(^{19}\)

b. The information from 25 in-depth interviews with social grant recipients, held in 2006, is integrated into Chapter 4 to highlight the position of woman-heads and to triangulate the quantitative research.\(^{20}\)

c. Thirteen (13) single, African, woman-heads of families were interviewed in over fifty (50) sessions of in-depth interviews between 2007 and 2009. Each interview session lasted for two to three hours.\(^{21}\)

The testimonies of the thirteen women were organised into three different generations of woman-headed families in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 – the Grandmothers, the Mothers and the Daughters - respectively. Each generation was formed within a particular historical period or political economy of South Africa, and this provides an important context to historicise and analyse the generation within itself and in relation to the other generations.

Although these are three successive generations of women in terms of their ages, this is a study of woman-headed families living contemporaneously in Bophelong.

v. A focus group discussion with all 13 single-black-woman-headed families was held in December 2008, after the bulk of the in-depth interviews had been completed. This enabled the researcher to triangulate the interviews with individual woman-heads; and was an opportunity for the ‘dialogic’ relationship to

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\(^{19}\) For the key informants interviewed in 2006, see Appendix 1.

\(^{20}\) See Appendix 2 for the list of in-depth interviews with grant recipients.

\(^{21}\) See Appendix 3 for the list of in-depth interviews with women-heads of the family.
emerge, where the ‘observed’ has an input into the text of the research (Marcus, 1994). This evidence has been incorporated into Chapters 5, 6 and 7.

The research was thus based on both quantitative and qualitative methods, and the principle of triangulation was used to confirm and consolidate research findings and to fill lacuna. The research was conducted in three phases over almost four years. (see Table 1.2 below) presents the three phases, and the different methods used in each of them.

1.4.2.2 Research ethics, confidentiality and consent

A broad process of consent was undertaken within the township with key stakeholders such as the local municipal library, the local clinic, local community organisations, shopkeepers and local councillors. The aim was to inform local people about the research and to gain their support.

I especially gained the support of a local community based organisation, ASED, to support the research and the survey. A reciprocal relationship was formed: ASED supported the survey (with their volunteers and the use of their offices) and I agreed to write a popular booklet on Bophelong based on the survey. ASED assists different government departments, and making the survey accessible would assist them to understand the conditions within which their daily work occurs.

Before the survey was implemented the draft questionnaire was discussed with my supervisor and the ASED co-ordinator. This was also to ensure that the questionnaire was ethically acceptable in terms of the university’s standards and those of ASED. Based on these consultations the draft questionnaire was pre-tested and consolidated, and the survey was finalised in terms of its appropriateness, issues of confidentiality and ethics.

The interviewers were provided with important training as part of their preparation for the survey. The training included explaining the survey method, the nature of the survey being undertaken in Bophelong and research ethics and consent.
The need for consent from each potential interviewee to participate in the survey was emphasised and formed an integral part of the training. The interviewers were obliged to request interviewees’ consent to participate in the survey before any further interaction took place. Interviewers were also obliged to guarantee each interviewee strict confidentiality with the interview. The ‘volunteers’ understood the importance of consent and confidentiality with each interviewee because they also work with community members and deal with a range of confidential issues on a daily basis. Nevertheless, this was stressed on a daily basis and the survey was implemented without any problems.

1.4.2.3 Some reflections on the research methods

The most appropriate research methods to facilitate the investigation of the Research Aims and to answer the Research Questions were carefully considered. This demanded co-ordination before implementation, consistent monitoring and theoretical engagement in the field – and shaped the research.

Participant observation should ensure representivity of ‘what goes on in the setting’ (Williamson, Karp, Dalphin and Gray, 1982: 117). Activities vary according to time, place, role and status (Williamson et. al., 1982); and this informed the researcher to spend varying lengths of time in Bophelong, at different times of the day, on weekdays, weekends and public holidays, and to attend many different events within the township such as memorials, weddings and funerals. In-depth interviews were conducted in various settings – in the home, with the family and in the community – in order to seek representative understandings of the township and the women (and the few men) interviewed. Other aspects of identity emerged, and were followed up in interviews through exploring religious and other civil affiliations and social positions.

The survey method is associated with less researcher ‘interference’, is relatively quick, assures representativity, and enables large numbers of people to be studied (Williamson et. al., 1982; McNeill, 1985). The ‘face to face’ interview is the best data gathering technique for survey research, if interviewers are well trained (Williamson et. al., 1982: 132).
A survey with a cross-sectional design was used to draw inferences about the population’s characteristics and the degree of association between these characteristics (Williamson et. al., 1982). The aims of the research informed the survey objectives, and enabled a broad range of data about the characteristics of large populations to be derived (Williamson et. al., 1982). The survey implemented in Bophelong was therefore different to most household surveys associated with gathering socio-economic data (Slabbert, 2003, 2004; Stats SA, 2008). The Bophelong survey, informed by the research aims, gathered socio-economic and cultural data, and made provision for information about family forms, children, child maintenance, family conflict and domestic violence.

The in-depth interview is a qualitative method that enables participants to provide more accurate responses than surveys, especially on sensitive issues (Williamson et. al., 1982: 186). The researcher is able to follow up, clarify and probe sensitive issues. The in-depth interview also enables the researcher to probe deeper and deeper and to get to the core, to the participant’s viewpoint (Williamson et. al., 1982). The interviewer needs to be flexible and respectful, and to ensure that an open and non-judgemental rapport is established. During the interview, the interviewer should be alert to identify implications and to guide the direction of the interview.

The problems of standardisation in interviews make it difficult to ascertain accuracy, and to make generalisations about entire populations. Considerations of sampling in qualitative studies are therefore important, to inform theoretical generalisations (Williamson et. al., 1982).

The focus group is a group interview that facilitates and encourages participation, especially amongst people who cannot read or write (Kritzinger: 1995). Umana-Taylor and Bamaca (2004) use the focus group method in their studies of Latino mothers and their families. The focus group method can be utilised for exploratory or confirmatory purposes and also enables people to feel more secure with peers, especially in situations where power differentials exist (Umana-Taylor and Bamaca, 2004). Other aspects that were considered were those of language and confidentiality.

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22 I am reminded of Michael Buroway’s vivid and passionate explanation of the in-depth interview during one of his teaching sessions in 2007: ‘like peeling an onion, layer after layer, to get to the core’. 

22
In this instance the focus group method was used as a means to confirm or negate discussions held in the in-depth interviews, in a situation where the women were relatively comfortable and secure.

1.4.3 The phases of the research

The research process was divided into 3 phases.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Phases</th>
<th>Contextual Analysis*</th>
<th>Participant Observation</th>
<th>In-depth Interviews</th>
<th>Survey</th>
<th>Focus Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase 1</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X (with Key Informants &amp; Grant Recipients)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>Phase 2</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Phase 3</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X (woman heads of families)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The review of the literature was started before the three phases began, and continued throughout.

1.4.3.1 Phase 1

The main objective of Phase 1 was to build trust, gain the community’s confidence and acquire research (human) resources for the study as a whole. This involved explaining to local people the nature of my study, its importance for African women and the community, and requesting co-operation. This phase involved participant observation, and many informal and formal meetings and discussions.

I did not want to have a one-way relationship with the community, and offered to assist local organisations where possible.23

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23 I wanted to use my skills and experience where I could assist, without impinging on my study. For example, upon request I assisted the Multipurpose Disability Centre in Bophelong by typing a letter and faxing it to the Mayor’s office, citing their need for ablution facilities. I also organised regular topical journals for the local library, responded to requests for information about support institutions such as drug rehabilitation centres, and referred some individuals to ASEDI.
This phase established preliminary building blocks and, through the process of consultation, shaped the fieldwork in the next two phases. It also laid the foundation for my understanding of the community. I visited the township regularly, at different times of the day and week including public holidays, to understand its rhythms. I formally introduced myself to local organisations – the library, the clinic, the police, the Multipurpose Disability Centre and local shopkeepers in Old Bophelong – and interviewed some key informants. I met with local councillors to gain from their experience about the community’s conditions of life in Bophelong. The councillors assisted me with access to information, and one of the councillors introduced me to ASEDI, an important breakthrough in getting to know Bophelong more intimately. Besides many important services to the community, ASEDI organises ‘volunteers’ who do daily home visits in the township.

I formally met the two community organisations set up in 2000 in response to the lack of basic service delivery.

Open-ended and sometimes informal interviews were used. I struck up spontaneous conversations with shop owners, township residents and local workers. This had a snowball effect and I was often introduced to other potential informants.

The literature and the consultative process in this phase revealed the importance of the government’s social grants to the indigent. One set of in-depth interviews was conducted during this phase and consisted of individual interviews with twenty-five (25) women, grant recipients, in an attempt to understand the role and position of the

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24 All three local councillors are from the African National Congress, (see Appendix 1). They assisted me with relevant information and introduced me to local organisations and individuals.

25 Fayers (2006) discusses the exploitation of ‘volunteers’, predominantly women, as low-paid workers, who provide an important service within the community and in return receive a stipend from the Department of Social Development.

26 I met BOCOSFO and TSEBO in 2006, see Appendix 1 for meeting dates. These are local community organisations that were formed in post-apartheid South Africa. BOCOSFO works for education and service delivery. It split from TSEBO and is now affiliated to the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF). For more on the social movements, see Desai (2004) and Lehulere (2005).

27 A grant is provided to indigents, for example the Child Support Grant to children from families who comply with a means test (discussed in Chapter 3). Other state grants include the old age grant, the disability grant, the care grant and the veterans’ grant (www.sassa.gov.za).
social grants for families living in Bophelong. The interviews with these grant recipients (25) were relatively straightforward and each one took two to three hours at most. All interviews were completed at recipients’ homes, except for those on the disability grant.

The in-depth interviews were based on snowball sampling. One key informant assisted to organise the first interview, and this had a ‘domino effect’ in accessing other potential recipients for interviews. I also sourced potential interviewees from the grant payout queues on ‘Paydays’, to ensure that I had interviews with recipients of all the main state grants. This was simple random sampling; focusing on the payout queues meant that each grant recipient had the possibility of being interviewed. Only one male was interviewed, as male recipients refused to be interviewed.

This was an important aspect of the participant observation. Besides the content of the interviews, the process of immersion and observation was informative. On Paydays, the grey, dusty, sombre township is completely transformed: Bophelong is abuzz with colour, traders, goods, laughter and lightness as locals buy food. The interviews provided rich insight into the lives of community members, especially those of African women.

1.4.3.2 Phase 2

The objective of this phase was to get to know the research site more systematically and concretely, and to understand the gendered conditions of life and the texture of living in Bophelong. A number of different methods were used, including participant observation. The preparation and implementation of the socio-economic and cultural survey of Bophelong also took place.

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28 See Appendix 6, the questionnaire used in the in-depth interviews with the social grant recipients.
29 The interviews with five disability grant recipients were completed under a tree at the Multipurpose Disability Centre in Bophelong.
30 The one male who agreed to be interviewed was one of the organisers of the Multipurpose Disability Centre. Hunter & Adato (2007) had a similar experience, where male grant recipients refused to be interviewed.


1.4.3.2.1 A volunteer at ASEDl

During this phase I worked as a volunteer at ASEDl for two months, accompanying other volunteers on their daily home visits.\textsuperscript{31} Going on foot into the ‘old’ (apartheid) township, the new post-apartheid RDP housing extensions and the informal settlements was an invaluable experience. We negotiated muddy roads in the rain, and braved windy days and blistering heat.\textsuperscript{32} The daily visits, which took place between 08.30am and 12.30pm were humorous and extremely informative. As a researcher I was relatively unobtrusive, with unmediated access, to the community.

The daily home visits were an opportunity to survey the township through unstructured conversations with township residents. I was invited into people’s homes - a privileged access. I got insight into how people live, the overcrowding, the neatness, the barrenness, the sombreness, children playing on the floor, neighbours visiting each other, neighbours chatting across the fence and laughing, and men sitting outside. Each home was different. The presence and the quality of the furniture and the household appliances, and the physical layout of the homes (including sleeping arrangements), were indices of income levels, unemployment and household composition. Not every house had a radio or a television. I could differentiate the absolutely bare homes with no food. The poverty in post-apartheid Bophelong was astounding. Yet, people were patient, friendly, helpful, engaging, at times sad, but never rude or unwelcoming. This experience was priceless.

The volunteers provide key services including seeking out vulnerable or orphaned children, indigent families and the infirm. Residents were advised of services at the local clinic, the various services ASEDl provided (including food parcels), and social work services.

\textsuperscript{31} I am indebted to ASEDl and in particular the women ‘volunteers’, for their assistance and comradely support. I also thank Michael Burawoy for his insights, suggestions and encouragement, in getting to ‘know the field’ in an unobtrusive way as a ‘volunteer’.

\textsuperscript{32} There are few trees in Bophelong, a legacy of apartheid. Across the road, in the white suburb, 500 trees had been planted.
1.4.3.2.2 Preparation and Training for Survey

After my spell of volunteer work with ASEDJ, I did the preparation required for the implementation of a socio-economic and cultural survey of 5 percent of the housing stock in Bophelong, to ensure reliability and representivity. The survey method enabled me to investigate the community at the level of the household.

Fifteen volunteers from ASEDJ (and other local activists) assisted me as interviewers. I prepared the questionnaire and planned the survey’s implementation. I used a relatively recent municipal town-planning map of Bophelong that included ‘old Bophelong’ and the eighteen RDP housing extensions in the survey preparation.

I trained the volunteers at a workshop in early November 2007, at the Bophelong Library. As explained earlier in this chapter, the training included understanding the survey method and the nature of the survey in Bophelong, and research ethics and consent. Interviewing skills was also included in the training, to avoid the ‘interviewer effect’ and to ensure that all interviews were conducted consistently (McNeill, 1985). The training also outlined an approach to answer the questionnaire, to code questions, and to understand the different questions.

The interviewers had an opportunity to pre-test the questionnaire together with a followup discussion. The pre-testing process was important in that it provided the opportunity for concrete feedback from each interviewer. This also enabled the questionnaire to be amended, where necessary, based on this feedback.

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33 As indicated earlier in this chapter, three housing forms existed, including apartheid housing, the RDP housing and the informal settlements.
34 See Appendix 4 for the list of interviewers who participated in the Bophelong Survey (2007). During the implementation of the survey, basic refreshments (tea and sandwiches) were provided for the volunteers before they set out in the mornings and when they returned in the afternoon. No remuneration was given as the survey was completed during work time, for which they received their regular stipend. After the survey was completed in December 2007, I gave the volunteers a small Christmas gift.
35 See Appendix 7, Questionnaire used in the Bophelong Survey in November/December 2007.
36 Provided by one of the ANC councillors.
The interviewers had clear instructions about whom to interview: they were requested to speak to the head of the family-household. If the head was not present, interviewers needed to speak to an adult living in the home who could reflect on socio-economic conditions and social relationships in the home.

1.4.3.2.3 Bophelong Survey Implemented

I organised and managed the implementation of the survey over a period of three weeks in November and December 2007. No problems were encountered with any of the questionnaires and/or the implementation of survey.

Both cluster and systematic sampling were used for the purposes of the survey (Williamson et. al., 1982). The cluster sampling was based on the three types of housing in Bophelong: the four-roomed houses of Old Bophelong built by the apartheid municipality in 1948; the two-roomed RDP houses built during the period of democracy in 1998; and the shacks built in two informal settlements (Stalling and Joko T) by inhabitants themselves from about 2000. Through cluster sampling of the housing types, a representative sample of the population in Bophelong was derived. Within each cluster group, systematic sampling was implemented – every twentieth house (of each housing type) was approached to ensure that five (5) percent of each housing type participated in the survey. The problem of bias was overcome as systematic sampling was conducted within each cluster or housing type (Williamson et. al., 1982: 185-7). If the occupant was absent, the house immediately adjacent was canvassed. Outbuildings were only approached for interviews when the occupants of the main house identified were absent.

Everyday each interviewer was debriefed as their questionnaires were checked to ensure that all questions were completed. If an omission in the questionnaire occurred this was remedied on the same day.  

37 For the three-week duration of the survey, the researcher lived literally across the road from Bophelong; in the former white suburb of Vanderbijlpark. Despite attempts, there was no accommodation available in the township. This enabled the researcher to begin the survey at 7am and to finish at about 5pm daily.

38 The interviewer was requested to return to the respective interviewer the same day and complete the questionnaire. This method ensured that instances like these were few, and only occurred in the first two to three days of the survey’s implementation.
Every morning the researcher had briefing meetings with all the interviewers on the previous day’s interviews before they went to implement the survey, and to remind them of the correct process needed.

A total of 599 questionnaires were completed – 74 questionnaires from the 1,054 Old Bophelong houses, 501 questionnaires from the 10,000 RDP houses, and 24 questionnaires from the 488 informal settlement shacks in the two informal settlements. Old Bophelong was relatively easy to access and the informal settlements are relatively small. Implementing the survey in the 18 RDP extensions was time-consuming, as the housing stands in each extension had to be counted manually to ensure accuracy.

This phase included data capturing and analysis, which occurred in 2008.

1.4.3.3 Phase 3

1.4.3.3.1 Selecting woman-head respondents

The two-fold objective of this phase was to locate single-woman-headed families for my sample, and to get to know them intimately and individually. This was the basis of my research from 2007 to mid-2009. This phase ran concurrently with Phase 2. I began to identify the human resources needed and started interviewing two women in 2007. Besides the participant observation, the main research methods in this phase included in-depth interviews and a focus group discussion.39

This was a crucial stage of the data-gathering exercise since the crux of the thesis is focused on woman-headed families with children. I was interested in learning about black woman-headed families from the women themselves, the way they understood their lives, their families, their headship, the choices they made and the struggles they engaged. Only the woman-heads were interviewed, I did not interview other family members.

39 See Appendix 8, Guide questions used in the in-depth interviews with woman-headed families; and Appendix 9 for Guide questions used in the Focus group discussion with woman-headed families.
Previous studies of black women in South Africa have prioritised them as workers (Cock, 1980; Ally, 2010); their resistance (Walker, 1982); their participation in political organisations (Hassim, 2006); and their life strategies (Bozzoli, 1991). None of these important studies have focused on these women’s personal lives, their personal choices, and issues of their sexuality, amongst others. I wanted this study to reflect black woman-heads speaking for themselves.

Based on the Research Aims, I adopted methods to ensure the study only included single-women with children and/or grandchildren, including adult sons and grandsons. Families with adult males who were partners, spouses or kin (fathers, uncles, nephews and cousins) were excluded. For the purposes of this study, I assumed that different power relations exist between women and their children (sons) and grandchildren (grandsons), compared to those that included women and their relations to partners and adult male kin.

I considered the possibility that the presence of lovers, husbands, fathers, and other ‘authority’ male figures, might influence the power relations within the family. I was also interested to understand in particular, the notion of, and the existence or non-existence of patriarchy within the woman-headed family, in the absence of adult men and/or men with authority (such as fathers, uncles, boyfriends and other kin). This ensured a ring-fenced focus on social relations, on power relations, within single-black-woman-headed families.

1.4.3.3.2 Triangulating interviews with woman-heads

While I only interviewed the woman-heads in this study, and spent hours with each one of them, this did not mean that I did not question their viewpoints and engage them. I was able to triangulate their evidence through engaging them about incidents of conflict with different children, with sons, family-household conflicts over money, disagreements over headship and decision-making, the place of a customary versus a secular church wedding, and so forth. I was also able to engage them and triangulate their views in the focus group.
This enabled me to triangulate and discern amongst others, different forms of leadership, headship and decision-making among the three generations of woman-heads. This analysis is included in Chapters 5, 6 and 7.

Given the problems associated with the standardisation of interviews, careful consideration was placed on sampling, to avoid obstacles to making theoretical generalisations (Williamson et. al., 1982: 185). I used the survey findings to follow up on single-woman-headed families to ensure random sampling. Given the basis of the survey, I tried to follow-up on woman-heads living in the different housing stock in Bophelong. I consciously tried to obtain a distribution of woman-heads: working and unemployed, different social grants recipients, and different age groups. This was time consuming, often potential interviewees were not at home, had a casual job, had acquired a regular lover (and thus did not meet the criteria anymore), had moved elsewhere, or were away visiting family.

By mid-2008 research considerations combined with time constraints informed the final outcome of the total sample of 14 women. The 14 women were drawn from the different sources that included considerations of income and employment. Nine (9) (64%) women were drawn directly from the Survey findings, 3 (21%) women were drawn from the in-depth interviews held on the social grants in 2007, and 2 (14%) women were volunteers from ASEDI. Two women lived in Old Bophelong, and twelve lived in the RDP housing extensions, this was consistent with the proportional housing stock in Bophelong. There was no-one from the informal settlement: an extremely tiny settlement and statistically insignificant.

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40 In one teaching discussion on in-depth interviews, Michael Burawoy (2007) advised the need to balance the number of interviews (always important), with the qualitative depth of the interviews, and the need for internal variation. This was therefore a decision that I made.

41 Originally there were 14 women, but the fourteenth one fell in love, decided to cohabit and amicably withdrew from the study. Considerations of income and employment were taken into account but given the generalised poverty and unemployment in Bophelong this was difficult.

42 It was not difficult to follow up the women interviewed on the grants. Because of my regular visits to the Township I maintained contact with them as part of my participant observation.
After all the in-depth interviews were completed, I organised the evidence into three different but successive generations or ‘types’ of woman-headed families, namely, the Grandmothers (3), the Mothers (4), and the Daughters (6), for purposes of analysis.

All the interviews were semi-structured to enable follow-ups and consistent engagement with the interviewees. The interviewees controlled the length of the interview and the times we met.

The in-depth interviews with the 13 single woman-heads of families were much lengthier, over many more meetings than those with the grant recipients, to unearth the multi-layered nature and texture of their lives. I met each of the 13 women in the sample at least three times, for about two to three hours per interview (see Appendix 3). On average, each of the 13 women was interviewed for between 10 and 15 hours. Some women I met more often (four to five times), and for longer periods depending on their availability and their accessibility to talk about themselves. For some women it was relatively easier to speak openly about themselves, whereas for others it took longer for them to open up. A translator was used in every interview, even when the interview was held in English.

Often the interviews with the women were delayed, postponed or interrupted. Initially I was frustrated until I realised that this expressed the nature of woman-headed families and their lives. All the women tend to live far from kin and extended family members and relied on neighbours (De Koker et al., 2006). Interviews were often postponed because the women had to attend to ‘family problems’ or to assist a neighbour with childcare or a friend going into labour. This loose network of support, based on friends and neighbours, is a “‘non market’ exchange, reciprocity, and women’s usage of ‘free time’” that is crucial for a single woman’s survival (Muthwa, 1994: 170). The in-depth interviews and the research process itself, revealed the

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43 When the in-depth interviews occurred in interviewees’ homes (and later at the Library), I provided tea and biscuits to ensure a more relaxed and convivial environment. Besides the interpreter, I did not pay anyone to participate in the in-depth interviews. When the 13 interviewees met for the focus group meeting in December 2008, together with the interpreter, I provided lunch.
world of woman-headed families, and the things that form part of their identity. In this context it was difficult to avoid getting drawn into ‘emergencies’.

The interviews depended on openness and trust. The women discussed their intimate relationships with men, their children, their feelings, their sexuality, patriarchy, culture and tradition. I tried to gain the confidence of each interviewee and reassured them all of the strictest confidence that underlined the research as a whole. People often prefer to talk to someone who is anonymous, whom they do not meet in their daily social life; and considerations of trust needed to be balanced consciously and consistently in relation to familiarity and immersion within the community.

The interviews were difficult, because at times sensitive episodes in the women’s lives were raked up. The women shared intimate details, feelings and discussed their relationships. Some women cried during the interviews when they remembered intimate events or relationships or sexual and physical abuse. Two women from different generations (Janet and Lena) took relatively longer to ‘open up’. As the interviews proceeded, they reported that this was the first time they had ever spoken to anyone about their lives, their hardships and especially their feelings. Afterwards, they both said that they felt ‘lighter’ for speaking out.

I was often requested to ‘counsel’ or to ‘listen’ to a friend or to give advice. This illustrated the absence of readily available support facilities for women (irrespective of age). Although I explained that I was not a counsellor, I could not turn people away without listening to them, as this was a reflection of the trust I had acquired within the community. I was conscious of the need to balance assistance with the principle of reflexivity – of not creating a ‘dependency’ given the objectively unequal relationship that exists between subject and researcher. Without narrowly focusing on the needs of my own research, I needed to balance reasonable support against undue familiarity.

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44 This included assisting with illness, or driving bridesmaids to the church because a car broke down, and giving a sister a lift to a matric dance so that borrowed shoes were not spoiled on the untarred township roads. One interview was stopped because of an unexpected visit from a mother, which impinged on the privacy of the interview.

45 The advice ranged from information on the social grants, to bursaries for education for children who had passed matric, to dealing with their HIV/AIDS status. I referred many to the Bophelong Clinic and to AEDI.
I organised the focus group discussion with the 13 interviewees at the end of December 2008, based on the semi-structured questionnaire used in the individual in-depth interviews. The aim was to enable interviewees to express their views on similar issues, and to ensure that the researcher had consistently understood their viewpoints on key aspects. This was an opportunity for a ‘dialogic’ relationship, where the ‘observed’ is able to have an input into the text of the research (Marcus, 1994).

This was a variant of the dual moderator focus group (Kritzinger, 1995) – the main moderator conducted the group in Sesotho, and I was the second moderator, ensuring that all the topics were covered. The discussion was open and engaging, and confirmed the broad thrusts of the interviews with each one of the women. This confirmed the integrity of the research. It also served as a strong confirmation of their identity as woman-heads of families.

1.4.3.4 Value of the research phases

During the three phases, being grounded in the theory before the fieldwork and engaging the theory during the fieldwork, sensitised me to the possibilities and potential that ‘the field’ presented. Using different methods – both qualitative and quantitative – enabled me to cross check, verify and triangulate findings, and to confirm the correctness of the thesis’s focus.

1.5 Limitations of the Research

One of the key limitations I was painfully aware of was that I do not speak an African language, in particular Sesotho, the language spoken predominantly in Bophelong. This meant that I relied on the support of an interpreter. Although my immersion within the township provided some compensation, I recognised the loss of tone, texture and voice of those interviewed (Marcus, 1992).
The thesis is based on participant observation and in-depth interviews. The role of the survey was to collaborate a profile of Bophelong. However, despite carefully pre-testing the questionnaire before the survey was implemented, there were problems related to the survey’s design. In Chapter 4, on the Bophelong research site, I have relied largely on the South African Government’s statistics, including the Emfuleni Municipality’s Integrated Development Plan (2007), and refer to the Bophelong survey selectively, where appropriate.

During the research it was difficult to consistently maintain detachment and not get personally involved in the lives of the people, especially the women whom I engaged, and who shared their lives so intimately with me. I consistently tried to maintain respect and integrity with all interviewees.

I tried to ensure a random sample of the woman-headed families for the in-depth interviews. I spent a substantial time following up on the single-woman-heads indicated in the survey findings, and the process was extremely time-consuming as often people were out, or had moved to another location, had a job or had gained a partner. I would have preferred more time to find and select woman-heads and with hindsight, the process of engaging woman-heads for the in-depth interviews should have started earlier.

After completing the in-depth interviews, I began the initial analysis and my research findings seemed to suggest its organisation into different generations of woman-headed families. In retrospect, upon reflection, perhaps I should have sought out single women in different generations in the first place, to ensure that they were more representative. However, it is not always easy to anticipate each and every research step, and the path I followed seemed more open-ended in terms of what the field would ‘yield’.

In my research, the in-depth interviews were with single, woman-heads, consistent with the nature of this study. My overriding concern was to ensure that I interviewed woman-heads of families, where the male presence in the family was confined to sons

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46 For instance, often data such as age, family size and length of time that household members have lived together, overlap.
and grandsons, and excluded adult males in authority, (like fathers, uncles and live-in lovers). My concern was to ‘control’ the ‘authority figures’ so that I could observe the power relations within the woman-headed families, with particular respect to power, patriarchy and authority.

I am aware as the research indicates on Bophelong (Chapter 4) and Statistics SA (2010), that there are different forms of the woman-headed family. This study focuses in particular on ‘one type’ of woman-head, the single, black-woman-headed family. This poses certain limitations on the study and its applicability to woman-headed families in general.

Although I interviewed a few male key informants on amongst others, the history and popular struggles in Bophelong, perhaps in retrospect it may have been enlightening to also interview them on their perspectives of woman-headed families, and what this family form represented.

1.6 Thesis Overview

Although three generations inform this study, they represent one family form, woman-headed families. The internal differentiation is related to age, historical context, experience and individual agency. The historical context, the regime of accumulation including its ideology, shapes the social relations in which each generation is formed, accounting for the variation within the family form. The woman-headed families are propelled by structural violence and poverty, varied and historically determined. The three generations of woman-heads are discussed, contrasted and compared in relation to each other, as a single woman-headed family form.

I have characterised the Grandmothers’ generation as the Survivors because they withstood the violence and poverty of apartheid and abusive husbands. Not only have they struggled to hold their families together, brought up their children (often on their own, with little support), but in their own molecular ways were transformative and contributed to the anti-apartheid struggle. The Grandmothers
bequeath their resilience and their appetite for struggle to their daughters, the Mothers’ generation. The Grandmothers’ lives are seemingly ‘silent’ and focused on ‘motherhood’, however they have pitched enormous struggles against the apartheid state, their employers or ‘madams’, and their husbands (some of whom undermined the women’s own notions of ‘culture’ and men as ‘head’ of the family).

The Mothers’ generation, *the Liberators*, is the generation who at the height of apartheid fought for liberation on a range of fronts – against the apartheid state, oppressive employers and often violent and patriarchal partners. Although the women in this generation may not have been political activists themselves, they experienced the mass mobilisation, the community boycotts, especially in the Vaal, and imbibed the popular struggles and popular consciousness that gripped this period. In post-apartheid South Africa, the Liberators find themselves amidst many contradictions, some of their own making and others over which they have little control.

The Daughters’ generation are *the Pragmatists*, who grew up largely in post-apartheid South Africa, and the popular discourse of democracy, women’s rights and women’s independence. They bear the fruits of the struggles of both the ‘Survivors’ and the ‘Liberators’. The Daughters have an extremely pragmatic attitude to men, to work and to issues of power. Admittedly the Daughters have not grown up in a period of mass mobilisation, and often their responses are ‘individual’ and reflect choices and decisions that correspond to their youth or the point in time in their life cycle.

The new democratic South Africa has provided women with the basis for relative autonomy and independence. While, the woman-heads are different, they all engage in daily struggles against poverty to hold their families together.
1.7 Chapter Outline

Chapter 2 includes a critical discussion of the conceptual framework that underpins the thesis, and the literature review. The chapter clarifies the use of important concepts that underline the thesis. The literature review focuses on social reproduction. The theory is however embedded and discussed concretely throughout the thesis, in particular, in Chapters 5, 6 and 7.

Chapter 3 discusses the rocky rise of woman-headed families historically, against the backdrop of capitalist development; and also contextualises them within contemporary South Africa.

Chapter 4 historises the research site, Bophelong, within contemporary South Africa. A socio-economic profile of Bophelong Township is drawn from primary and secondary sources. This chapter foregrounds woman-headed families within Bophelong.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 form the basis of the empirical research on the woman-headed family. The three chapters focus on the three successive generations of woman-headed families – the Grandmothers, the Mothers and the Daughters. Each generation is discussed with respect to being a woman-headed family, the family form and the reproduction of capitalist social relations. The similarities and variations within the Grandmothers’ and the Mothers’ generations, and between the Grandmothers’, the Mothers’ and the Daughters’ generations are highlighted and discussed in Chapter 6 and 7 respectively.

Chapter 5, The Grandmothers, is based on a vignette of Mosotho, who is then discussed in relation to the two other women in her generation (Rakgadi and Lena).

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47 This study on social reproduction and social relations within the single woman-headed family is therefore different to Luxton’s (1980) study, *More than a labour of love - Three Generations of Women’s Work in the Home*, which focuses largely on women’s work, the labour process in the home.
Chapter 6, The Mothers, is based on a vignette of Margaret, who is discussed in relation to the four other women in this generation (Eunice, Rowena, Kedibone and Sara).

Chapter 7, The Daughters, is based on a vignette of Lerato, who is discussed in relation to four other women in this generation (Rebilwe, Rebecca, Janet and Katlego).

Chapter 8 provides a concluding discussion of the research study on the nature of social reproduction in the woman-headed family, the contradictions, the ambivalence and the emancipatory potential that exists. Key and salient trends emerging from the discussion in the three generations, Chapters 5, 6 and 7, are discussed in relation to each other as a totality of black single-woman-headed families in contemporary South Africa. The conclusion discusses the position of woman-headed families within South Africa.