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A STUDY OF LEARNING, KNOWLEDGE AND PROCESSES OF REFLECTION WITHIN THE WORKER EDUCATION PROJECT

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the degree of Master of Education (Educational Administration, Planning and Social Policy) at the School of Education, University of Cape Town.

February 2010

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Abstract

There are over a million women domestic workers in South Africa who are largely overworked, underpaid, unprotected, and undervalued and who are entrenched in a system that denies and reduces the value of their work and their skills. Such conditions are invariably tied to contexts that are historically located. Domestic work is both necessary and valuable; however, in a context dominated by the structured social inequalities of race, class and gender, both their roles in society and their various skills and capacities are too often overlooked.

Domestic workers have had to acquire a range of skills to effectively carry out the work they do and the learning involved is more often than not informal and tacit and the learning outcomes (skills, competencies, and knowledge) are not accredited or formally validated by society and institutions of education. The Worker Education Project, hosted by the South African Domestic Services and Allied Workers Union, which formed the context of the present study, was designed as an educational process in support of steps taken by domestic workers to organise themselves and develop and give expression to their own capacities to improve their living conditions.

This study explores and tells the stories of women's lives as domestic workers and speaks of their experiences as women, as black women, and as domestic workers. To ground my analysis and my discussion, I provide an overview of the broad theoretical approaches that bear out the women's stories that turned on five sub-plots: learning, knowledge, alienation, their needs and desires, and the various relations of power that mediate their lives. In analyzing the said and done of the women, the very point is to attempt to understand how the women attach meaning to their lives.

The research findings were drawn from semi-structured interviews, workshop facilitation and participation, and observations *in situ*. The results showed that the women learned from their experiences and through social participation in union activities, and that learning did not comprise only of hard skills, but that the women learned about themselves through processes of reflection. The research also revealed power as a prevailing condition (both complex and at times contradictory) central to all of the women's stories, operating in all spheres of their lives.

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This study attempts to open a political space for change and would like to suggest that learning is no less learning when the actors are domestic workers.

Acknowledgements

It is hard to know how to thank the women of the SADSAWU who participated in the Worker Education Project. I am particularly thankful for their generosity, their openness and their willingness to share their time, their experience and their vulnerability without which this work would not have been possible.

I am most grateful to Shaheen, Rifqah and Chantalle for their love, friendship, honesty and integrity. Most importantly, I thank them for their unwavering belief in me at a time of incredible personal difficulty. Thank you to Anita for her critical feedback, for not giving up on me and for pushing me in ways I cannot begin to describe.

I wish to thank my supervisor, Crain Soudien, whose quiet support encouraged me along the way.

Last but not least, to my family, you all know who you are.

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This thesis is dedicated to my brother, Reza, whose personal path has humbled me and helped me appreciate life's grey moments.

Abbreviations

ANC: African National Congress

CoP: Community of Practice

COSATU: Congress of South African Trade Unions

SADSAWU: South African Domestic Service and Allied Workers Union

SADWU: South African Domestic Workers Union

WEP: Worker Education Project

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Chapter 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

While we hail South Africa's new democracy and the emergence of the rainbow nation as the embodiment of hopeful possibilities, we cannot ignore the striking contrasts between the promise of democracy and the failure of this system to deliver the majority of people from their poverty. I am particularly concerned with the lived experiences of millions of economically disenfranchised female domestic workers.

The work performed by domestic workers, as well as their experiences, is rarely interrogated or engaged in the nation's dialogue on post-apartheid reconstruction and 'a better life for all'.[1] The impact that this disregard reinforces is a strict institutionalised racial order, severe class inequality, and gender-based discrimination (cf. Fish 2006; Grossman 2004).

This chapter provides an overview of the historical aspects of domestic labour, the aims and rationale of the study, the research questions, and outlines the limitations of the study. It also introduces the Worker Education Project (WEP) on health and safety hosted by the South African Domestic and Allied Service Workers Union (SADSAWU) in Cape Town within which the present study is located.

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[1] An ANC election slogan (2004).

1.2 Rationale

I was motivated to explore domestic workers' experiences through stories such as Marlene's:

> *In the early 60s, a young girl by the name of Marlene left her family home in the rural town of Wallacedene and moved to Cape Town with the promise of employment from a family who were friends with a well-known white family in her home town.*
>
> *Possessing a Standard 6 [Grade 8] education, she had few options in a job market structured by the economic prerogatives of apartheid. A vivid childhood memory that she never quite understood was of her father leaving early every Sunday morning, only to return on Friday night. At 18 years old, Marlene well understood because, like her father, she was desperate to help support her family and to help provide better opportunities for her younger siblings.*
>
> *She was hired as a domestic worker with a family in Kenilworth, a suburb in Cape Town legally designated for whites at the time. Her days consisted of heavy cleaning, cooking, sewing, caring for the family's children and gardening. Making beds, washing dishes, working with electrical appliances, dusting, sweeping and cleaning baths or showers were the most common everyday activities.*
>
> *Marlene worked a 16-hour day, six days a week, and received R150 a month as compensation for her labours – an amount that remained constant for the entire time she was employed by the family. Her low wage was justified by reference to their provision of free board and lodging in a one-bedroom cottage with no electricity and with a cold tap in the backyard as the only form of running water. This payment-in-kind not only made Marlene available to her employers 24 hours a day, but also reinforced her economic dependence on them. Most of the money that Marlene earned went to her mother as she helped support her family.*
>
> *Outwardly, Marlene appeared to accommodate this situation of exploitation. Her behaviour, however, was less reflective of her passivity than an acute awareness that under apartheid she had few, if any, labour rights. Domestic workers were excluded from most labour legislation and received little, if any, legal protection as workers. Most significantly, domestic workers were not covered by any labour legislation (the Industrial*

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Coalition Act 28 of 1956 and the Wages Act 5 of 1957). As a result, Marlene was deprived of a negotiated wage, regular working hours, and the benefits associated with union membership like basic bargaining rights and basic respect.

Despite her vulnerable position, after years of service, Marlene decided to ask for a small raise. She was told to complete the day's work and then was immediately dismissed without notice or compensation.

Over the next 15 years, Marlene married, raised her brother's daughter, and worked as a domestic worker for a number of different white employers. Having learned that asserting her rights resulted in dismissal, and sometimes verbal and physical abuse by employers, Marlene formulated a strategy for surviving these dehumanising situations. Packing up her personal belongings and fleeing her employers property in the middle of the night was her most noteworthy strategy of resistance to impossible working conditions. While she understood that this 'strategy' yielded few rewards, it maintained her sense of personal dignity. Despite all appearances to the contrary, Marlene never accepted her subordination. She knew she was being exploited, and she knew that her options were limited. However, she had little or no recourse and therefore could not openly confront her vulnerable position.

In 1994, Marlene voted in South Africa's first democratic election. In 1997, Marlene was working for a middle-class white family in Constantia. In this job, she worked 14 hours a day, six days a week for a household of five people. She earned R500 a month, and her small cottage was equipped with electricity, running water, a bathroom and small kitchenette.

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Marlene is one among nearly one million working in South African households. Her story is the story of many, including those women who participated in the WEP hosted by the SADSAWU.

I therefore not only felt that there is a pressing need to reframe the way in which the role of the domestic worker is perceived in South African society, but also to attempt to read this against other structural inequalities. Changing the conditions of their lives is neither easy nor obvious. Even in the context of the SADSAWU and its education programmes, change is complex and

complicated, as is borne out by the research. Rather than present a simple answer, the present project underlined that need for a better understanding of the women.

1.3 Historical Background of Domestic Labour

Domestic labour in South Africa originated in the 17th century, when Dutch settlers enslaved African women as household servants. Slavery was abolished in the 19th century, but many of its exploitative and abusive aspects persisted. Under apartheid, the government generally did not interfere in matters between 'master and servant', leaving employers free to treat employees as they saw fit (Gilson 2000).[2] While these relations were not regulated, they were and still are entrenched in a system of gross inequality and form the backdrop of an institutionalised oppression. Thus, domestic labour is deeply embedded in and is an enduring symbol of apartheid.

Domestic workers are employed in full-time service in almost all public and private institutions where they most typically serve tea, wash dishes, and polish floors. This tends to reinforce the idea that 'dirty work' is for black women[3] to do. While figures for public institutions are readily available, it is difficult to access accurate records of women employed in domestic service. According to Fish (2006), it is estimated that of the 4 353 000 working women in South Africa, 763,000 are employed in domestic service (in public and private institutions). Figures from different sources indicate that well over a million women are employed in domestic service

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[2] Visit http://journalism.berkeley.edu/projects/safrica/facing/domestic.html

[3] It is important to remind ourselves that during apartheid (1948-1994), people were divided into four racial classifications: Africans, Coloureds, Indians and Whites. Political activists and others rejected this classification as racist. 'Black' was, and still is, a political (not cultural) term referring to the 'non-white' oppressed majority of the population. I will use this term, although, at times, it will be necessary to use terms such as 'coloured' and the reader should imagine they have invisible quotation marks around them. At times I also use 'women of colour', Generally the term Black has more progressive and political connotations and is a more all-inclusive term referring to all South Africans who are not 'white'. 'Coloured', 'legally', referred to persons of 'mixed blood' – often, but not always, meaning African and White. 'Bantu' or 'native' were terms used by the apartheid regime (broadly the state, comprising the 'government' headed by the National Party (NP), civil service, judiciary, police and the army) to refer to 'African' people: indigenous people whose descendants' presence in the region pre-dates the arrival of European settlers. 'Indian' refers to people descendant from South Asia (often indentured labour) and 'White' to descendants of European and other settlers.

(Grossman 2000, 2004); this makes up about 23 percent of all women workers, with 88 percent of domestic workers being black and 12 percent being coloured (Minister of Labour public address 2001 cited in Fish 2006: 6). Important to note here are not only the numbers, but the nature of the interconnectedness between gender, race and class based oppression in South Africa.[4] In addition, it is my contention that apartheid structures continue to prevail throughout the social and economic fabric of society.

Domestic work encapsulates the proliferation of the ongoing social aspects of apartheid where severe race and class inequalities continue to dominate the relationship between worker and employer, and reinforces apartheid power structures and hierarchies. And while we drown in the positive spin of the 'rainbow nation', employers do not have to acknowledge or account for their ongoing exploitation.[5] Furthermore, because of high rates of unemployment, employers feel a sense of benevolence by paying salaries that fall far below living wage standards (Hickson & Strous 1993; Grossman 2000, 2004; Fish 2006). The employment of domestic workers in South Africa mirrors apartheid labour practice, and though the demographics of a few employers have changed[6], a highly racialised and gendered labour sector is maintained and the nature of how it

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[4] Patricia Hill Collins contends that 'the matrix of domination' relegates women [of colour] to the lowest stratum of society based upon the simultaneous, mutually reinforcing oppressions of race, class and gender (Collins cited in Fish 2006:18).

This nexus is also referred to as Triple Oppression (see for example:

http://www.disa.ukzn.ac.za:8080/DC/ChMay83.1024.8196.000.009.May1983.3/ChMay83.1024.8196.000.009.May1983.3.pdf;https://www.up.ac.za/dspace/bitstream/2263/4318/1/Muller_Stories(2004).pdf;http://www.dfa.gov.za/docs/speeches/2007/dzum0807.htm)

[5] Because of widespread refusal on the part of many employers to abide by any kind of legally enforced regulatory framework for employment, hours of work or leave, these arrangements are determined by the employer so as to suit the employer's convenience. Domestic workers have very little job security and are left unprotected in cases of dispute (Hickson & Strous 1993: 110; Fish 2006). This takes into account the labour legislation that came into effect in 2002.

[6] Recent discussions suggest that an important aspect of the contemporary profile of the occupation in South Africa is the changing racial composition of employers. It is important to point out that while the transition from mainly white to mainly black employers has been documented in other settler colonies following democratisation (see Hansen 1989; Pape 1993), in South Africa, the qualitatively different character of settler colonialism has not resulted in the transformation of the racial composition of employers to the same extent (see Fish 2006). Since the early days of apartheid, 'blacks' have employed domestic workers, so it is therefore not a new phenomenon but rather a marginal increase in an existing pattern. What should ultimately be noted is not so much the perceived changing profile of employers, but rather the enduringly persistent racial profile of employees. In the post-apartheid context,

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plays out begs the question about the extent to which democracy penetrated the society as a whole.

1.4 Statement of the problem

Domestic labour provides the biggest sectoral opportunity for formal employment to black women in South Africa (Grossman 2004: 2). Paid domestic work, however denigrated, is both socially useful and socially necessary. Domestic workers have been compelled to develop a broad range of skills to ensure that they are effective in their jobs, but because these skills are learned informally, they are not accredited and, thus, not properly rewarded in financial and other terms. Most often, they have been developed through ordinary, everyday experiential processes both inside and outside the workplace.

Domestic labour is worthy of examination, because it fulfils important social, economic and other functions. However, the daily life experiences, learning, socialisation and knowledge involved in occupying a position in this sector, or that the sector requires, are underestimated and undervalued, because occupants of the roles and positions in the domestic labour sector are generally drawn from groupings with low socio-economic status in society (e.g. black women with little or no formal educational qualifications). Furthermore, the learning involved is more often than not informal and tacit, and the learning outcomes (skills, competencies and knowledge) are not accredited or formally validated by society and recognised institutions of education. As a result, domestic workers tend to receive poor remuneration for their services, are often not unionised and, as individuals, stand little if any chance of receiving due legal protection and suitable access to opportunities for improving their situation and formal qualifications.

The central focus of this research is on the experiences of women *as domestic workers*, that is to say, their understanding of what it is to be oppressed and marginalised in society and a specific

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social privilege largely remains a central feature of white South Africa with a negotiated transition that, to a large degree, preserved white economic power and as a result, everyday life remains virtually unchanged for many white South Africans, because social status continues to be defined by economic power and the system of racial hierarchy entrenched throughout apartheid.

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labour market as *women*, as *black women* and as *workers* with a low economic, legal and political status.

1.5 The study

The study allowed for an examination of a union-based WEP on the issue of health and safety in the context of the SADSAWU. The WEP within the union context presented an interesting mixture of informal and non-formal adult learning and aimed its attention at learning for purposes of personal transformation.

The WEP initiated by the SADSAWU is in line with the union's aims of building awareness, exploring and understanding worker's rights, and more specifically, for domestic workers to understand that their workplaces vary to reflect the full range of activities that they may be required to perform, and that in each of the various tasks they face the associated range of health and safety hazards. Further aims were to equip the women with an awareness of their roles and responsibilities, their rights as workers and the rules of law, to speak out and to convey the benefits of unionisation (Heng 1996: 203). The idea was to focus on a participatory process which would then contribute to the building of a collective.

The SADSAWU reorganized itself in 2000 from what was formally known as SADWU (South African Domestic Workers Union). The SADSAWU is formally affiliated with COSATU and is at the centre of organizing around themes of workers' education and focuses on collective action as part of a broader labour movement. Historically, the trade union movement in South Africa has played a significant role as the site for adult education and learning.[7]

The SADSAWU is membership based and union members pay an annual fee of R120 and have access to all of the services offered by the union including educational workshops, workplace mediation, salary negotiations, to name a few.

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[7] Since the transition to democracy in SA, the trade union movement has shifted its political role and this shift has impacted on its policies on education.

1.5.1 The Worker Education Project

The Worker Education Project (WEP), an initiative of the SADSAWU was aimed at the development of a Health & Safety manual for domestic workers. The WEP was designed as an educational process in support of steps taken by domestic workers to organise themselves and develop and give expression to their own capacities to improve their living conditions.

A series of workshops were hosted over a four month period. The workshop topics were not explicit in so far as a proposed and specific theme for each session. Instead, the approach was to share stories of everyday living experiences, and being conscious of the need to start from the issues and interests of the women themselves while trying to sequence the workshops to:

- Establish prior learning (as part of the storytelling and sharing) by identifying the problems and discussing existing methods of dealing with the problems.
- Consolidate knowledge (as part of a more focussed discussion) around specific questions such as, 'what do medical people say or what should they say?' and 'what does the law say or what should the law say?'

My role in the WEP was as researcher, workshop co-facilitator, participant and observer.

1.6 Aims of the study

This study was initiated with three broad aims in mind:

- To establish if learning happens within the WEP.
- To capture the experiences of the lives of the women domestic workers that formed part of the WEP.
- To tell the story or stories of the experiences as told by the women.

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1.7 Key questions

Several specific questions were developed at the outset and during the study to elaborate the aims:

- Did learning happen? How did participants learn? Was the learning reflected on?
- Did perceptions of health and safety change?
- What impact did the learning have on their individual lives?
- How do female domestic workers articulate their experience of the social, economic and political forces at play in their lives as workers and as individuals?
- How does the worker education project relate to the histories, needs, and aspirations of the participants in the project?

It became apparent shortly after reviewing the data, that the themes of learning, knowledge, alienation, needs and desires, and relations of power encapsulated both the aims and the key questions. The thesis frames the aims and questions around these themes as to illustrate how learning and knowledge cannot be divorced or even distanced from the issue of context and power. In line with this, at times there appears to be a blurring in terms of the actual unit of analysis as it shifts between the SADSAWU, the WEP and domestic workers as individuals. However, the primary unit of analysis is the individual domestic worker and her experiences. What sometimes accounts for the blurring is the domestic worker's location both within the SADSAWU and the WEP.

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1.8 Limitations

Two issues are worth underlining: the possibility of generalising from qualitative studies involving participant observation studies (see Mouton 2001) and the researcher's involvement in the process (see Edwards and Ribbens 1998)

As regards the first issue, I am not seeking to generalise from this exploratory study, merely to record and retell the stories of these women and offer an interpretation with a view to gaining a deeper insight into the experiences and conditions that shape their lives.

Edwards and Ribbens (1998) and Bean (2003) note that as researchers we experience a dilemma when we explore other people's private lives and personal experiences and translate those into public knowledge. It is also worth noting that I do not believe that it is possible to write about anything from some imagined politically neutral perspective and that research is not a distant academic exercise but an activity that occurs in a set of political and social conditions (Tuhiwai Smith 1995: 5). Personal values and beliefs of authors inevitably influence the research questions they pose, the evidence they select and the analysis they develop (Kane 2003). The best way to be scientific and non-manipulative is to ensure that the author's beliefs are openly available for inspection rather than just embedded in a text (Cletch Lam 2004).

It is also important to note that language might have been a factor in the learning process. With the exception of one of the union leaders who spoke English, all the women used Afrikaans and Xhosa as their first languages. While I understood Afrikaans well and spoke it with less conviction than I understood it, workshops were conducted in English. It was seldom an issue but I do know that in some instances meanings and nuances were literally 'lost in translation'. Of course, the same rule applied to me. There were times where participants found it difficult to understand my particular English accent. Lastly, as a researcher and observer based at the SADSAWU, I was not present at any of the workspaces the women spoke of nor did I visit any of their homes. The closest I got to 'visiting' a workplace/home was when I dropped a woman at her place of work after a meeting. I did not observe firsthand the conditions of their lived experiences in the workplace.

1.9 Concluding comments

In this chapter I introduced the research by providing the context in which the study was carried out. The chapter briefly set up the WEP, located it within the SADSAWU and noted the need to

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find productive ways in which to articulate the experiences of black women domestic workers. Also noted were some of the study's limitations.

In what follows, I provide, first, an overview of the relevant literature (Chapter 2) on the themes as these emerged from the women's reports. After this, I outline the methods used (Chapter 3), the results obtained (Chapter 4) and conclude the study with a discussion of the main themes that emerged through the study (Chapter 5).

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Chapter 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

> For me, learning was not something separate from life, it was life itself (Serge 1963: 7)

2.1 Introduction

In the context of the present study, there exists very little academic research on the learning and learning practices of domestic workers and even less so in the context of the domestic worker's union. The dearth of literature may well be indicative of the low status afforded domestic workers and the fact that domestic workers were largely denied access to formal education.

This chapter is aimed at presenting a theoretical perspective to the study and thus seeks to understand how learning happens in the WEP in the context of the lives of female domestic workers. I examine the literature relevant for grasping the experiences of women as domestic workers and, in particular, along the themes suggested by the data: (i) learning, (ii) knowledge, (iii) alienation, (iv) needs and desires, and (v) the question of power. Even though I did not initially pose questions in these terms, an analysis of the transcripts of the interviews and meetings with the 16 women who participated in this study (see Chapter 3) suggested these themes as the sub-plots of their stories.

The chapter is divided into two parts. Part one examines theoretical perspectives on learning, and informal learning and the acquisition of knowledge; part two examines the literature on alienation, needs and desires and power.

In the context of the WEP, informal learning theories are particularly relevant because they provide us with a means to view learning that takes place outside the classroom and which arises from the activities and interests of individuals and groups, but which may not be acknowledged as learning (Smith 1999, 2006). Furthermore, the social and situational aspects of informal

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learning theory are applicable to the WEP because it is concerned with learning as a social process and forces us to look closely at the social and cultural contexts in which the learning occurs.

There is a vast body of literature on informal learning and definitional complexities about informal learning are exemplified in a wide range of writings that have over the years related to this phenomena: learning from experience (Dewey 1938; Kolb 1984); learning from context (Lave and Wenger 1991); the tacit dimension of knowledge (Polanyi 1967; Inkster 1987); reflection (Mezirow 1990; Boud and Walker 1992); enhancing informal and incidental learning (Freire 1970; Brookfield 1986).

2.2 Learning

Learning is often understood as the 'inner processes of combination, construction and transformation' (Morphet 1992). Learning is not just something that happens in school or in work or in particular settings (Wenger 1998), as it can also occur as a result of action (Foley 1999, 2001). Kirshner and Whitson (1997) note that learning in this way is not understood as the gaining of particular information from a formal education institution, although such people can learn to be active citizens through daily participation in social practices (Holst 2002). This type of informal learning can be understood as having a direct relationship with people's struggles for a decent life (Foley 1999: 10). The WEP was set up as part of a larger initiative that advocated for the improvement of living conditions for domestic workers. The WEP was also about acknowledging and affirming the importance of domestic workers skills and competencies which were largely informally acquired. Informal learning occurs when people live, work, and engage in social action, in which people learn through their own experiences and from each other in workplace and community organisations (Foley 1999).

Foley (2001) argues that 'we learn as we act' and that this learning is both tacit and explicit. Foley (1999: 16) suggests that, over the past two centuries, the 'learning dimension of human life has been colonised by the discourse of institutionalised education.' Furthermore, Foley (1999: 1-2) suggests that there is more to adult learning than formal courses and that 'some of the most

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interesting and significant learning occurs informally and incidentally, in people's everyday lives.' Some of the most powerful learning occurs as people struggle against oppression, as they struggle to make sense of what is happening to them and to work out ways of doing something about it. However, this learning is embedded in action and, consequently, it is often not recognised as learning, or only partly realised as such. Although this incidental learning is frequently not articulated as learning by the people who do it, it is still very significant learning (Foley 1999).

To expand on Foley's premise that 'we learn as we act' I will draw on Vygotsky's Activity Theory (1978), Lave and Wenger's (1998) Community of Practice Theory and Experiential Learning Theory.

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2.3 Activity Theory

Activity theory was developed by the Russian psychologists Vygotsky, Rubinshtein and Lurija (Bonnie Nardi cited in Kaptelinin and Nardi 1997).[8] Activity theory is best understood as a philosophical framework that allows for the study of different forms of human practice. It may well be viewed as a developmental process whereby both individual and social levels are interlinked. Activity theory contends that activities are central to human thinking and acting, with humans interacting with each other and the world (Leontjev 1981). Scribner (1987, 1997) proposes that activity fulfils specific purposes that are socially constituted; individuals engage in actions and operations that have both mental and behavioural dimensions to their enactment. In this way, cognitive and motivational processes are embedded within the 'larger activity structures whose goals they serve' (Martin & Scribner 1991: 582), which refers to the reciprocity between the social and cognitive contributions to thinking and acting.

Bonnie Nardi (cited in Kaptelinin and Nardi 1997) argues that activity theory can be implicitly understood as 'a set of conceptual principles that constitute a general conceptual system, rather than a highly predictive theory.' In considering this approach, activity theory then forms the

[8] (cf. Billet 2000).

basis for understanding human learning through the discovery and observation of how humans develop through the use and creation of tools within their culture (Nardi cited in Kaptelinin and Nardi 1997).

Activity is seen as being transformational, mediating between individuals and social circumstances through reciprocal interactions and transformations (Cole 1998; Scribner & Beach 1993; Leontjev 1981; Wertsch 1991, 1998). Perspectives emphasising the interpersonal and semiotic contributions (e.g. signs and tools) (Hutchins 1991; Scribner 1985; Wertsch 1985) also accentuate the mediation between social sources and the mind as a means to understanding thinking, acting and learning. Scribner (1990, 1997) points to the significance of this mediation in stating that human cognition and development are usually discussed in terms of relations between the organism and environment. However, cultural mediators influence how humans engage in cognitive acts and development, thereby operating as intermediaries between the organisms (humans) and the environment.

Activity theory provides us with a means to view learning in the context of the work that we do and as it is embedded in everyday living (Nardi cited in Kaptelinin and Nardi 1997). The application of Activity Theory to domestic workers and their learning is particularly important because their learning is anchored in the activities of their everyday experiences. However, activity theory on its own is not enough to help explain the process of learning.

Lave and Wenger (1991) acknowledge Activity Theory as being influential in their work on Communities of Practice. Trowler and Turner (2000) and Mathieson (2005) all agree that there is a substantial overlap between Activity Theory and Communities of Practice Theory.

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2.4 Communities of Practice (CoP)

According to Wenger (1998)[9], CoPs are everywhere and in some way or another, we all belong to a number of them. He goes on to say that whatever forms our involvement takes, most of us

[9] http://www.infed.org/biblio/communities_of_practice.htm#comms

are familiar with the experience of belonging to a CoP. Members of these communities are informally bound to what they do together and by what they have learned through their mutual engagement in these activities. A CoP is then markedly different from a community of interest or a geographical community, since neither of these two communities implies a shared or mutual practice. Wenger goes on to say that a CoP characterises itself along three distinct dimensions: what it is about, how it functions, and what capability it has produced. CoPs are reflective of what their members consider important, because they are usually formed around issues that matter to those involved. The idea that learning involves a deepening process of participation in a community of practice has gained significant ground in recent years.[10]

Rather than looking to learning as the acquisition of certain forms of knowledge, Lave and Wenger have tried to place it in social relationships, or situations of co-participation. The question they pose is, 'what kinds of social engagements provide the proper context for learning to take place?' (1991: 14). The kind of learning that happens within these CoPs is not just about hard skills, but about using this 'learning to learn about yourself' (Wenger 1998). According to Wenger, learning changes who we are by changing our ability to participate, to belong and to negotiate meaning. And this ability is configured socially 'with respect to practices, communities and economies of meaning where it shapes our identities' (Wenger 1998: 226). It would seem then that in this context, identity is not something stable or whole, but rather something that is 'acted out' through practices and narratives that 'reshape elements of biographic relevance' (Wenger 1998: 226).

In the CoP there is a concern with identity, with learning to speak, act and improvise in ways that make sense in the community. What is more, and in contrast with learning as internalisation, 'learning as increasing participation in CoP concerns the whole person acting in the world' (Lave and Wenger 1991: 49). The focus is on the ways in which learning is 'an evolving, continuously renewed set of relations' (*ibid*: 50). In other words, CoP speaks to a relational view of the person and learning.

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[10] http://www.infed.org/biblio/communities_of_practice.htm

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Thus, according to Lave and Wenger (1991), learning takes place in the conditions that bring people together and organises a point of contact that allows for particular pieces of information to take on a relevance. Without these points of contact and this system of relevancies, there is no learning, and there is little memory. Learning does not belong to individual people, but rather to the various conversations of which these people are a part (cf. Tennant 1997)

As Tennant (1997:77) argues, the system of relevancies has the definite advantage of drawing attention to the need to understand knowledge and learning in context. There is an intimate connection between knowledge and activity, which asserts then that learning is part of daily living. Problem solving and learning from experience therefore become central processes[11] (Tennant 1997: 73). Lave and Wenger also allude to 'legitimate peripheral participation', the fundamental nature of which is about the relationship between 'newcomers and old-timers', and about activities, identities, and communities of knowledge and practice. Therefore, a person's intentions to learn are engaged and the meaning of learning is configured through the process of becoming a full participant in a socio-cultural practice. This social process, includes, indeed it subsumes, the learning of knowledgeable skills (Lave and Wenger 1991: 29).

Consequently, this view offers a decidedly different way of approaching teaching and learning This is important in that the acknowledgment of the relationship between 'newcomers and the old-timers' is also an acknowledgement of the dynamics of power. However, having said this, it should be noted that while the propensity for richly nuanced accounts of teaching and learning exist within the framework of a community of practice, and while the dynamics of power are alluded to, there is very little to suggest that broader issues of power have been considered or accounted for as part of the learning experience.

Here I refer to the structural and historical relations of power and divisions that exist based on class, race, gender, language and ethnicity.

Situated learning theory relates to other theories of learning, combining experience, perception, cognition and behaviour and, in a sense, this type of learning theory also speaks to proponents of

[11] Although it should be noted that situated learning is not the same as 'learning by doing' (See Tennant 1997).

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experiential learning who argue that we learn from our experiences. According to Grossman (1999), situated learning theories afford us an opportunity to take into account the extensive body of 'unused, wasted, suppressed, denied knowledge' that exists inside the workers' movement (cf. Cooper 2005).

Mathieson (2005) contrasts Activity Theory with Community of Practice Theory and highlights that while the latter focuses on the social nature of learning, meaning and identity within practice, Activity Theory focuses on organisational structure, history, contradiction and change. While there are considerable variations in terminology and ideology, both theories focus on learning and knowledge as outcomes of social engagement in shared practice within a context. It is in this regard that Activity Theory and Communities of Practice Theory are understood as central to understanding the experiences of the domestic workers who formed part of the WEP.

Other theories add new dimensions to the ways in which we understand learning in everyday life with approaches that specifically avoid drawing definitive lines between the formal and the everyday. Two specific bodies of theory are experiential learning and situation learning.

Cooper's (2005) doctoral thesis clearly states that experiential learning approaches have had a deep influence on non-formal education[12] in South Africa. She goes on to say that experiential learning theories have been an important resource for those writing about learning in informal education contexts, particularly those promoting social transformation.

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2.5 Experiential Learning and Situated Learning

A question posed by Boot and Reynolds (1983) asked, 'how is learning related to experience and how should it be related?' In defining what the process of learning is, Kolb unequivocally links it

[12] *Non-formal education*: any organised educational activity outside the established formal system - whether operating separately or as an important feature of some broader activity (like the WEP located within the SADSAWU) - that is intended to serve identifiable learning clienteles and learning objectives (cf. Coombs and Ahmed 1974). The problem with this is that people often organize educational events as part of their everyday experience and so the lines blur rapidly. As Fordham (1993) comments, these definitions do not imply hard and fast categories. In particular, there is overlap (and confusion) between the informal and the non-formal.

to people's experience as learning is understood as 'the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience' (Kolb 1984 cited in Thorpe 1993: 155). The contention therefore is that learning is experiential.[13] However, it is important to note that, Kolb (*ibid*) insists that experiential learning should not be understood as another alternative to behavioural or cognitive learning theories but rather a holistic integrative approach to learning, combining experience, perception, cognition and behaviour.

Joyce and Weil (1972) argue that in order to learn from experiences, the focus should be on the learner and how she or he experiences the world instead of on the realities of the world and what an individual must then learn. In Freire's seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he speaks of a student's understanding of the world (Freire1970).[14] Psychologists, Piaget (1978) and Bruner (1973), argue that the relationship between learning and experience is 'interactive' in nature (Tennant and Pogson 1995: 150).

A further iteration of this interaction is Tennant and Pogson's (1995) claim that learners reconstruct their own experiences and match their existing rules more closely in order to understand the world. Accordingly, this process can lead to new experiences and increased learning, supporting the claim that learning is an on-going process. Dewey's (1916 cited in Boot and Reynolds 1983) 'method of intelligent learning' refers to the relationship between thinking and experience, and he asserts that thought and reflection are critical and essential, and that no experience can have a meaning without rudiments or elements of thought.

The assumption is that we seldom learn from experience unless we assess the experience and assign our own meaning (Crowther, Martin & Shaw 1999). Brookfield (1987) argues that experience has to be mediated and reconstructed in order for people to learn from it because education is not merely or necessarily an affirmation or substantiation of experience. From these

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[13] For literature on experiential learning, see Boot and Reynolds (1983), Kolb (1984 in Thorpe 1993), Warner and McGill (1989), Fenwick (2003), Mezirow (1991).

[14] Freire talks about the fallacy of looking at the education system like a bank, a large repository where students come to withdraw the knowledge they need for life. Knowledge is not a set commodity that is passed from teachers to students. Students must construct knowledge from knowledge they already possess. Teachers must learn how the students understand the world so that the teacher understands how the student can learn.

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processes come the insights, the discoveries and the understanding through which the experience takes on added meaning in relation to other experiences (Endresen 2004, unpublished). All this experience is then conceptualised, synthesised and integrated into the individual's system of constructs that she or he imposes on the world and through which she or he views, perceives, categorises, evaluates and seeks experience. Boot and Reynolds (1983) remind us that experience and reflection form the basis for continued development in adult thought. Consequently, reflection is an important component of the learning process.

Critics of experiential learning theory argue that focus on the individual aspects of learning neglects the collective, social dimensions of learning, and according to Cooper (2005, unpublished), over-separates the individual learner from his or her social context. Context is defined, in this instance, as the static space surrounding the individual rather than an integral part of knowledge construction. Another criticism, if you will, is that it does not account for the notion that experience as 'never innocent'. This criticism is important in the context of the SADSAWU, because the experience of domestic workers is located historically, socially, and materially.[15]

Situated learning theories highlight the importance of the organisation as a key element in learning and provide a means of understanding the impact and importance of context on learning. These theories also speak to the more social dimensions of learning, an element missing in the body of theory located in experiential learning practices.

It could well be argued that experiential learning theory presupposes too much about individual agency, however, proponents of this theory argue that it does not. They claim that reflection is the bridge between experience and learning (Garrick 1989).

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[15] This is particularly important given that the data speaks to issues of power in exactly the way experience is framed here. This will be taken up later in this chapter.

2.6 The process of reflection

Boud, Cohen and Walker claim that,

> Reflection consists of those processes in which learners engage to recapture, notice and re-evaluate their experience, to work with experience to turn it into learning...through entering into dialogue with our experience we can turn experiential knowledge, which may not be readily accessible to us, into propositional knowledge which can be shared and interrogated (Boud, Cohen and Walker cited in Garrick 1989: 24).

This quote highlights processes such as making inferences, generalizations, analogies, discriminations and evaluations. These processes are important in the case of domestic workers and their informal learning because it reminds us that reflecting on experiences can shift and transition experiential knowledge into factual knowledge. Reflection also requires feelings and remembering, using beliefs to make interpretations, analysis and judgments, however unaware one may be of doing so. According to Jarvis (1987: 87), reflection is 'a process of deep thought, both a looking back on the situation being pondered and a projecting forward to the future, being both a process of recall and reasoning'. In this way, reflective thinking and learning from experience form an essential part of the dialectical tradition (Boot and Reynolds 1983).

One of the more established models of experiential learning is the one developed by Kolb, et al., (1971). Broadly, this process begins with an experience that is followed by reflective observation and the reflection is then assimilated into a theory. Finally, these new (or reformulated) ideas are tested in new situations. This model is a recurring cycle within which the learner tests new concepts and modifies them as a result of the reflection and conceptualisation (Kolb, et al. 1971). In terms of learning, experiential learning can best be described as a process whereby the experience of the learner is reflected on and from this emerges new insights or new learning.[16]

As much as reflection is a constitutive component of experiential learning, so is critical thinking. Indeed, Paulo Freire (1974: 36 cited in Thorpe, et al. 1993) politicised the concept of reflection

[16] Many adult educators make use of various educational activities that link adult learning to experience. Some of these are group discussions, simulations, role-plays, field projects, action projects, seminars, workshops, consciousness raising and group therapy (Knowles 1970).

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in his work and the dialectic nature of learning and adaptation is encompassed in his concept of 'praxis'. To Freire, 'reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it' is crucial. Moreover, praxis is a process with the potential of bringing about revolutionary change (Newman 1994: 111). In trying to develop critical thinking in other people, we reflect their attitudes and habitual ways of thinking and, in doing this, we function as a mirror and Brookfield (1987) (see also Kolb 1971) suggests that this reflection can be a very powerful tool.

Mezirow points out,

> If reflection is understood as an assessment of how or why we have perceived, thought, felt or acted, it must be differentiated from an assessment of how best to perform these functions when each phase of an action is guided by what we have learned before (Mezirow 1990: 8).

Mezirow is making a distinction between action and reflection. Action can be a creative process that involves our prejudices and distortions but reflection requires conscious attention to those distortions in our reasoning and attitudes.

Boot and Reynolds (1983) note that experience and reflection is a basis for continuing development in adult thought and so reflection is an important component of the learning process.

The exploration of Activity Theory, Communities of Practice Theory, Experiential and Situated Learning Theory offers much promise for understanding practices, identity development, participation, and a range of types of learning within the WEP. These theories have particular relevance for understanding informal learning, everyday practice and experience, and tacit and local knowledge as it relates to domestic workers and their lived experiences.

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2.7 Knowledge[17]

The question about the relationship between domestic workers knowledge and theories of knowledge is what is at stake in this section. I agree with Grossman (2004), that domestic workers know a great deal and I want to explore what it is that they, in fact, do know. As we will see in Chapter 4, domestic workers of the WEP do not have much formal expert knowledge even though that they have often a wealth of experience. For some, knowledge is articulated by way of a myriad of complexities embedded in power (cf. Giroux 2001), while for others, knowledge is a social construct and knowing a social process (cf. Freire), and for others still, knowledge is about justified true beliefs with considerable evidential support (Craig 2007).

2.8 Knowledge *that* and Knowledge *how*

While the term 'knowledge' itself suffers from a high degree of terminological ambiguity (Ahmad 2009: 1), there are a number of different ways to distinguish between kinds of knowledge. To better understand the contextual location of knowledge and in finding our way around what knowledge is, it helps to make a distinction between different kinds of knowledge - the most obvious being the difference between *knowing how* to do something (e.g. ride a bicycle) and *knowing that*[18], which refers to knowledge of facts, or theoretical knowledge. Then, too, we distinguish between explicit knowledge (knowing that you know and, at best, being in a position to justify the knowledge or truth claims), and implicit or tacit knowledge (e.g. how to use your mother tongue, or make grammatically correct sentences in your home language without being consciously aware of the rules that you are in fact following).

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[17] I use pedagogy as a referent for analysing how knowledge, values, desire and social relations are constructed, taken up, and implicated in relations of power in the interaction among cultural texts, institutional forms, authorities, and audiences. At stake here is acknowledging the productive, political, and ethical character of pedagogy as a deliberate attempt to influence how and what knowledge, experiences and identities are produced within particular social formations and relations (cf. Giroux 2001).

[18] Also known as propositional knowledge (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epistemology).

The distinction between 'knowledge-that' and 'knowledge-how' is sufficient for this discussion on the kind of knowledge the women in this study seemed to have. The latter, or 'knowledge-that', has to do with claims or statements about how things, in fact, are. These are statements about the world or a part of it that assert a factual state of affairs, in other words facts that were and will continue to be checked, through research, against objective evidence or data. 'Knowledge-how', in turn, indicates practical knowledge of the type noticed in a statement like: 'I know how to ride a bicycle.' In the case of claiming practical knowledge, showing how will suffice to verify a claim to practical knowledge, while 'knowledge-that' depends on the results or conclusions of planned and controlled research.

It is important to know what counts as practical knowledge (knowledge-how) and what counts as 'knowledge-that'. Each form of knowledge, in its proper place, will contribute to successful problem-solving. However, these forms of knowledge are not the same. Someone who has 'a lot of experience', as we say in lay terms, is typically someone with practical know-how, and not necessarily someone in control of 'knowledge-that'. If the former wants to convert her practical know-how into factual statements, she has to do the hard work of research: search again and again through a certain method for evidence with which to justify claims.

In *Personal Knowledge*, Michael Polanyi (1958)[19] makes a case for the epistemological relevance of both forms of knowledge. Using the example of the act of balance involved in riding a bicycle, he suggests that the theoretical knowledge of the physics involved in maintaining a state of balance cannot substitute for the practical knowledge of how to ride, and that it is important to understand how both are established and grounded.

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[19] Polanyi's (1958) philosophical ideas are most fully expressed in the Gifford Lectures he gave in 1951-52 at the University of Aberdeen, later published as Personal Knowledge. It was while writing this work that he discovered what he calls the 'structure of tacit knowing'. He regarded this as his most important discovery. In tacit knowing, persons experience the world by integrating their subsidiary awareness into focal awareness. In his later work, Polanyi elaborated what he called the 1) phenomenal, 2) functional, 3) semantic and 4) ontological aspects of tacit knowing.

2.9 Tacit Knowledge

According to Rod Watson (2006: 1), a dominant tendency in the analysis of tacit knowledge originates in the work of Edmund Husserl (1962). Husserl subjected the mundane frame of existence to examination. This frame of existence is the one within which ordinary persons routinely apperceive our phenomenal world. Within this frame of reference, which is experientially paramount, people take it for granted that they encounter things as they are, as self given. In ordinary circumstances, any doubt about what things are is routinely suspended (Watson 2006: 1). The example used by Watson is that in facing the front of a house, we tacitly assume from our perspectival standpoint that the house has side and rear elevations too, even though we cannot actually see them: we simply 'know' what houses are like – they have figured in our past experience, and so on. This taken-for-grantedness involves 'active' apperception, which is the act of perceiving (*ibid*).

Alfred Schutz (1967) extended Husserl's approach and applied it to both the social world and the social-scientific theorisations of that world (*ibid*). Schutz conceived of society members as comprehending and acting in their lived world as a phenomenal domain constituted through an intersubjectively (commonly held) held framework of ordinary common sense knowledge as built into lay members' practical actions (*ibid*). It was further asserted that this framework of taken-for-grantedness and its constituents, as proposed by Husserl, were incorporated into the production of sensible actions in an unstated, unquestioned way (Husserl cited in Watson 2006).

Now it is obvious that knowledge cannot be both expert and conscious *and* tacit, while most of what we 'know' and do in living our lives is indeed implicit or tacit. Generally, domestic workers possess both knowledge-how and knowledge-that, albeit that these are not fully recognised even by themselves.

2.10 Knowledge in Context

Giroux (2001) asserts that knowledge must always be contextually defined, allowing it to respond specifically to the conditions, formations and problems that arise in various sites in

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which learning takes place, as well as to respond to the very problems that arise in the in-between spaces, places and contexts that connect with the experiences of everyday life (Giroux 2001: 22).

Ahmad (2009), much like Giroux, asserts that knowledge is a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information and expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information. He further asserts that this knowledge originates and is applied in the mind of the knower (Ahmad 2009: 2).

Knowledge in the context of everyday framed experience is best captured by Freire (1970: 92) when he writes that,

> knowing is a social process, whose individual dimension, however, cannot be forgotten or even devalued. The process of knowing, which involves the whole conscious self, feelings, emotions, memory, affects an epistemologically curious mind, focused on the object, equally involves other thinking subjects, that is, others also capable of knowing and curious. This simply means that the relationship called 'thinking' is not enclosed in a relationship 'thinking subject - knowable object' because it extends to other thinking subjects.

According to Grossman (2002), the different aspects of knowledge cannot be separated from the context in which they are used and affirmed, or wasted and denied. He goes on to say that elitism has to be challenged and the gendered, racialised and hierarchical divisions of labour must be broken through to allow access to socially useful skills. At the same time, experiential knowledge has to be affirmed and respected, and domestic workers have to be allowed the resources to develop their talents and the opportunities to nurture socially useful skills. Both Craig (2007) and Haak (1995) on the other hand uphold the idea of knowledge as context-relevant, but warn against going 'overboard' by claiming exclusive ownership to that knowledge.[20] In other words, there is no such thing as a realm of domestic workers' knowledge.

Part one of the theoretical framework provided us with a lens through which to view learning and the acquisition of knowledge.

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[20] What Haak (1995) and Craig (2007) argue is that knowledge cannot be owned. Differing contexts that people live relative to do not give them license to own that knowledge. Therefore, acknowledging differences due to different histories and experiences is not tantamount to saying that this knowledge claim belongs to men (Craig 2007: 35), black people, or in this case, domestic workers.

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In what follows I review literature on alienation, needs and desires, and relations of power. These too are the sub-plots of the women's stories (see Chapter 3), but I review them separately because they capture something about the context of their lives, thus of their learning and knowledge.

One of the crucial frames for grasping the experiences of domestic workers in the political landscape of South African is 'alienation', i.e., the women's sense of estrangement. In order to clarify this complex concept, I examine it from different theoretical perspectives. From this I conclude that the experiences so labelled are best conceived as occurring at a particular intersection of the social-structural and the psychological realms.

2.11 Alienation

Although the concept can be traced back to at least ancient Roman times, it was Marx's critique of the exchange of labour for wages, in a particular socio-economic situation, that sparked ongoing interest in alienation as a description of workers' experiences. Marx argued that 'the estrangement between the worker, his or her tools, and the product of his or her labour, led to the removal of work as a central moment in human life and thus to the eradication of fundamental selfhood and humanity' (Langman and Kalekin-Fishman 2006: 1). Marx, who expounds the concept of alienation in considerable detail, identifies a certain type of *dysfunction* associated with the experiences of workers in capitalist systems. For Marx, this dysfunction essentially involves an 'unnatural separation' between oneself and what one produces so that what one produces comes to dominate its maker (Corlett 1988).[21]

According to Marx, there are at least four ways in which one is estranged or alienated (Meszaro 1970). First, one is deprived of the *product* of one's own labour. Second, one is alienated from *oneself* in the act of production. These two aspects of estrangement are related in that labour for man is self-constitutive and, as such, being deprived of the product of one's own labour, one is

[21] J. Angelo Corlett (1988) refers to the work of Allen Wood titled *Karl Marx* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1981).

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therefore also robbed of a part of oneself (cf. Meszaro 1970). Third, the alienation becomes manifest in the separation of self from others, which means that one is also estranged from others in the process of production (Corlett 1988: 700).[22] Fourth, alienation results from the separation of human beings from nature typical of the (industrial) process of production (Meszaro 1970). Alienation or estrangement, in Marxian terms, is thus characterised by four disfigurements: self from the products of labour, self from self, self from others, and human beings from nature.

Generally speaking, there is a division in the literature on alienation between those who consider alienation a phenomenon typical of mass, urbanised, industrial society and those who suggest that alienation is a universal and timeless phenomenon typical of all human society (Burger and Pullberg cited in Twinning 1980: 417). In addition, some writers consider 'alienation' too much of an ideological construct to be understood as more than a metaphor for the frustration humans encounter in varying situations of their lives (Feuer 1969 cited in Twinning 1980).

Central to the different conceptions of alienation are the powerlessness, loneliness, estrangement and disassociation experienced by workers in the context of their working lives. Kohn (1976) suggests that the crux of understanding alienation is to understand that it is located at the intersection of the social-structural and the psychological conditions.

I argue, in particular, that no examination of South African female domestic workers will be complete if alienation is not taken into account. The group included in the present study are, in fact, alienated as workers, as female workers, as domestic workers, and also as black workers. This many-faceted set of experiences brings both the psychological and the social-structural aspects to the fore. In addition, the political landscape in South Africa provides a necessary frame for making sense of both the women's experiences and our grasp of their alienation. In what follows, I review literature from each perspective under separate sub-headings.

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[22] Karl Marx & Frederick Engels, Collected Works, Volume 3. (1975). New York: International Publishers.

2.12 The social-psychological perspective

There has been much social and psychological research on the concept of alienation. The concept is useful as it points to an important interface between the individual and his or her social system where feelings of estrangement (powerlessness, normlessness, meaninglessness) are correlates of marginal social status, the loss of control over means of directing one's life and disaffection with the goals of the broader society (Martin et al. 1974: 266).

Central to the social-psychological perspective as defined by Seeman (1967, 1972) are five aspects namely powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, social isolation, and self-estrangement. He later focussed predominantly on powerlessness and work alienation as negative responses to work (1972). This perspective[23] was countered by Plasek (1974) who claimed that it was too narrow a lens to approach alienation as only the cognitive state of the individual, moreover emphasising the importance of subjective evaluation and then not taking into account the structural, historical and ideological conditions (Plasek 1974: 321).

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2.13 The social-structural perspective

Twinning (1980) in his defining of alienation as a social process, draws on the work of Blauner (1964) and Kohn (1976) as a point of synthesis between the Marxist and the social psychological perspectives through a simple shift in analytical focus. Blauner adopts a slightly modified Marxian approach and speaks of a 'structural differentiation'[24] and views alienation as a 'general syndrome made up of a number of different objective conditions and subjective feeling-states that emerge from certain relationships between workers and the sociotechnical[25] settings of employment.'

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[23] Seeman's perspective of alienation as purely a negative response to work

[24] Blauner (1964) determined that alienation was related to the impact of industrialisation on the worker and that structural differentiation of modern industry, especially technology, would allow for an examination of the relational character of the phenomenon (Blauner cited in Twinning 1980: 420).

[25] Blauner shifted the focus of Seeman's conceptual analysis and melded it with a modified Marxist approach.

Kohn,[26] in turn, examines the relationship between occupational structure and alienation with an emphasis on the loss of control over the process of one's labour. He therefore examines powerlessness and estrangement as processes of alienation in reference to ownership and division of labour, and to the degree of occupational direction. He contends that conditions of work and alienated responses do indeed have an impact beyond the workplace and that the lessons of the job are transmitted and directly generalised to non-occupational realities. In other words, as a result of the work conditions, the alienated responses extend outside the workplace to form as much a part of the everyday as the occupational realities.

Shepherd (1972) conceived of alienation as a response to separation from some social referent (e.g., someone or something that wields power), suggesting that it is attributed to perceptions of a lack of status and a lack of recognition within a certain social structure. This means that alienation must be examined in relation to its social referent, and in the case of female domestic workers, I would like to suggest that the social referent is located in the matrix of domination as experienced through class, race and gender inequality.

2.14 Feeling foreign in feminism[27]

Paid domestic labour remains distinctly characterised by social constructions of difference and continues to be centred in social location divides (Fish 2006: 133). Cock (1980) suggests that one of the sharpest challenges to sisterhood is the split created through the institution of domestic work. Relationships for South African women across colour divides are deeply complex, intricate and multifaceted. Thus Mohanty's (1991) notion of the First World/Third World divide further accentuates the intersection of class, race and gender,[28] and offers an important

[26] Kohn, 1976 cited in Twinning, 1980.

[27] A term I borrowed from Maivan Cletch –Lam (1994)

[28] In the South African context, we have to be mindful of rural and urban divides and locations as well.

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perspective in trying to understand the complication of and the complexity inherent in institutions of domestic work and the possibility for democratising the private sphere.[29]

Feminist[30] scholars have problematised the household as a strategic site in the binary construction of gender divides (Fish 2006: 14) to create a public/private duality. Ling (2002) disrupts the notion of the public/private duality in that she alludes to an inherent 'mutuality' of these domains and, unlike western thinking, does not feel they are mutually exclusive (Ling 2002 cited in Fish 2006: 14). According to Ling the private/public sphere is disrupted by introducing paid labour in the household domain (Ling 2002 cited in Fish 2006: 17). I want to draw express attention back to the issue of a connected relationship because it is very much informed by race and class, and certainly challenges any feminist notion of 'sisterhood'.

I want to highlight (western) feminist scholarship and the (white) feminist movement as part of proliferating feelings of alienation as experienced by the domestic workers in this study and women of colour more generally (cf. Mohanty 1998; Fish 2006; Leonardo 1985; Cletch Lam 1994; Davies 1989; Hickson & Strous 1993). Refuting notions of 'universal sisterhood', the institution of domestic labour allows us to see how gender is relational, historically situated, and not separate from race, class and nationality (Fish 2006: 18; Mohanty 1991; Cletch Lam 1994). Both Smith (1999) and Collins (1990) refer to a social stratum that relegates and reinforces the black or indigenous woman as 'other'. Collins describes the construction of 'black womanhood' as a process of othering that reinforces the hegemonic privileging of western feminist perspectives continually defined in relation to the dominant power group (Mohanty 1991; Smith 1999).

Often feminists are accused of representing third-world women as a 'singular monolithic subject'[31] (Mohanty 1998: 63). Mohanty further asserts that the monolithic analysis of the

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[29] The private sphere in this instance refers to the home or household shared between the domestic worker and the employer.

[30] I refer here to a 'white bourgeois feminist discourse' (Cletch Lam 1994: 866).

[31] Mohanty further argues that 'western feminist writing on women in the Third World must be considered in the context of the global hegemony of western scholarship – i.e. the production, publication, distribution and consumption of ideas' (Mohanty1988: 64).

'average third-world woman' fails to recognise the multiple complexities of women's lives and that notion that 'sisterhood is global'. Mohanty (2003) urges us to consider both an ideology and a methodology that considers the historical and structural conditions of women's very contextual lived experiences.[32] In the case of South Africa, white women, although living in the global south, maintain stronger ties with the white or northern power structures and often 'monolithically construct' black women domestic workers (Fish 2006: 20). Interestingly, the first world or third world power divide or dynamic is recreated and maintained among women who ostensibly share the same nation status (Fish 2006: 20). This is particularly important to note because it alludes to certain social and ideological patterns of privilege that continue to challenge and marginalise women of colour (Cletch Lam 1994).

Embedded in patterns of privilege are questions of power and alienation and central to its proliferation is the mediation of needs and desires.

2.15 Needs and desires

In terms of needs, Sheldon, Elliot, Kim and Kasser (2001) note that while there is a lack of consensus in defining needs, an uncertainty persists about how to identify them. In terms of defining a need, the authors raise the question of whether needs are synonymous with desires or cravings. They go on to explore the issue by trying to determine whether needs should necessarily enhance a person's health or well-being. Furthermore, needs are then framed, either being generated innately and revolving around the individual, or cutting across cultures and being universally formed. After touching on some of the issues that revolve around needs, the authors define needs 'primarily as necessary inputs rather than driving motives' (2001: 325). This definition would clearly suggest that necessity tends to outweigh the notion of desire in terms of identifying needs. This is particularly significant in the context of domestic workers and working class workers because their needs are usually mediated by the perceptions of others about what their needs should be. Desires of domestic workers are therefore rarely framed as a

[32] Mohanty posits this as central to the production of knowledge.

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need, while employers or those in positions of power can more easily frame a desire of theirs as a basic need.

In terms of weighing or grading needs, Sheldon, et al. (2001) draw from and build on Maslow's hierarchy of needs. According to Maslow's theory of personality, the five primary needs include the need for physical health, safety and security, self-esteem, love and belongingness, and self-actualisation. The authors go on to incorporate Deci and Ryan's need for competence and autonomy, and Epstein's need for pleasurable stimulation, into their model of needs. In essence, their revised model incorporates ten categories that need to be fulfilled: competency, security, physical thriving, autonomy, relatedness, self-esteem, self-actualisation, pleasure, luxury (money) and popularity (influence). While this model includes needs that go beyond the need for physical sustenance, the needs of domestic workers are often determined or at least largely influenced by the competing needs of their employers. In this way, domestic workers' needs are usually legitimated when they are framed as basic, covering the barest of essentials, and their desires and the seeming excesses of a 'want' are more easily disregarded.

According to Ryan and Deci (2000: 68), although people have a natural inclination to want to grow and learn, the 'human spirit can be diminished or crushed' and 'individuals sometimes reject growth and responsibility'. In terms of the authors' self-determination theory (SDT) of motivation, people want to feel useful or competent, that they have chosen the path they travel (autonomy), and that they are connected to others. Furthermore, motivation is influenced by the degree to which people have internalised and integrated these values into their lives. The integration and internalisation of their motivation is central because this process has an impact on the manner in which people live or regulate their lives. The feeling of connection is a vital component for the process of internalisation. Tied into this internalisation is the fact that a person is more inclined to buy into an activity when he or she is seen to be useful or competent in carrying out some aspect of the activity. On the other hand, external influences can induce behaviour, usually to fulfil the requirements of an external demand or reward. External demands are generally experienced as control or alienation. Again, the issue of whether values are culturally endorsed is important, especially in cross-cultural contexts where the need for competence, autonomy and relatedness might be valued differently. However, Ryan and Deci

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(2000) do note that ‘the mode and degree of people’s psychological-need satisfaction is theorised to be influenced not only by their own competencies but, even more important, by the ambient demands, obstacles, and affordances in their socio-cultural contexts’(p. 75). The authors note that if the social context in which people are rooted is receptive to meeting their psychological needs, then this environment fosters a developmental network that enhances agency. On the other hand, situations in which people are greatly controlled and not challenged appropriately, and in which they feel disconnected from others, do not foster actualisation and organisational tendencies, which in turn results in lack of responsibility and initiative, as well as psychopathology and distress (Ryan and Deci 2000)

Sheldon et al., (2001) raise the question of whether needs are tantamount to desires and cravings and, in essence, substantiate the work of Ryan and Deci (2000). Ryan and Deci provide a framework to ground the psychological realm that transcends the individual. They frame the psychological experience within a socio-cultural context that takes into account power dynamics and competing external demands. Ryan and Deci tie needs right back into questions of control and alienation. This is particularly relevant in any discussion about the lives of domestic workers, as their everyday experience is located in and mediated by the perceptions that others have of what their needs should or should not be.

I would like to draw on the work of literary theorist, Lauren Berlant, who coined the term ‘intimate public’, a term she uses to ‘describe the social umbrellas that unite strangers through shared race, religion, nationality, class, sexuality – or most any category of existence (Gibson 2008). Berlant is of the opinion that people who belong to intimate publics are people who have historically endured injustice and coercion, and turn to their ‘group’ for a ‘space of legitimacy that is not sanctioned by the dominant public.’ She goes on to say that ‘in subordinate populations’ intimate publics, the presumption is that the general world is not organised around their flourishing.’[33] If the space to flourish is not available, people will create spaces that allow them to feel ‘de-isolated, sanctioned, held, and where they can learn how other people survive.’ In the case of the domestic workers in this study, the SADSAWU and the space it provided was

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[33] http://magazine.uchicago.edu/0878/investigations/sentimental_ed.shtml

exactly the kind of space that enabled sharing and, consequently, legitimized stories and experiences, and fostered feelings of inclusion. Therefore, in essence, the union space and union membership were part of creating a 'domestic workers public'. This notion of a domestic workers' public ties in directly to another observation made by Berlant when she claims that sharing, while being recognised as a mode of self-expression or protest, is sometimes also about conceding to the inevitability of control and alienation. To further reinforce the idea, she goes on to say that telling and retelling of the same kinds of stories alludes to 'unfinished business' or needs that are consistently unmet. That is to say, the retelling process addresses the need for a 're-encounter with the problem of survival.'

I want to talk specifically about power in this next section because the general belief is that, as people, we have different levels of power, which then assumes our ability to more or less achieve what we wish for ourselves and for society as a whole. Much like identity, power is not fixed. How we negotiate power in one sphere might be decidedly different in another sphere, thus understanding power is central to grasping the interrelation between the themes as evidenced in the data: (i) learning, (ii) knowledge, (iii) alienation, (iv) needs and desires, and (v) the question of power. Domestic workers yielded different levels power in their lives: as family members, as domestic workers, and as union members.

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2.16 Relations of Power

Like some of the previous concepts highlighted in this chapter, power bears its fair share of ambiguity and contradiction with little agreement among scholars about what it means or explains. It seems as though for every assumption about power, there is a plausible counter assumption and the implication is that power is no less complex or slippery than other key concepts presented previously in this chapter and, more generally, key concepts in the social sciences.

Stanley Barrett, in his book, *Culture Meets Power* (2002), offers some basic assumptions about power and, in essence, turns our attention to the slippery slope we navigate in trying to explain power as a concept. These assumptions include: (a) power as a fundamental human motive, (b)

power as equal extent or scope with society, (c) power as force at its most elementary, and (d) power as always negative, destructive, unfair and immoral, to name but a few. What follows are some brief descriptions of the above conjectures.

For Marx, as well as for more conventional, the most fundamental human motive is 'self interest'. However, Bertrand Russell in his critique of this notion claims that the assumption is out and out 'wrong' and that power warrants distinction (Russell cited in Barrett 2002: 66). He goes on to say that power is a 'fundamental concept' and a 'chief motive' and an 'essential part of human nature'. In line with this thinking is Edmund Leach's assertion that we are never justified in assuming that behaviour can be reduced to a single motive, except that is, for power (Leach cited in Barrett 2002: 67). Others have tried to explain this single motive as pathological and an incessant need that has adults overcompensating for childhood deprivations. A strong counter argument against these psychological explanations of power is that the inclination to submit is equally as prevalent as the drive for power, and that people who seek power do not fit neatly into distinct personality types (Barrett 2002).

In the shift away from the psychological explanation is the idea that power is a sociological phenomenon. It is ever-present, unrestrained and implicated in all institutions. This kind of power runs through race, values and beliefs, and cuts through gender, ethnicity and class, although it is broader and deeper than all of these. In this explanation, power is unmotivated and it is unintentional. Power permeates the entire social fabric and the sheer weight of this kind of power recreates structured systems of advantage and disadvantage independent of human preference or desire (Barrett 2002: 66). Barrett goes on to say that trying to explain power in this instance is synonymous with trying to explain society. While I am inclined to agree with the view that power is ever-present, I am disinclined to side with the perception that power is unmotivated and unintentional. A critique of this assumption is that it would in fact require very intentional acts and specific kinds of structured behaviours. Added to this is the fact that this critique does not account for unintentional human behaviour, thus rendering power's unintentional nature as almost illogical.

Power as synonymous with force speaks to authority, manipulation and coercion, but cannot explain assertions such as *the power of the pen*, or in the case of this research, that *knowledge is*

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power. For some, like Foucault, where force exists, power certainly does not and so force and power are juxtaposed and interact in opposition to each other, thereby discounting the idea that power at its most elementary is force (Foucault cited in Barrett 2002: 67)

Power as always negative, immoral and destructive is a concept that alludes to power being the key to systems of stratification and suggests one sector or one person 'lording it over another'. It produces and sustains institutionalised inequality much like systems of patriarchy, where men lord over women or in the case of South Africa's apartheid era, white people rule over black people. Relevant to this study, the domestic worker has been reduced to a labour unit rather than thought of as a person (Mohutsioa-Makhudu 1989: 113). And with respect to domestic work, the relationship between employer and employee is one of inequality, with employers setting wages, deciding on daily tasks, and deciding on rules that more often than not impinge on the domestic's private life and basic privacy. This situation extends even further when one considers the large number of employers who do not bother to call domestics by their names, but rather refer to them as 'girl'. In contrast, the form of address used for the employer is that of 'madam' or 'master' (Lelyveld 1986; Cock 1980; Davies 1989; Fish 2006). The employer is almost certainly always in a position of power. In this instance, we have patterns of advantage and disadvantage being sustained and buttressed by ideology with force very much in the foreground. Here I would like to draw on Freire's exposition of power, which claims that power is not just negative as is suggested by this assumption. Freire is explicit in his claim that power is both negative and positive, and that domination is not just merely imposed (Freire 1985).

Freire offers a dialectical notion of power in so far as power being viewed as both a negative and a positive force. He claims that its mode of operation is usually more than just simply repressive. For Freire, power works both on and through people. In other words, power is never experienced exclusively as a negative force. He also maintains that power is at the basis of all forms of behaviour in which people resist, struggle and fight for their image of a better world. In the case of South Africa's current political terrain, after 15 years of democratic rule, the dualities of struggle and hope continue. A world-renowned constitution, which includes an impressive Bill of Rights, is in place. The economy has grown and some measure of political stability has been achieved. However, it is in the social domain that enormous challenges remain and grow. For a

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large part of the population, life is still very much about struggle and hope. This is an important observation because it speaks to the broadening terrain on which and in which power operates. Power in this instance is not limited to or exhausted in those public and private domains or spheres where governments, ruling classes and other dominant groups operate.

Freire (1970) offers an alternative perspective, and he stresses the contradictions and tensions in the various spheres that power occupies. He also speaks of domination, not as something merely imposed, but also as the expression of the way in which power, technology and ideology come together to produce forms of knowledge and social relations, as well as other concrete cultural forms that function to actively silence people. A very important observation made here is that domination is certainly not only about that which bears down on the oppressed daily, but is also to be found in the ways in which the oppressed internalise and thus participate in their own oppression, so to speak, and this then points to the ways in which domination is subjectively experienced through its internalisation.[34] Foucault called this internalisation ‘interiorisation’ in his work, *Power/Knowledge* (1974). Foucault also claimed that power is only exercised at a cost and, in his study of the penal system, he combined this notion of power and cost with what he termed ‘gaze’ and ‘interiorisation’:

> There is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorisation to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against, himself. A superb formula: power exercised continuously and for what turns out to be minimal cost (Foucault 1974).[35]

Interestingly, Foucault (1980) grapples with what he considers the widely held notion of power being a top-down phenomenon wielded from above. Instead, Foucault saw power as being everywhere and claims that power is constantly being produced and is constantly producing resistance. And, much like Freire, he claims that power is not necessarily merely imposed. He goes on to say that we are to be mindful not of what we perceive to be the exertion of power, but

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[34] In relation to this notion of internalisation and domination being subjectively experienced, Freire talks about it eventually becoming part of the very needs of the personality, thus creating stumbling blocks to self-emancipation (Freire1970, 1985).

[35] http://foucault.info/documents/foucault.eyeOfPower.en.html

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rather its proliferation, because it is in the proliferation of power that we are disciplined and controlled.[36]

Foucault challenges the juridico-discursive notion of power that further reinforces the idea that power simply represses. He rather chooses to characterise power as multi-faceted, ubiquitous and productive. Interestingly, along these same lines, Freire claims that power is omnipresent and is expressed in a range of oppositional public spaces and spheres that have 'traditionally' been characterised by the *absence* of power and thus from any resistance.

It seems as though Foucault was not satisfied with a discussion of power as a pure abstraction and wanted to identify more concretely and explicitly what power is and how it functions. In his book, *History of Sexuality* (1980), he uses sexuality as a means to explain the proliferation of power. Central to *History of Sexuality* is its redefinition of power, not as a force that is exerted from the top and that is simply repressive, but one that is productive and omnipresent. For Foucault, power is circulating constantly and produces resistance. In other words, as people we do not 'have' power implicitly; rather, power is a technique or an action that individuals can engage in. Power is not possessed. Rather, it is exercised and where there is power, there is resistance. For Foucault, power is circulating constantly and produces its own resistance.[37]

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[36] I draw here on Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (1980), where he demonstrates that power is not only repressive and is not merely imposed from the top but is omnipresent and inherent in all social relations. In *History of Sexuality*, Foucault grapples with what he believes to be a widely held misconception – that over the past three hundred years, the history of sexuality (specifically the Victorians) has been a history of repression. Furthermore, the hypothesis Foucault speaks of purports that the only way to be liberated from this repression is to talk about sex, by telling the truth about oneself.

Foucault's challenge to the repression hypothesis emphasised key points of departure: he believed that instead of the subject of sex being suppressed, that in actual fact discourses on sex have only proliferated. This has resulted from the fact that not only do the clergy demand of us that we confess ourselves, but the scientific fraternity has also intensified its investigation into the human body and sexuality. However, contrary to what the repression hypothesis espouses, this proliferation of discourses on sex has not spurred us toward liberation but rather has aided in further disciplining and controlling us. Foucault alludes to the proliferation of power in much the same way. Foucault's ideas were extended when Shanklin, in identifying how states have used bio-power, claims that race and sexuality may thus be seen as 'twins' (in Harrison1999:618).

[37] Shanklin further developed Foucault's idea by suggesting that, as an instrument of the state's 'biologising' power race may be viewed in much the same way (Shanklin cited in Harrison 1999: 618). Although not raised explicitly here, Shanklin's connection illustrates the very wide array of uses Foucault's power concept has had. Goldberg, for instance, applies the bio-power sex/race model to an analysis of the manner in which the apartheid state generated discourses around the naturalisation of race in order to justify its regime.

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The Foucauldian notion of the absence of 'having' implicit power is somewhat evocative of Bourdieu's symbolic power. While power in the form of domination is at the core of Bourdieu's work, he extends his concept of capital[38] to power and contends that capital in the form of power does not exist in isolation, but relationally in fields[39], thus making it a symbolically mediated interaction.

Much like Freire and Foucault, Bourdieu contends that the dominated internalise their conditions for domination but, unlike Freire and Foucault, Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power does not recognise power as producing its own resistance. Symbolic power is therefore the capacity to impose classifications and meanings as legitimate and, accordingly, creates a form of symbolic violence that finds expression in everyday classifications, labels, meanings and categorisations that subtly implement a social and symbolic logic of inclusion and exclusion.[40]

While I heed the many definitions and explanations of power, I draw on the thinking that power is ubiquitous, positive and negative, constantly produced and producing resistance. I have endeavoured to emphasise and underscore some of the many assumptions made about power and power relations and it is my contention that understanding notions of power that reify the complexities of oppression, domination, authority and resistance are critical to the discussion on learning as experienced by domestic workers. Not only is power critical to our understanding, but it is essential as a referent for analysing how knowledge, values, desires and social relations are constructed, taken up and implicated in relations of power in the interaction among cultural

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[38] Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital is widely known – he has applied the concept of capital to an array of areas like social capital, economic capital and academic capital.

(http://www.allacademic.com//meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/2/4/2/4/2/pages242427/p242427-1.php)

[39] Bourdieu defines 'field' as a specific sphere of struggle.

(http://changingminds.org/disciplines/sociology/theorists/bourdieu.htm)

[40]Symbolic power takes the form of embodied dispositions – what Bourdieu calls the habitus that generate a 'practical sense' for organising perceptions of and actions in the social world. Bourdieu puts power at the heart of the functioning and the structure of habitus, since habitus involves an unconscious calculation of what is possible, impossible and probable for people in their specific locations in the stratified social order.

texts, institutional forms, authorities and audiences, and its attempt to influence experiences and identities that are produced within particular social formations and relations.

2.17 Concluding comments

To better examine and understand the themes suggested by an analysis of the data, this chapter presented a detailed theoretical framework that will provide the backdrop against which the results of the study are discussed in chapter 5. The first part of the chapter reviewed theoretical.

perspectives on informal learning and the informal acquisition of knowledge. A review of these theories showed them to provide lenses which were relevant and useful for a study of domestic workers in the WEP. These theories were seen as critical to understanding the lived experiences of domestic workers and the role of the WEP. In particular, this part of the framework highlighted the social nature of learning, the value of experience, and the importance of relationships as part of the learning process.

In order to expand the understanding and theorisation presented in the first part of the chapter, the second part of the chapter thus reviewed the social and structural conditions within which learning happened and knowledge was acquired. Furthermore, the second part of the chapter argued that learning and knowledge cannot be divorced from women's histories, needs and aspirations and the matrix of power that is central to its articulation.

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Chapter 3 METHODOLOGY

This research project is not written up as a traditional ethnography.[41] However, it is influenced by the principles of critical ethnography, which is to say that it allows for what Carspecken and Apple (1992: 510) refer to as the acknowledgement of human struggles with competing social forces within the context of an unequal society. While this project is again not married to all of the defining principles of a critical ethnography, it is influenced by an ethical responsibility to address processes of fairness and injustice within a particular *lived* domain.

As a qualitative research method, ethnography draws on extensive detailed descriptions. This study in particular draws on interviews, observation *in situ*, and the workshop process. According to Durrheim (1999), one of the primary methods used by 'qualitative' researchers is interviewing. Qualitative studies aim at providing an in-depth description of a smaller number of people (Mouton 2001). Choosing to do a qualitative study allowed me to participate in workshops, conduct un-structured interviews and observation of a small number of participants. This also allowed me to contextualise and analyse the data in the participants' everyday practices.

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[41] I refer here to ethnography in the anthropological sense. The term ethnography may be loosely applied to any qualitative research project where the purpose is to provide a detailed, in-depth description of everyday life and practice. This is sometimes referred to as "thick description" -- a term attributed to the anthropologist Clifford Geertz writing on the idea of an interpretive theory of culture in the early 1970s. The use of the term "qualitative" is meant to distinguish this kind of social science research from more "quantitative" or statistically oriented research. The two approaches, i.e., quantitative and qualitative, while often complimentary, ultimately have different aims. The ethnographer goes beyond reporting events and details of experience. Specifically, he or see attempts to explain how these represent what we might call "webs of meaning", the cultural constructions, in which we live. An ethnographic understanding is developed through close exploration of several sources of data. Using these data sources as a foundation, the ethnographer relies on a cultural frame of analysis.

(http://www.brianhoey.com/General%20Site/general_defn-ethnography.htm)

I used semi-structured interviews, and found this method useful as it allowed for the interviewees to answer on their own terms and at their own pace. A large part of the interview process focussed on biographical information, because biography and identity are interlinked with how learning is experienced (Freire 1970).

McClellan (2000) believes that interviewees have ownership of their stories, including the right to take back what they have revealed in an interview. In addition to explaining the purpose of the research and making the interviewee feel comfortable, I addressed methods for giving power to the speaker by asking about typical misconceptions, by requesting assistance in generating and wording questions, and by offering respectful silence after significant narrations and disclosures.

Anderson and Jack (1991) spoke of the idea of listening 'in stereo' (Anderson and Jack 1991: 11) to women's voices with a discerning ear, to distinguish between the dominant male perspective echoed in the testimony, as well as the woman's own voice speaking her own truths as experienced by her. Janet Bean (2003) asserts that it is the job of the researcher to provide a respectful space in which people can represent their lives in a way that brings them power and integrity.

3.1 Ethical considerations

As important as it is to consider all the possibilities in addressing ethics in this context, I am in agreement with Pat Caplan (2003) who suggested that research ethics are always negotiated in the field. Different kinds of power were negotiated all the time, together with my own limitations in a world where black women as domestic workers live with little dignity (Grossman 2004).[42]

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[42] For example, some women are referred to as 'girls' and some women are expected to refer to their employers as 'master' and 'madam' in work situations with minimal security that binds them no matter how exploitative the relationship (Gordon 1985).

3.2 Positionality

I had to be mindful and sensitive to my own assumptions and questions around 'representivity', as representing Others[43] (i.e. those excluded from the dominant white, male discourse) is never free of contention or complication. This arose repeatedly and on multiple fronts throughout the research.

The researcher or ethnographer is required to be committed to consider how his or her own acts of studying and representing people reinforce the subjected position of the 'subjects' – already *subjected* to an exclusionary and dominating discourse imposed from outside their lived worlds – and whether they are party to further acts of domination. In these terms, the issue of power over others and thus the question of 'positionality' becomes important. I want to highlight this because, in acknowledging my own position of power and authority, my limitations and my own responsibility relative to the representations and interpretations I offer, I have to be able to answer to questions about what my position means, and what difference it makes given that I too am part of a history of colonisation and disenfranchisement. According to Murillo, I travel that blurred boundary of Other becoming researcher, of narrated becoming narrator and one emergent and intermittent identity continuously informing the other (Murillo 2004; see also Noblit et al., 2004: 166). For Narayan, the adjective 'insider' is problematic because there are a myriad of factors (i.e. class, gender, religion, education, etc.) that could offset the cultural identity we assume with insider or outsider status (Narayan 1993: 672). Patricia Hill Collins refers to the 'outsider within' positioning of research (1991).

In terms of my own fieldwork, my own self-identification as a black woman[44], as a political identity, from a working-class family background and employed in part-time domestic service paying my college tuition, did not create or constitute a 'native' context to which I had special insights and special access. While I might have identified on some level, I am also a university

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[43] Representation has consequences. The ways in which research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world's colonized peoples (Tuhiwai Smith 1999: 1)

[44] My Canadian experience was that of a black woman. Given the racial classifications of the apartheid era it was at times difficult to claim blackness when that same system would locate me as coloured. My identity was further complicated by my North American experience and accent.

student, a researcher and, having grown up in Canada, not only speak with a clearly identifiable foreign accent, but have also lived an experience that was largely located in North America. Narayan's point is simple yet significant: points of identification exist alongside points of differentiation.

Being female, and being aware of my own inability to define sometimes for myself and step outside of the lines that have been drawn for me by 'white feminist scholars' (cf. Cletch Lam 2004, Tuhiwai Smith 1999, Fish 2006, Mohanty 1998) that claim a shared female experience with universal characteristics and universal sufferings, I am concerned about visibility, voice, invisibility and silence.[45] In the previous chapter, I pointed out the inclination of white bourgeois feminist scholarship to represent Third World women or women of colour as a 'singular monolithic subject'[46] (Mohanty 1998: 63). What this highlights for me as the researcher is the challenge of reflexivity, the process of critical self-awareness and the openness with which I approach this study. The women domestic workers who formed part of the WEP have very different personal, social, political and economic circumstances that shape their everyday lives. Therefore, I have had to be mindful of and acknowledge the unique perspective and the distinctive standpoint of their lived experiences as domestic workers.

I was concerned with the respectful representation of working class lives, which is to say that I had to be acutely aware of the complexity of my multiple positions. Because of this, ethics was immediately important to my research and questions about ethics were always on my mind. This was especially so because of the potential vulnerability of the participants. Women domestic workers risk a great deal when they discuss topics close to home and share them with others, because these people might respond disrespectfully (Lindquist 2004: 188) and also because of the minimal work security. Janet Bean (2003) alerts us to the dangers inherent in holding up

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[45] I do not assume arrogance as the researcher in a position of power alone. I recognise that the participants in this study are under no obligation to share their stories with me. Power was negotiated on both sides.

[46] Mohanty further argues that 'western feminist writing on women in the Third World must be considered in the context of the global hegemony of western scholarship – i.e. the production, publication, distribution and consumption of ideas' (Mohanty 1988: 64).

parts of our lives for public scrutiny and the possible risks involved both with misinterpretation and with misrepresentation.

I am not proposing that this research study will in any way ease any suffering nor do I claim any change towards better conditions. Instead, I am mindful, and very much so, of the overt and covert power dynamics that do exist and I attempt to speak with rather than for or on behalf of these female domestic workers.[47]

3.3 Field Site

At the time of the research the SADSAWU very small offices on loan from Cosatu were housed in the old COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions) offices at Salt River House.[48] Both organisations shared a general reception area and to get to the SADSAWU offices during weekdays, one had to pass through COSATU's general training area, sometimes while training was in session.

3.4 Workshops

The workshops were conducted with an average of 16 women per workshop session and two facilitators over a period of four months. These workshops were conducted at the SADSAWU offices in the COSATU training rooms every Sunday after lunch, which is when most domestic workers were 'off duty'. Before the start of each workshop, we would sit around over tea and the SADSAWU members would talk about the week that had just passed and the week ahead. It was a time of very personal sharing and joking, during which it seemed that women let their guards down.

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[47] Both as it relates to their everyday lives and the learning with which they were engaged.

[48] Salt River is a mainly industrial suburb of Cape Town located near Table Bay to the east of the city of Cape Town (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salt_River,_Cape_Town).

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A total of five Health and Safety workshops were held and on average, each session lasted between three and four hours. In addition, without adhering to a strict and rigid format, each workshop covered: 1) an introduction or introductory story, 2) the expression and uncovering of lived experiences and sharing incidents and feelings of being undermined, and 3) a focussed discussion.

The first part of the workshop was used to introduce the day's session and to clarify the direction that the session would take. It was also used to establish and reinforce the safety of the space and provide the room for personal disclosure. The second part of the workshop focussed on the sharing of the participants' stories and feelings, and the women were encouraged to talk about emotional and physical wellbeing – with particular emphasis in some instances on perceptions of health and safety and what they meant for a domestic worker. The third and last part of the workshop focussed on more detailed discussions on common themes in the personal narratives and their relationship to personal health and well-being. At the heart of these workshops was the need to have the women and their experiences validated by themselves and each other in a world where they lived with very little validation.

3.5 The workshop participants

The women who participated in these workshops were both black and coloured, and they were from both urban and rural hometowns, although most of the women were from rural towns like Namaqualand, Uniondale, Eastern Cape, Clanwilliam, Northern Cape, Prieska to mention a few. Very few women hailed from Cape Town.

Most of the women were live-in domestics who had been working for anything from 10 to 40 years. There was a great variation in terms of the highest standard achieved at school. These grades ranged from Standard 2 (Grade 4) to Standard 10[49] (Grade 12), with the average being Standard 5. A large number of domestic workers were not given the opportunity to study further. The majority of the concerns voiced by these women centred on knowing worker rights, job

[49] This is indicative of only one of the women, a field worker and union organizer, and is quite unusual.

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stability and security, health and safety, payment for overtime work, to have more leave or time off, and the desire to have their humanity and their skills recognised.

3.6 Interviews (includes discussions and conversations)

Interviews for this study were conducted in 2006 between the months of August and October at the SADSAWU offices. These interviews were carried out separately from the workshops and were conducted with the women individually. Interviews generally lasted between 90 minutes and 180 minutes. Each individual interview was completed in one interview session.

Interviews were conducted in such a way that they resembled a conversation and this format tended to make the interviewees more comfortable. The interactive approach also encouraged open discussion between the interviewees and I. I used a tape recorder to record the interviews, and I was worried at first that the recording device would impede the conversation. However, the conversation and the knowledge of the details of their own lives led to the recorder being much less of an issue than anticipated.

There were times I was aware that the tape might have run out or that the noise levels were problematic and to avoid too much focus on the actual tape recorder, I focussed on the details of the story, especially since some of the details were painful and required sensitivity and compassion. However, I still had to be mindful of the quality of the recordings.[50] I was most concerned with having the data emerge (cf. Durrheim 1999) with minimal interference from myself. Therefore, I started with broad questions and became more specific along the way as a means of eliciting information with a minimum of leading. Using this approach was useful in that it allowed me to delve into sensitive issues.

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[50] I had to pay attention to recording levels so the interviews could be transcribed.

3.6.1 The Interviewees

I interviewed five programme participants, two of whom doubled as programme organisers for the domestic workers union. These same two women had retired from domestic service and were field workers for the SADSAWU working on domestic worker case files and recruiting live-in domestic workers as potential members to the union. They did not facilitate any of the workshops but were responsible for the workshop logistics. Three of the five domestic workers interviewed are single, live-in domestic workers.

The youngest of the interviewees was 33 years old with the oldest being 61 years old. The average age of these women was 49 years old. Most of the women had been employed in domestic service anywhere from ten to 40 years. Some are parents and some are grandparents. Almost all of the women have dependants, some of whom live either with immediate family or with extended family. Sometimes the dependants are not their biological children, but are the children of other family members who have either died or work even farther away with even less access to actively maintain some semblance of family life. For many of the women, their place of work is also their place of abode. These women worked and lived in places like Kenilworth, Sea Point, Newlands, and Constantia.

The domestic workers interviewed most commonly worked a six-day week, and on average, worked between eight and 14 hours per day. The variation in wage is dramatic, ranging anywhere from R550 to R2 500[51] per month.

I also interviewed one workshop facilitator, a university professor. These interviews took the form of informal discussions both at set meetings times at my place of work or after the workshops on a Sunday afternoon where the *observations in situ* were discussed at length.

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[51] Generally those women working in very high socio-economic areas earned a much higher wage which is not representative of the average domestic worker in South Africa.

3.6.2 Observations *in situ*

I include my observations *in situ* as another body of data. Extensive notes were written after each workshop session and these were used specifically to examine needs and desires as expressed and experienced during the process of engagement with the women. The observations *in situ* were central to my own understanding of the importance of reflection and were critical to unearthing my own assumptions about the learning process and the entire research project.

I did not have the opportunity to observe any of the participants in settings other than the workshop setting at the SADSAWU offices. Apart from two meetings, no homes were visited and no time was spent at the workplace.

3.7 Analysis of Data

All sources of data were transcribed and treated as text for in-depth reading and for ongoing discussions as to the meaning of what was said and done. I separated the interview transcripts into two sections. One section dealt with biographical information, the nature of work as a domestic, and their perspectives and experiences, while the second section dealt with learning, learning practices and reflection.

The central themes emerging from a combination of my initial literature review, my observations, the interviews and a thorough and extensive immersion in the data were then used as categories for further elaboration along with illustrative extracts from the data. That is to say, the categories suggested by reading and rereading and discussion of the data, together with the women's stories were as follows:

(i) Learning

(ii) Knowledge

(iii) Alienation

(iv) Needs and desires

(v) Relations of power.

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Each of these categories, depending on the source of data, were then further elaborated on and clarified. For example, the learning discussed by participants suggested the following themes: specific facts, reasons for things, alternatives to practices, and about themselves. The raw data was then scrutinised again in order to find illustrative extracts from what the participants had said and done.

3.8 Concluding Comments

In this chapter I introduced my ideas about methodology, outlined the methods used for data gathering (including a description of the field sites, observations, participants, and data analysis). In what follows I present the collected data along the specific themes or sub-plots as noted in the two previous chapters.

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Chapter 4 Re-storied Lives

> In its barest pre-narrative facticity, human life is meaningless: indeed, it is not yet human at all. Meaning depends upon narrative. So to give human life meaning, we must start telling stories about it. We've got to narrate it, that is, to fictionalize52 it. We alone make meaning (Cupitt 1991: 98)

4.1 Introduction

As indicated in Chapter 1, the very point of the work reported here is to address the research aims and key questions which includes allowing the women to articulate and voice their experiences that are too often undermined and diminished. These experiences have obvious political and economic consequences – quite apart from the more obvious social and psychological effects that their undermined and diminished positions have on their lives.

In what follows, I unpack the women's said and done in terms of the following plot-themes[53]: learning, knowledge, alienation, needs and desires, and the relations of power that shape and direct their lives. These plot-themes emerged from a qualitative analysis of the transcripts produced from the various interviews, meetings and workshops outlined in Chapter 3.

My initial interest in the WEP centred around learning and the acquisition of knowledge. However, it became apparent from the outset that in order to adequately assess learning and knowledge acquisition, it would be necessary to examine the structural conditions in which learning and knowledge acquisition occurred. The women's accounts of their lives constantly

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[52] Cupitt regards story-telling as a human need and ability to exercise some control over change and the passage of time and, crucial for present purposes, *not* '"bad for truth" as has been thought since Plato gave stories and art generally a bad name, but in fact our way of *making* truth or *fashioning* a life worth living' (1991: 12-31).

[53] Cupitt calls the patterns in stories 'plot-themes' or '*mythemes*' (1991: 13).

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reflected feelings of powerlessness, loneliness, estrangement and disassociation all of which are grouped under the umbrella of alienation. Needs and desires on the other hand was a recurrent theme. In line with my own motivations for the research I thought it was important to allow women to express both their humanity and individuality. Needs and desires emerged from the women themselves and functioned as a means to understanding the experiences of the women as women, as *black women* and as *workers*. While alienation accounted for how women's lives were acted on structurally, historically and ideologically, needs and desires was about women's reflections on what they felt they needed to enhance their quality of life. Power is the matrix in which all of the themes were mediated. Power accounted for the complexities that gave expression and context to the accounts of the women's lived experiences.

Each theme is introduced so as to pave the way for restoring the women's lived experiences to their fullness. After these introductory notes, I will unpack each theme in their own words, coupled with my interpretations and comments on they have said and done.

4.2 The plot-themes in the women's stories

4.2.1 Learning

After a review of the interview transcripts it is clear that the women's engagement in union activities did, in fact, result in them learning a great deal that was useful and important. I categorised their responses about what they learned so as to distinguish and draw out different levels of the learning process. The categories reflect basic comprehension (facts), causation (reasons for), alternatives (critical thinking and reflection), identity, personal transformation and self awareness (what they learned about themselves). In particular, they learned specific *facts*, (e.g. about the law and their rights), *reasons* for their experiences, (e.g. backache), *alternatives* to their usual practices, (e.g. how to hang washing without hurting the back) and, most importantly, *they learned about themselves* and their identities. Interestingly, alternatives to practices and insights about themselves were deemed most important by all of the women interviewed and required a certain amount of reflection, critical thinking and self-awareness.

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The women also reported on the different and, at times, conflicting roles they occupy as women, workers and domestic workers. The latter is well captured in the following statement: '*I think we still have to build the woman a lot... we still need to encourage the woman within the domestic worker to come out... we also need to make the employer realise it's a woman working for her*'.[54]

Learning took place through reading, observation of self and others, listening, talking, and watching television, and also by doing, and learning from mistakes in doing. Learning was thus more often an incidental part of their daily grind, but not for all that any less appreciated by the women. The following extract captures the richness of the many ways in which the women learned and came to re-own their lives through learning:

> *I think it's a good thing to read, and as you read, at least you can say that you read that in the newspaper. Like yesterday, I was saying that talking about the woman who gets raped and talking about our justice system that's so weak, and women get raped and children get raped, and nothing happens. Also, and I like to share what I learn, you will never believe how I speak to the committee members. I will stand in front of them and I will say this is what I learn and I also want you to become a leader one day, so I can, also if I'm still alive, looking at you, how you perform in your organisation. And I like to deal, also as a leader, like the people outside the union – it gives me more knowledge. I like to work with the NGOs like HIV Aids, you know Black Sash and all these people – it's different issues that come up. I like to write. It's one thing for me, I like a pen and then I will write it down and then on Sunday, when I'm free and have nowhere to go, I will go through my notes whatever and sometimes I bring it up in the committee meetings.*

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That the women learned, and reported on this, is heartening in view of the often body-breaking nature of domestic work. Clearly, part of what they learned involved easing their load, but learning also took on another role. The women used what they learned to create spaces for self-validation and also for distinction. In the words of one: '... *it is also from the education from the union that things became better... if I didn't have the education and the knowledge, then I wouldn't have had the guts to defend myself at work...*' Participation in union activities certainly

[54] Note that all quotations of the women's own words are from the transcripts that are available from the author on request.

made learning possible, in part because, as one woman said, '*[there are]…too much stories we share of our lives that makes us feel we are not alone.*'

To achieve mastery of one's life and a certain distinction in what one does is clearly important to all people. Learning therefore can never be underestimated and must be acknowledged as a motivating force in these women's lives. As someone said about her own movement through the ranks:

> *I must say that the trade union was giving me very good education, even the workshops,…I finished school in Standard 5. Today I am [chairperson]…because through the education and learn from other people, taking advice from other people and literacy in the union.*

Learning as a motivating force in the lives of these women is further illustrated in the following:

> *Ek het self die boek gevat en gelees…ek het gelees van skoonmaak middels wat veilig is en dis 'green products' wat vir die environment gemaak is... Daar was baie goed wat ek geleer het... van hoe die chemicals werk en hoe die chemicals jou kan siek maak en om te vra is it safe? Soos, by voorbeeld, ek dra nou gloves. Ek werk met Domestos en sulke goed, maar ek gebruik gloves...ek wil nie siek oor die dinge raak nie.*[55]

The products of what the women learned: specific facts, reasons for things, alternatives to practices, and about themselves, qualify as knowledge – albeit *informal* knowledge – and thus knowledge that is not certified and, as such, not properly compensated for. What they possess are socially useful and valued skills; the question is whether the knowledge and know-how that accompanies these skills could be accounted for in such a way that they are properly affirmed, valued and open to life-long learning accreditation.

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[55] 'I took a book and read it for myself. I read about cleaning products that are safe to use and they're called *green products*, made for the environment. There was a lot that I learnt… about how chemicals work and how these chemicals can make you sick, and to ask if it is safe. For example, now I wear gloves. I work with Domestos (household cleaner) and things like that but now I wear gloves… I said I do not want to get sick over these things.' Translation by author.

4.2.2 Knowledge

The workshops, as already stated, focused on health and safety issues, and this was well received by the women. They were demonstrably eager to learn and wanted experts to impart knowledge that would help them in their lives and work situations. The women thus wanted what they regarded as valued and valuable knowledge. The question that this raises is one about different *kinds* of knowledge (formal versus informal, practical versus factual, and accredited versus non-accredited) and their respective value in society, in general, and in the workplace, in particular. My concern, as a researcher, is to emphasise the social value of their know-how, their experiences and their informal knowledge, so as to create a political space for appropriate recognition and thus compensation for their informal knowledge in much the same way Grossman (2002) advocates. However, my emphasis does come up against the women's expressed desire for specific facts, thus, for factual and, as such, formal knowledge. My concern is that if the women do not take their own practical know-how seriously as knowledge, it leaves little room to argue that the women's experiential knowledge be given a status commensurate with the socially useful function they fulfil as workers. The women's own capacity to undervalue their practical and implicit knowledge directly affects the impact of any political initiatives aimed at gaining recognition for their skills. However, they did also acknowledge the depth of their own experiences and the usefulness of this to their work as domestic workers apart from their clear and repeated calls for more factual knowledge about their work and well-being.

The following example demonstrates such an acknowledgment where a worker recognises the value of her skills:

> *I come to the factory for work – I saw this people standing – I thought they were all coming for the same job that I'm applying for…I go inside and the boss came to me and he said…we are working for…people, we are cleaning their house, we [are] about lifestyle – we run the best of everything. I get to this house and it was not nice and the kitchen was not nice you know, and she [the employer] said to me, 'you cook'! I cooked for them and she said to me, 'My girl, where did you learn [to cook]?'…When I was in the factory, I worked in everything. It was partly informal education. I educate myself…*

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The question for those who want to recognise the women's expressed need for factual knowledge, mobilise the women around their economic status as useful workers, and turn their skills, competence and practical know-how into certified, formal knowledge, is one of the relationship between informal, experiential *and* formal knowledge, and the due recognition of their prior learning with suitable access to formal education. This is obviously something I would want to call for in view of what the women said about knowledge. More about this topic will be covered in the concluding chapter.

At the beginning of the workshop process, the knowledge that was emphasised more explicitly was factual knowledge about, for example, the chemical compounds they were handling as part of their domestic chores and the possible effects of these compounds on their bodies (e.g. on their lungs or respiratory system due to the inhalation of toxic substances, allergies). The focus on 'chemicals' is understandable given the focus of the health and safety workshops. One of the union leaders, in a careful reflection of the importance of understanding the potential dangers of chemical agents, had this to say:

> *you see because the first time we had doctor[s] they came to us and they went around with us and you know something stay with me – we must have health and safety workshops. You realise... we don't know what we really do, and Handy Andy, we must buy something stronger and domestic workers say oh it cleans so nicely something like that – and then I realise we don't really know the dangers.*

The emphasis on factual knowledge as being critical makes sense given the profound consequences that *not* knowing could have on the lives of these women. As one woman attests,

> *The one that…worried me...is the inhaling – we didn't know about if whether we use too much or too little. That if we inhale, we must breathe out immediately. The one thing that was worried me, like Valerie, it did happen with her where she works. She scrubs [with] ammonia; she didn't dilute it – and the madam she didn't let her dilute it – she used it straight from the bottle - and you how strong that stuff is - the inhale that make the lungs dangerous. The lungs burst and she did bleed inside. They never know what was wrong, they treat her for TB and after one doctor cut off a piece of her lung he came and he*

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say…it was not TB, it was the inhaling of the strong stuff. It also makes me aware of the distance that I must pour it in before I use it!

The factual knowledge talked about included chemical compounds, and also included the law as it affects their lives. In the words of one woman:

the most important thing [is] there is no law yet for domestic workers in the Western Cape... if you climb on the ladder and you break your leg or your back... you are not going to be compensated and I think the more information or education we can give to the workers [about their rights]... will arm their mind.

While the above statement shows the woman's knowledge of workman's compensation, the following quote conveys more of an awareness of the complexity of translating the law into reality. This communicates an understanding of the limitations in the context under which these laws are implemented and, moreover, the impact that it has on a domestic worker's reality.

There is a freedom but they don't know how to use that freedom... and where... and it's another challenge. For the union, [it] is now to tell that woman do you know the power [you have]? Do you know that if you're not going use it, it's just going to lie there? It's not going to be of any use to you? Yes, it's OK on paper but for the domestic worker to actually grasp that opportunity and make that paper... a reality, there is still a long way there.

In the above example there is a demonstrated understanding of the interplay between a constitutional right i.e. freedom, the potential power it could generate, how this power should be mediated by the union, and the potential for this power to remain dormant if a proper understanding of its importance is not grasped (cf. Freire 1985).

Beyond issues of the law, knowledge of the self came up often in discussions and in workshop meetings. The link between health and emotional well-being was a significant theme in their concern with knowledge. For example, one woman expressed concern over the links between emotional stresses and a dependency on medication:

For five years I had it, then the doctor discovered that it was a chronic asthma. It had to do with my divorce and the loss of my husband and things like that. As soon as I get

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problems, I tense up completely…I didn't have the [asthma] pump and [when] I got the pump...slowly I got addicted and lost weight completely...I decided that I must stop this, it's a bad habit because as soon as I am upset, I just say give...me [the pump] I want to have it. For the last two years I am fine, it just disappeared. But I mean asthma gets you in different ways you know, and anxiety attacks and stress and everything, it used to be very bad...at night it used to be very bad as soon as [I] start thinking. It gets you and you just walk around the house and I got addicted to the medicine because it was just there and I think you also have to overcome some of the things and you know if you know what's wrong with you, you can overcome it.

The above quote captures this woman's ability to identify stresses, list its symptoms, link the stresses to those particular symptoms and understand the role that the stresses play in relation to health and emotional well-being, evidence of a reflective process (cf. Boud, Cohen and Walker cited in Garrick 1989). Most of the women who participated in the workshops employed the kind of reflection evidenced in the above quote across multiple contexts and in various areas of their lives.

Further, what was most remarkable was that the women also acknowledged their own lack of knowledge on all kinds of matters affecting their lives. One woman, for example, kept asking, repeatedly, '*Why me?... Why? Why? Why? Why... and always why? Why? Why?*'

It is this kind of frustration at not knowing that begs articulation and recognition.

4.3 Alienation

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As noted earlier in Chapter 2 (page 28), central to the diverse notions of alienation are the feelings of powerlessness, loneliness, estrangement and disassociation experienced by workers in the context of their working lives. Each of these feelings was a recurrent theme that coursed through all of the narratives of workshop participants.

The following account is offered by one domestic worker as she reflects on a situation involving her friend, a fellow domestic worker:

> *I met Christina and she does domestic work, and one day I was taking a walk and I saw this woman... to me some of us tend to carry our whole household on our shoulders... I enjoy my walking, so one afternoon and I took a walk and I saw this woman and I could see that she was not happy... I didn't know what her problem was, but I made it a point that I want to know her... so we became friends and this is what we all tend to do, talk about our employers just as they talk about us too... I listened to her and what came out was anger, frustration and she wants to kill [her employer] and I said you can't kill... The house [where she works]... is a big house, there is nothing she can do in [the] house... cleaning and that she can only do. She is not allowed to use the fridge because [the employers] are scared that she will steal what's in the fridge... She is not allowed to use a cup of...she can't eat out of their plates... she had to have her own supper [alone]... she was with them for so long already and there was no trust... she goes often for a lunch break and they lock the door and when it is time for her to come in she has to walk around the house and ring the bell or even phone in so that they know that it is her wanting to come in... How long can she be in a situation like that before she cracks... On weekends, she doesn't get a meal; she has to look [after] herself.*

The situation Christina found herself in denied her control over her immediate activities and her living and working environment. The above example is one of loneliness and social isolation. Christina's employers do not merely control the conditions under which she works, but also undermine her humanity by distrusting and disrespecting her. They further disassociate themselves from her by refusing her the use of the same eating utensils and forbidding her from using the refrigerator (cf. Shepherd 1972). Christina's reaction to her estrangement and isolation are feelings of anger and frustration, which manifest themselves in a desire to kill her employer. The sentiment in the workshops for most of the women, while not being as extreme as wanting to kill, most certainly reflected intense rage and anger as a response to feeling powerless to address the injustices in the workplace.

The social psychological residue of severe inequality and massive disparity defined by a deeply embedded history of apartheid is what defines many of the women's stories of subjugation and repression as is seen in the story of Christina. Apartheid was in these terms a system specifically

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aimed at maintaining and reinforcing social discrimination and in the case of domestic work, continued social isolation (cf. Plasek 1974).

Consider the individual's powerlessness in the face of her isolation: '*it was klaar gesê dat iemand jonger en vrisser enige tyd my werk kan neem as ek voel ek nie meer kan nie. So ek byt my tong en ek se niks...*'[56] The silencing of the individual worker (i.e. having to bite her tongue and saying nothing so as to keep her job) clearly underlines the force behind organising individuals into a union.

At the SADSAWU, it was this powerlessness and silence that was addressed, albeit not always in ways that benefited and acknowledged all women's experiences equally. I noted at times hidden discourses, so to speak – ones that tended to expect of women to be self-sacrificial examples of womanhood, and also to all agree on what it means to be a domestic worker. In other words, one of these hidden narratives expected women to buy into a tale of their humiliation, which obviously tended to feed into the powerlessness that they already felt. The majority of the women felt powerless to deal with asking for a raise, asking for vacation time, asking to have friends and family visit, asking for personal time, asking to be trusted, and asking to be respected.

In addition, the SADSAWU members were not expected to give positive accounts of their work situation. When individual experiences are at odds with the 'official' union narrative, then this too will tend to feed into the isolation and powerlessness of a woman.

This dynamic played itself out when one woman, in particular, came with stories that challenged the empowerment role that the union traditionally took on. Her experience was undermined and, as such, her story relegated to pariah status. In her own words:

> *I have got no problem where my employer is concerned because if there is anything that is wrong, she takes me to the doctor and she finds out what is the problem. Because why? In their eyes I am working for them and my help is very important to them. That is what they said. So I have got no problem with them. I just had a slipped disc and they spent*

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[56] 'I was told that there is someone younger and healthier that can replace me at any time if I feel I can't do the work anymore. So I bite my tongue and say nothing…' Translation by author.

more than R12 000 to get me fixed up. Then after my split disc, they found that I had arthritis and then I was told a lot of things that I shouldn't do in my work, which I am sure a lot of people won't think of it in that way. They have been to the chemist getting me medicine and stuff, and now I am much better and it is also that I told her about it... So I think that I am well looked after.

...What I want to say is...I feel sorry for people to be nervous in their work. I am not nervous. If I break something, really, I don't have to be nervous! I just say, 'Madam I am sorry I broke this thing.' She will say nothing. My boss will say it's world[ly] things and if it's gone, it's gone!'...In my work... she [employer] takes me for a manicure for my hands and even in the kitchen... she always shouts at me...and she tells me every...five minutes she says, 'Noleen, why is your hands so dry?' And I say, 'Madam, what do you think? I am in the water, in and out'...she is like that...I put it [hand cream] in front of my bed and every night when I go to bed I must put it on. She will say, 'Noleen, look at your nails...I must take you for a manicure!'

Now consider the following passage from my observations *in situ*:[57]

Something quite interesting happens...another woman...puts up her hand [I notice the other women's eyes rolling]...she discounts the experiences of the women who have just spoken and speaks very fondly about her 'master and madam' and how well they treat her...regular pedicures so her feet stay strong, regular doctor's check-ups so she stays healthy, regular breaks so she is not tired and her children are allowed to stay with her so she doesn't have to worry about them... she is derisive and says to the other women that they should speak up and had they been stronger, they would have the privileges she has and not feel victimised.

There is an obvious annoyance...and the group starts to get Noreen to be quiet. They start talking loudly over each other and part of the upset is that Noreen has accused them of not being strong enough and of being victims. The volume picks up and the language has switched from primarily English to a very 'forceful' Afrikaans. When the women use Afrikaans, there is a different 'ownership' of the meeting space and of the process.

[57] These notes made during all interactions with the women are available on request from the author.

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The schism between Noreen and the group encapsulates her individual alienation as estrangement and isolation. She is estranged from the group exactly because her story is not one of humiliation and powerlessness, and also because for whatever reasons of her own, she has chosen to tell a positive story about her experiences.

In most instances women's attitudes and experiences were expected to feed into a particular union narrative.

Beyond feeding into a particular union narrative, the issue of competency and lack of skills at times also fed into feelings of powerlessness and estrangement. In situations where competencies were perceived not to have been mastered quickly enough, domestic workers were treated as though they were deficient. This deficiency was magnified when union members were required to mediate transitions between different bodies of knowledge. As one union leader and educator put it:

> *There are sometimes problems and workers do not want to bring it across themselves, now they want to use me as a worker leader. I said...you are a woman like me – don't come and speak to me here...I'm here for a purpose! Don't come to me here with these things. I don't want hear anything. We've got a meeting on Sunday; you put your hand [up]. I'm chairing the meeting and you stand up as a woman and you put [your issue] nicely on the table. Don't use [me]. I'm no one's fool. I'm a leader and I'm here to guide so we all go through that process.*

In the above quote, while the worker leader acknowledges her role as a leader and chairperson, she is oblivious to the power dynamic and how the dynamic positions her as more competent. Instead, she feels that the women need to speak for themselves, with little consideration that women may not feel comfortable with public speaking or may not possess the confidence required. Her use of the phrase, 'I am no one's fool' implies a resentment that her skills base is being drawn on by women who should know how to, in this instance, speak for themselves. Her assumptions have the potential to further alienate individuals from the group.

It should be noted, however, that even though inconsistencies between particular individual voices and the voice of an organised group of workers are evident and to be expected, the union

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nonetheless provided a space away from the dehumanising conditions experienced in the routinised working lives of the women.

4.4 Needs and Desires

Like alienation, needs and desires was a recurrent theme that ran through many of the discussions. Even when the needs of domestic workers are acknowledged by the union, this does not necessarily mean that the needs of each individual woman will be met.[58] A moment's reflection allows some insight into this: when we talk about 'women, domestic workers' in South Africa, we refer most typically to: 'black women' as people in a *racial* hierarchy, to 'women' as part of *paternalistic* hierarchy, and to 'domestic workers' as workers in a *capitalist* system of inequality. This means that different political as well as specific realities and disadvantages criss-cross the lives and experiences of the women in the present study. Therefore, to talk about their 'needs and desires' is to take on a bigger load than one the unions could carry alone.

A recurrent psychological need articulated by the women was the need to be seen and to be respected. As one woman put it:

> *Ek wonder nou vir my of sy sien ek is 'n vroumens nes sy. Sy soek gedurend ander vrouens om saam [met] haar te gaan na daai awards programme vir vrou mense. Sy't nooit een keer vir my gevra nie…lyk my ek is nie vrou genoeg nie…lyk ook vir my sy makeer een vrou afdruk om soos vrou te voel..dis ma net hoe ek voel!*[59]

In these few words she captures the lack of recognition afforded her as *a woman* (cf. Cletch Lam 1994; Fish 2006). Yet, even in the case of what seems a central need, the individuals did not all

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[58] As noted earlier, while the union was invested in meeting specific needs, like the need to represent domestic workers, the capacity for collective representation was at times limited by their fallible notions of who domestic workers are. Employers, on the other hand, were a lot less likely to meet domestic workers needs, for example, adequate remuneration. Whatever the intention from either employer or union, the result was a need unmet.

[59] 'I wonder if she can see I am a woman just like her. She is always looking for other women to accompany her to those women's awards and not once has she asked me…seems I am not woman enough…seems as though she oppresses me as a woman, so she can feel more of a woman…those are just my feelings.' Translation by author.

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report the same experiences. Consider the case of someone who was fortunate enough to have herself recognised and affirmed as a domestic worker:

> *I always say that people at university are very reluctant to say that their mother is a domestic worker. Then I always say...I've been a domestic worker and then you will see someone slowly but surely get up and then I will say, 'Why were you are ashamed to get up, do you think I don't look like a domestic worker?'...you know...my daughter...I once went with my daughter to a work thing, she said, 'Here is my mother, she was a domestic worker!' And that's why I am what I am today.*

In talking about individual needs and desires, the women were able to reflect and bring to the surface hidden stories, dismissed lives and suppressed feelings. In reference to these hidden experiences, they were able to locate it in a broader context. Not only could these hidden experiences be located, they could also be owned and validated. Consider the following:

> *Sometimes we compromise, like I am a domestic worker and...12 or 13 years I don't think that I ever went on a holiday because every time I go on a holiday, my employer always finds an excuse that she and her husband must go overseas. I compromise…we always think of our children and that we must put food on the table and somewhere along the line that employer [she knows]. I had a bad employer, look at how they exploited me and because they were so sweet and so nice [I don't know]...I think we need to find ways as to how we educate our employers. What do we do? It's easy to talk here rather than saying enough is enough! I am going to sue you and I can do it! But how do I affect her [the employer]...like the worker that came here with the complaint and like the worker who said that she can't take it anymore and when you go to the employer, they say hold on, I am going to lose my job. So it's compromising...I mean I spoke to that employer who was so rude and cutting the money the first time and I was like how can she?...we need to learn to love each other today and we need to find out why is it that I am staying where I am? Why is it that I am getting the stress? Maybe this is the place where we can come and speak…we need to love one another. If she [another worker] say she is going to talk to her employer, she needs to know that she has our backup…we are going to support you it's nothing we bring on ourselves but it is compromise.*

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The above extract not only tells an individual story, but it could be applied to a collective experience. It is an experience that expresses multiple needs that exist across multiple realms: the *psychological* (respect, dignity, peace of mind, love and support), the *economic* (job security, financial stability, food on the table) and the *physical* (going away on holiday). All of her expressed needs and desires are contained in her need to better understand herself and her choices (or compromises) and is evidenced in her lament, '*why is it that I am staying?*' These needs relate to her different roles experienced as a woman, a worker and a domestic worker.

All of these expressed needs are interconnected and interwoven. For example, peace of mind, respect and dignity, while listed as psychological needs, cut across the economic needs of job security and financial stability (Ryan and Deci 2000). I offer two more examples as illustrations of how needs and desires are layered across each other albeit in different contexts:

> *Did I ever ask [myself] why [am I] still there?...my answer…I got children. I did work before but never has a white woman pull the skin off my face and then she expects me to say nothing and stand [there]...and sometimes you don't know how to speak to them. When I told them that I am finished working…they say that I must work…When I asked her about my money, she asked me, 'What money, what money do you want?' ...you realise that you can get sick and I was sick…*

In the above example, the purposeful question posed at the outset reveals an acute awareness of mistreatment but also that she is cognisant of exactly why she stays when she answers her own question with '*I got children.*' The employer's disregard and neglect of the woman's need for respect and dignity is echoed in her expression '*pull the skin off my face*' denoting humiliation. That she chooses to stay because she is a mother who needs to provide for her children is indicative of the primacy of her need for financial stability. Inseparable and interlaced, her *psychological* needs traverse her *financial* needs.

In the next extract, we note the worker confronted with the precious commodities of the 'owner classes' – an interaction that clearly places the object above the human's needs and desires:

> *I got a pain on my side and I never had such pain in my life. It was bad. I didn't say anything to them but it was terrible. I had a terrible week just to do my work and they*

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didn't know. I keep quiet. I used to have a lot of stress and there were time[s] that I felt like I would pack up and go. I was very much under pressure and I didn't know what to do and then...I nearly had a nervous breakdown…There was a crack on the side of the cup and I tested it to find out if it still works and it didn't work...then I went to Woolworths to see if I could get it [the same cup] on my account just to replace it because I know it was going to blow up [an argument] and Woolworths didn't have it…then I went to Clicks and then luckily I got at Clicks…then I went back…and I said to them I made a mistake I cracked your cup…I replaced it without saying anything because I bought a new one. She [the employer] took it and I said to her that she took a new one now so you might as well give me that old cracked one…she said no and then I left it there. I was so nervous for all the years I was working there. It just shows you how they put pressure on you.

An individual's facelessness against overpowering stereotypes about what domestic workers are capable of or not is well captured in the following:

She doesn't want me to break a thing and if there is anything missing in that house, it just takes me back. Now somebody gave her a little precious stone, a very expensive stone…and she said that [the] stone is missing...it's [in] a little box. [She said] maybe I threw it away and I am positive that I didn't throw anything away…I was the main person working in the house…I know everything in this house in the cupboards and things…So it must be…me who stole the thing...she opened the safe and I was standing there and that little box was lying in that safe. You see that is the stress that we go through? They accuse you sometimes…if something goes missing in that house

In both the above extracts, we note the women crying out for recognition as *subjects* against the value attached to *objects*. These quotes while taking the form of individual examples, illustrate a collective reality. The intersection of psychological needs (to be trusted, supported, respected, appreciated, and to live without fear and stress) and financial needs (unable to 'pack up and go'), lock each worker firmly into larger, oppressive structures.

In terms of the union itself, members' growing collective sense of self was bolstered by the validation of their aspirations, their dreams and their hopes through their involvement in the

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organisation's activities, and in part, its education programmes. Consider the following testimony:

> *Ek het...gedink die union is net oor politiks. Ons het almal so gedink, net politiks en nog meer politiks. Maar ek het baie geleer in die tyd wat ek betrokke is. Een dag het hulle vir ons na ander meetings [gevat] om ander domestic workers te ontmoet en ek was een keer in Joburg ook gewees vir die movement oor regtes vir ons werkers...hulle [die union] bou jou op ja...*[60]

The above declaration speaks of opportunities and experiences that isolated domestic workers would generally not have, thus, the power of unionisation. Involvement in the union and its activities allowed for the expanding of horizons, in this instance travel, networking (cf. Gibson 2008). The statement, '*hulle bou jou op*' is a significant testament to the enabling environment that the union tries to foster. Pride is captured yet again by another union member who claims that

> *sometimes I think that I'm amazing because of being in the top leadership [of the union] and being still a full time [domestic] worker. There is never a time I miss a meeting!*

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4.5 Relations of power

Relations of power are central to any discussion about domestic workers given the specific racial stratifications, gender oppression and the ongoing class struggle captured in their situation. The different levels of power we wield (or do not), in the different contexts of our everyday lives, more or less assume our ability to achieve what we wish for ourselves. It is in this sense that 'the individual' is powerless against those who control the sources of power: political, economic,

[60] 'I thought the union was just about politics. We all thought that, just politics and nothing else. But I have learned so much in the time that I have been involved. One day they took us to a meeting to meet other domestic workers and once I went to Joburg for the movement (to talk about) worker's rights...they (the union) build you up.' Translation by author.

ideological, and the means to violence. Furthermore, it is the very aim of unionisation, or the organisation of workers (or women), to confront this powerlessness, at least ideologically and politically, but also economically in the form of, for example, strike actions. In my data-gathering activities, it was however the women's experiences, in particular, that I focused on rather than SADSAWU's other roles in society, such as transformation.

The expectation on the part of union leadership is that union membership would offer women an opportunity to come together to form a collective voice and, by virtue of their involvement, to overcome their silences and have stronger voices emerge (cf. Freire 1985; Foucault 1980). This is best captured in one woman's statement when she says,

> *organising the workers [to be part of the union] and the workers was very lost... it is working...You know, we were saying if we can all work together then we will make it...as our union.*

What is intimated in the above is the idea that in women coming together under the banner of the union, their collective action will be a powerful force in creating change in the lives of domestic workers and, more importantly, creating the space to be heard. To add to that, the following is an example of the potential of collective action that the union is trying to galvanise with a view to challenging existing structures of power:

> *we are exploited and...protest it is so rare [for domestic workers]...You know we are the sweepers of this country and I think that we can be the biggest work force in South Africa if we come together and join the union. If we say today we had enough and march to parliament, it will be history in South Africa for domestic workers...You know when COSATU [go on] strikes...I feel that I can put my foot down, I can do it, I am strong enough to stand up for myself. But now for me to say yes I am going to strike today, domestic workers cannot strike, but if we make up our minds and say that we are going to strike today...nothing will happen in that house...if we say that we are going to strike. I think may be...we must come up with something and just show them that we are human beings, we are there and we do exist.*

In this next example, the potential for collective action is mediated by politics within the union context and SADSAWU, as a lesser body within broader union ranks, is likened to the status

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afforded women domestic workers. Though SADSAWU is allegorised as a 'union stepchild,' iterations of collective power and collective strength are unmistakable (cf. Bourdieu 1989):

> *The importance [of the union] is South Africa never thought of a domestic worker as a woman... COSATU, NUMSA and the domestic worker herself! They never thought of the domestic worker...I will get up and I will say, 'why do you call them the domestic workers? It's SADSAWU... We are right there in COSATU [and] we have [to] fight. We have to challenge why do you want to call us that? We are domestic workers, but you don't say there are factory workers in the meeting, you say SACTU! That is what we are talking about! That recognition as a woman! ...The ANC call us and they say, 'Do you know you have got South Africa in your hands?' We know! ...if domestic workers [on a] Monday don't go to work, some people won't even know if they must wake their children! Can you imagine the chaos? The factory boss will be late and not open the factory because [the] maid was late! ... [as SADSAWU] we have got the power!*

Outside of the union space, powerlessness in the face of discriminatory laws, low wages and long working hours is about the institution of domestic work as the complex, intricate, complicated relationships of power that have existed for generations. In the following extract, even though one domestic worker was adamant she would never be domestic worker, the extract illustrates how pervasive and insidious relationships of power are and how it is replicated even in those situations where there is an explicit refusal to acquiesce:

> *My mother, she never talked about her life. She always get up early to go to work and come back late and get up early. I sometimes hear when she cry but she never say anything to us – and when I ask her she get cross and she keep quiet. I was sad for her and I think I will never be a domestic worker. When we have nothing, she give us bread and black coffee because we don't have milk and we don't even have a fridge for the milk. So I promised myself I will never be a domestic worker. I just remember the black coffee and when I taste black coffee, I feel like that child – look where I am now!!! [I am a domestic worker]! I HATE BLACK COFFEE!*

In those four angry words 'I hate black coffee' lies the metaphor of exclusion, pain, poverty, 'disadvantage', invisibility, and the chimera of choice. The realities reflected in the above extract

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are examples of a deeply embedded structural oppression that overpowers the individual. This is evidenced in the words of another domestic worker who has battled to be heard:

> *When you were a child, you used to sit and then you start crawling. And I have been crawling in the apartheid years and I am still crawling. Although I am leader in the union, I am still crawling. There are some things and I am not happy with at work and then sometimes I feel that it is sometimes useless speaking about these things. It just fell on deaf ears...*

The voice of this domestic worker is illustrative of how underlying relationship dynamics in the work context embody broader social structures of ongoing inequality. As a leader in the union, she wields a certain level of power, but as a domestic worker, her limited education and the nature of the 'household' (e.g. women's work) firmly entrenches a social relationship of inequality. As a leader, her skills, her experience, her power and the many activities she partakes in do not elevate her status in her own work environment, although she adds enormous value to the lives of hundreds of other union members. We must create the political spaces to have these socially useful skills acknowledged and suitably recognised.

The underlying relationship dynamics and the humiliation of the experienced structural inequalities are not just evident in the nature of the interaction between worker and employer, but extend like tentacles, and are reproduced and played out in the personal lives of the women who work hard at thankless, unforgiving jobs to ease and improve the lives of their families. Consider the following extracts that point to two rather distinct expressions of power as constantly circulating and constantly being produced and reproduced.

> *You know what! I struggle and I put away the money and I want to send my child to the good school so she don't have to do this. So she can have the better life. I work hard – I work very hard. I pay the money what I can and I push her to study and she is good. Ai! that child is good. I can send her to the good school. I want her to talk in English so she can have the chances. Now she speak English and she go to the good school and she is doing very good – but now it is me, she can't look at me. I work so hard and I take so little for me and I give to her so I can be so little in her eyes. My heart! I can't tell you. Maybe I did the wrong thing. I don't know.*

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In trying to provide her daughter with the choices that the formal, certified education could potentially afford, this woman finds herself and her authority displaced. There is unmistakable pride at what her daughter has achieved. However, she questions the wisdom of her decision when she says, '*Maybe I did the wrong thing.*'

In the following extract, I draw your attention to another shifting power relationship in which one woman disassociates herself from her peers by internalising negative ideas of difference and identity, i.e. black people as uncivilised and lacking in sophistication as it relates to ideas of what is proper and correct ways of being (cf. Foucault 1974). What she says could well be seen as a reflection of self-shame and an attempt to distance and disassociate:

> *Please, ladies please – let us behave and not act like we are uncivilised. Just take one piece of meat at a time and you can always come back for more and please don't make your plate so full. I must say this because sometimes black people don't know how to behave! We always act like we haven't got nothing.*

I want to draw attention to my observations *in situ* and point out two examples that further demonstrate the disassociation and the internalised entanglement of existing unequal power relations:

> *moenie nou 'n klomp vleis skep nie – ons almal moet eet! Die swart mense weet nou net nie hoe om vir hulle te gedra nie.*[61]

A comment made directly to me as though I (as a coloured woman) should understand:

> *oh you know how these people can go on when they see food, never mind the meat! Come quick and dish for you so you know you can get something.*

Common to all three of the extracts included above, is the appropriation of dominant cultural norms that have been internalised and reinforced over generations. The extracts amplify the internalisation of unequal power relationships in which, wittingly or unwittingly, domestic

[61] 'Don't dish too much meat, we all have to eat! Black people just don't know how to behave.' Translation by author.

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workers live out racialised identities that have shaped and continue to shape their lives (cf. Freire 1970; Foucault 1980; Bourdieu 1989).

The institution of domestic work signifies an entrapment in that workers feel they have little or no options, and further reinforces the class and racial divides. What follows is an excerpt from my observations *in situ*:

> *There are clear divides along language and colour lines…I do notice that certain cliques of women, especially from the Constantia area, seem to be drawn together….I also notice that the room is split so that black women occupy the back seats while their coloured counterparts are inclined towards the front. I also notice that the better dressed women occupy the very front sections and take on a lot of the chair's body language…all kinds of perceived class distinctions happen…and racial classifications…in almost all of the meetings…the women from Constantia [coloured] are very self-assured and very vocal in both meetings and social settings but almost disparaging, and how many of the black women are silent more often than not unless it comes to sharing stories with a larger group…and how the seating happens. I mostly watch the cliques…and it's a real microcosm of South African class and race politics.*

Whether it was about the formation of cliques or perceived notions of class relative to the affluence of the areas in which people are employed, the maintenance of ongoing class or race inequality and marginalisation is pervasive and insidious. The everyday violence of racialised power reinscribes dominant frames of racialised relations of power and further reinforces class, race and gender disparities. The continued perpetuation and reassertion of power imbalances and internalised differences is the result of the valorisation of prevailing cultural norms. Far more crudely put, 'going from being the abused to buying into the abuse' as one of the many effects of lived and experienced racism and colonisation, i.e. being powerless against those who control the sources of power: political, economic and ideological.

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4.6 Concluding comments

This chapter documented and presented women's reports on learning, knowledge, alienation, needs and desires and power. Evidenced in the chapter is that their engagement in union activities resulted in them learning a great deal. Learning at the SADSAWU happened consciously and unconsciously, and it was suggested by the data that collective learning was one of many valuable ways in which learning happened. Through their engagement with each other and in the sharing of individual stories, the women's experiences were validated. It was in this sharing that they were afforded an opportunity for much needed support and solace in their closely mirrored experiences and realities.

On the one hand, their stories occupy a collective space that is one of shared oppression and that carries the burdens of the structural violence they are subjected to, and on the other hand, the opportunities that the workshops provided for narrating their lives – narratives that emphasised each woman's particular, unique experiences and also underlined their individual realities. As regards the former, organising each individual's experiences into a unionised and more or less unified voice cannot be underestimated as a source of both ideological and political power. Yet, as individuals, each woman's specific story also embodied her strength against the forces that threatened to overpower her on her own. It is thus remarkable to note that apart from the body-breaking nature of the domestic work that they are involved in, these women nonetheless manage to create spaces for self-validation and also distinction.

I also want to note that the platform for the women's reports, i.e. the SADSAWU Worker Education Project, specifically focused on health and safety, which clearly inclined the women towards certain issues. There is thus a certain relationship in the data between the context and the women's reports of their experiences. Furthermore, their relationship to the union can be thought of as both productive and problematic in terms of certain conflicting and conflicted expectations and assumptions, as well as explicit and implicit rules for conduct and for being.

The union provided a particular space for exercising and understanding their rights as women, as workers and as domestic workers, as well as opportunities for exploring their experiences among

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others who suffer and live similar lives. The ways in which these meetings and workshops did, in fact, produce learning and knowledge cannot be underestimated.

The relationship between the context and the said and done of the women was certainly also problematic in the sense that – as union members – a certain discourse is legitimated, which in turn warrants specific roles and behaviour. This means that unless there is a close fit between the particular experiences of any specific woman and the union discourse, her experiences will at best not receive the necessary validation and, at worst, will be relegated to the silence that, in any case, tends to overpower the less empowered among the women. When an already marginalised and alienated group of workers is denied satisfaction for their expectations and their appeals for assistance, their position is obviously weakened. This cannot be thought of as an intentional violence on the part of the unions or educators, but rather a consequence of both naive and faulty assumptions about women, workers and domestic workers, and incongruent hopes and goals among the participants. The very gap between the women and their status as domestic workers, and the aims and ambitions of the union, were at times also a source of growth and joy.

The stories of all of these women are defined by and deeply embedded in a history of inequality and repression: in terms of race, gender and as workers in a deeply entrenched system of inequality. Central to their stories and a clearly articulated thread woven through the context of their working lives, are feelings of powerlessness, isolation and estrangement. It is in the union context that some of these feelings of isolation and powerlessness were tackled, albeit in somewhat problematic ways.

Through the course of telling their individual and collective stories, the women shared heartfelt needs and deep-seated desires. There was a cry for factual knowledge and thus the need to have their skills, know-how and experiences recognized (of their prior learning) and given access to formal training so that they could be properly compensated for their work.

In chapter 5 I will synthesise the woman's experiences, and detail the complexities, continuities, consistencies, and contradictions that arise in the data.

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Chapter 5 REFASHIONING THE WHOLE

> Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched, we cannot know ourselves Adrienne Rich (1972).

The study attempted to explore the learning and learning practices that took place within the WEP, housed at the SADSAWU. The aims included determining whether learning occurred in WEP, capturing the experiences of the women involved and telling the stories of the those experiences. Furthermore, several key questions were raised in an attempt to address the aims outlined. These included whether learning happened and how it happened, whether the learning was reflected on, whether perceptions of health and safety changed, what the impact of learning was on the participants' individual lives and how the project related to the participants' histories, needs, and aspirations. These aims and key questions were framed through the lens of the themes that emerged from what the women said and did.

In this last chapter, I re-visit some of the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 and the findings in Chapter 4 so as to conclude a story that had a number of sub-plots and that meandered across the political landscape of South Africa.

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5.1 Learning

A review of the interview transcripts, the workshops and my observations *in situ* revealed that that some learning happened through the women's involvement in union activities. The workshops, observations, and informal discussions demonstrated that that the women constantly engaged with the information they were exposed to by making it conscious through their many discussions with each other. It was in this way that learning was generated and transformed into knowledge. This confirms Foley's (1999) claim that some of the most interesting and significant

learning happens informally and incidentally, in people's everyday lives. Vygotsky's (1978) activity theory reinforces the women's reflections that they learnt by doing and from their mistakes. It further substantiates Vygotsky's argument that activities are essential to human thinking and acting and that ultimately 'we learn as we act' (Foley 1999). Before I interviewed the women, I told them I was going to ask them about what they had learned. Almost all of them were concerned about giving the wrong answer. When they started to talk about their learning it was difficult to stop them, especially as they started to realize how much they had learned. Because their learning was embedded in action and because it was part of a social process, they were not expressly aware of, nor had they recognised their learning as learning. The women reflected on their doing and the activities were the acts of sharing, of participating and of being active members of the SADSAWU. In this way, their learning was a result of action and communication.

All of the women interviewed spoke of the SADSAWU as an important space for learning. As well, their collective participation in union activities facilitated learning, was perceived to be inspiring, encouraging and affirming. They spoke of sharing life stories, of sharing experiences, of feeling included and of feeling 'not alone'. For the women feeling part of a group sharing similar stories meant feeling validated. They also spoke of ownership of their lives through learning. This kind of learning is reflected in Lave and Wenger's (1998) CoP theory, a central tenet of which is social participation. Sharing stories with others, listening and talking, as reported by the women is reflective of this social participation. It also confirms Lave and Wenger's (1998) claim that learning happens through our engagement with others and that participation is a pivotal way by which we learn. Another claim of Lave and Wenger's (1998) that grounds the women's statements on the importance of the union space as a place of sharing is the fact that in CoPs learning takes place in the conditions that bring people together and allows for particular pieces of information to take on relevance (Tennant 1997).

Lave and Wenger's (1999) theory is useful because it looks at learning as situated in social relationships and in this instance, the women learned and created meaning through their engagement with each other. However, CoP theory assumes balance and harmony. CoP theory has a strong storyline of cohesiveness and sharing. It is noteworthy that much of the empirical

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studies involving CoP theory are based on formal work contexts. So while CoP theory has largely been applied in particular working environments, the SADSAWU did not constitute the work environment of the women even if they considered WEP work as important or significant in potentially enhancing their real work environment. In addition to this, women's experiences could not be divorced from their position as domestic workers unlike other situations where the theory was being applied. There was not the same level and access to laws and rules that would protect domestic workers and that would facilitate the harmonious relationships the CoP theory draws on.

Within the WEP itself, even though there was lots of sharing and validating of experiences, there were still black women and coloured women. They were still Afrikaans speakers and Xhosa speakers and there were still those who earned in excess of R2000 per month and those who earned R540 per month. Outside of the formal workshop space or even on the way to the tea table at breaks, all of these dynamics came into play. If anything this underlines my contention that their lives are still marked by the realities of a racially, culturally and economically structured society.

So although the social aspects of learning contained in the CoP theory appear to be applicable, the theory itself does not adequately account for unequal power relationships within the learning community that are especially important for negotiating harmony and cohesiveness.

When disparities in the narrative occurred, like with Noreen, members found ways to minimize and undermine these views because it did not facilitate the narrative of the group. This situation could be explained by CoP theory that largely focuses on identity and that members are expected to learn the code of the group and apply it in a group setting. Not adhering to the code had consequences that often left members socially isolated even if it was for a short time or in a particular situation.

As the workshops progressed, women started to share their intimate stories and feelings of not being seen, heard or understood. These were important stories that united the women. In this space of sharing, women were bolstered by other women who could identify with what they were experiencing. This is directly related to Lave and Wenger's (1991) argument that learning is reflective of what the learning community deems important, in this case stories of shared pain,

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and also, that learning happens in situations of co-participation. Lave and Wenger (1999) go on to say that learning is not only about hard skills and competencies but also about learning to learn about oneself. Within the WEP women made the connection between physical health and emotional health. This sharing space provided by the union encouraged women to draw on their personal, often painful realities, and apply it to understanding both their physical health and eventually their emotional wellbeing. For example, women wanted facts about cleaning products so their skin could stay healthy, or so that they would know when products were harmful to inhale. Women later moved to talking about the stress it caused when they felt they could not speak to their employers about the kinds of cleaning products they preferred to use. It was reported by the women that the stress impacted on their feelings of emotional well-being. In one example, a woman was able to draw clear connections between the stress of her divorce and the frequency of her asthma attacks and her eventual dependence on medication. She was afraid she would not be able to manage without the medication and that she would be addicted for life. As a result, she actively tried to avoid stressful situations and stopped taking asthma medication. In making this realization, she was able to combine experience, perception, cognition and behaviour. Her realisation confirms Boud, Cohen and Walker's (cited in Garrick 1989) claim that it is the process of reflection that grounds experience and transforms it into learning. This is further substantiated by Kolb's (1984) claim that in trying to define what the process of learning is, we have to understand in no uncertain terms that it is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience.

Women were able to reflect and bring to the surface suppressed feelings, hidden stories, and dismissed lives. In synthesizing these hidden experiences they were able to locate it in a broader context. Not only could it be located, it could be owned and validated. That women were able to find points of connection with each other in sharing stories of their lives supports Tennant's (1997) assertion that learning does not belong to individual people but that learning belongs to the various conversations that the people are a part of. In the workshops, although images of themselves as passive, powerless victims were transformed into images of strong, active survivors, it is difficult to know if these strong images of self were extended beyond the workshop setting.

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5.2 Knowledge

When the workshops on health and safety started, women were concerned about acquiring factual knowledge. For them, factual knowledge about the chemical compounds they handled was seen as particularly valuable in that it could enhance their safety. In particular they required facts about workers compensation, the law, and the constitution. They were aware that there are laws to protect them but also understood that they needed the specific facts to help them use the law to their advantage. This confirms Grossman's (2002) argument that the different aspects of knowledge cannot be separated from the context in which it is used.

As noted in chapter 3, the women were able to draw on their lived experiences and critically reflect on their own lives and the lives of others. They were able to re-evaluate and reframe their experiences even if they were not expressly aware that they were doing so, thus, engaging in what Jarvis calls a 'process of deep thought, both looking back at a situation (thinking it through) and projecting it forward to the future' (Jarvis 1987: 87). For example, after a few discussions in the workshops on the importance of understanding chemical compositions in cleaning products and other women's complaints about harsh chemicals, one woman gathered information on environmentally safe cleaning products and shared it with her friends. She also went to a seminar on eco-friendly household products held at one of the local high schools. She was really determined to learn more. What motivated her was the desire to improve both her physical health and emotional health. What gave her joy was being able to share her knowledge with others in the WEP.

When the WEP started, I and the other workshop facilitators were invested in affirming the knowledge and skills the women already came with; nonetheless, as the research continued, I also had to acknowledge their cry for more factual knowledge. As facilitators we wanted the women to affirm their own skills and we wanted them to value the currency of their experiences and they were indeed proud of what they knew. It also became apparent that the university-educated facilitators had the luxury of downplaying the value of formal education and formal qualifications while the women, by virtue of their lower socio-economic status, did not have the same luxury. Their lack of access to formal education reinforced the fact that their lives have historically always been mediated by the severe structural inequalities of race, class and gender.

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It was presumptuous of us as facilitators to assume that the women would not want the kind of formal knowledge that they did not have.

There was a keen awareness on the part of the women of the power of certification and, in particular, the opportunities afforded them through certification.

5.3 Alienation

Throughout the research, women spoke of employers setting wages, deciding on daily tasks, and deciding on rules that more often than not impinged on the domestic worker's privacy; they were shouted at, asked to eat away from the family table, were often accused when household items went missing, were threatened with being replaced, were disrespected, and were isolated from other workers. The employer was almost always in a position of power. I agree with Shepherd (1972) that alienation must be examined in relation to a social referent, in this case the employer, but both the social referent and the domestic worker are entrenched in a complex set of power relations. I further agree with Mohanty's (1998) assertion that white feminists have failed to adequately reflect the complexities and contradictions of black women and that this has left these women further estranged.

While I expected women to report on alienation in the workplace, I did not expect to see alienation manifest itself in the WEP. The women's relationship with the SADSAWU was a complex one. While the SADSAWU, for the most part, provided women with the opportunity and space to give voice to their pain by sharing experiences with other domestic workers, they were also expected to mirror an experience that would feed into the narrative of the union. The narrative was that of union as safe haven and safe space, welcoming all who needed refuge. However, when women did not tell stories that spoke of pain, humiliation and anger in the work environment, their voices were given less credence and their experiences were somewhat undermined. We noted the case of Noreen, who spoke of her employer as kind and loving and wonderful (see p.62). The more she told her story, which was often, the more she was isolated and estranged from the group. Even though the SADSAWU was supposed to be a reprieve from the alienation that the women endured in the workplace, the structural conditions that bred

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workplace alienation were enacted in the union space through race, perceived class privilege, and even in the union ranks. It is not that I expected the union space to be devoid of dysfunctional power relations, but I did not expect to encounter it as frequently as I did. For example, when some of the women associated me with a shared coloured identity, they felt comfortable and safe enough to share disparaging remarks about the black union members. This confirms Twinning's (1980) point about the way in which alienation cuts across both social-structural and psychological conditions. It also substantiates Plasek's (1974) contention about the intersection of the social-structural and psychological factors.

5.4 Needs and desires

The women spoke of their need to be seen and heard, they spoke of their need to be recognized as women not just workers, they spoke of their need for financial stability, they spoke of their need for job security, they spoke of their need for safety, they spoke of their need for dignity, and they spoke of their need for representation and unionization.

The literature on needs and desires reflects great ambiguity on what it is that constitutes a need and this ambiguity is reflected in Sheldon, Elliot, Kim and Kasser's (2001) question of whether a need is synonymous with a desire. In the case of domestic workers, they almost never have their desires met unless it is framed as a need, and not just any need, but a most basic need that covers the barest of essentials. Needs and desires cannot be divorced from structural conditions that govern domestic worker's lives.

Through the WEP a support base or 'intimate public' (Gibson 2008) was created and fostered within the union space. The significance of the intimate public is that it joins people who have historically endured injustice. It unites people who feel that the general world is not concerned with their well-being. The 'sisterhood' that was cultivated within the group added to the sense of belonging through a shared articulation of what women needed and wanted in their lives.

What I observed was a tension between the 'intimate public' space that was provided by the union and the union leaders' perceptions of who the women were. In part the tension was created when the concept of 'intimate publics' as a means for people to create 'spaces of

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legitimacy' clashed with perceptions of union members as a 'subordinate' population relative to the general world perceived as dominant. What I also observed was that although there was a tension that existed, women noted the union as a positive force in their lives and claimed that it was indeed one of the few spaces they felt valued and heard.

5.5 Relations of Power

It was in the union space that women were proud of being the biggest workforce in the country. It was in that same space that they were aware of their ability as a collective to cripple the economy (if they so wished) by refusing to work. This realization was made through their participation in union activities. That the women reported on the power of their collective strength as members of the SADSAWU confirms Barret's (2002) argument that power is ever present in all institutions and not limited to institutions where dominant groups operate (Freire1970).

Expressions of power are at the centre of understanding and drawing threads through all of the previous sections: learning, knowledge, alienation, and needs and desires. As noted in the literature, for every assumption about power there is a plausible counter assumption (Barrett 2002). This yields true especially in the case of the domestic workers whose lives cannot be divorced from the notion of power as ubiquitous. In Chapter 4, one of the women in a leadership position at the union who at her place of work experienced abuse, ridicule, and a number of other indignities; however, in her role as union leader, she has authority, power and influence. This holds true with Freire's (1970) argument that power works both on and through people.

What I did observe were divisions amongst the women based on the inequalities of race, class, language, leadership and position within the union ranks. For example, one woman who lived in an affluent neighbourhood and earned in excess of R2500 per month had an idea of herself as better than and an idea of herself as better off.

The pervasive nature of power is captured in one woman's life account when she spoke of her explicit refusal to be a domestic worker like her mother. She remembers her mother's life as a silent, painful and lonely existence. She told me this story as a domestic worker and as a

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member of the SADSAWU. Her story confirms and supports Barrett's (2002) claim that power permeates the entire social fabric and that power recreates structured systems of advantage and disadvantage independent of human preference or desire. Being a domestic worker was neither her preference nor her desire. It was the one thing she expressly did not want to be (see p.70).

It was interesting to note the women's expressions of the potential of their collective action and their potential to challenge existing power structures as detailed in Chapter 4. As indicated by one of the leaders of the union, the SADSAWU was never afforded the same status as other unions under the umbrella of COSATU. Even in the context of the unions under the COSATU banner, there was a hierarchy in which the SADSAWU ranked low. It is as though the SADSAWU is reflective of the status generally accorded to domestic workers. This point is further illustrated by both Freire (1985) and Foucault (1980) who stress that there are contradictions and tensions inherent in the various spheres that power occupies. In both the workshops and my observations *in situ*, one woman also disassociated herself from what she perceived as uncivilized behaviour associated with colouredness and chastised other women for feeding into this belief (see p. 72). She was both perpetuating the stereotype while at the same time wanting to be detached from the association.

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5.6 Concluding comments

Learning was certainly achieved in the context of the WEP. Learning and the acquisition of knowledge is a double-edged sword as they are important tools of the system that give or deny access to power. It would be negligent not to frame learning and knowledge against the rich and often painful canvas of the lives and histories of domestic workers in South Africa.

The WEP invited women to voice and explore the notion of power beyond a mere negative force that was thrust down upon them. However, by the end of the programme the women were still largely preoccupied with the effects of subordination and subjection on their individual lives (and their lives as a group of domestic workers). Their learning, while significant, did not translate into a cohesive understanding of how processes of subordination and subjection are systemic and part of the structural conditions that mediate, limit and constrain their lives.

The study offered us a multifaceted view of learning as it happened in the WEP and the multiple contexts the women of the SADSAWU have to negotiate. We see and feel their struggles in life and in learning, located both historically and in the present. We hear of women's hopes and aspirations for better lives for themselves and their families. We are also exposed to a range of social and psychological barriers as it relates to the lives of domestic workers.

With all its complexities, tensions and contradictions, the WEP became a space for reflection, dialogue, sharing and hope that facilitated learning. In several of the women's stories we detect evidence of a critical stance on their own lives: on their alienation, their needs and desires, and the relations of power that mediate their lived experiences.

The starkness of the subjugation and oppression that domestic workers continue to experience cries out for acknowledgement and validation. I felt compelled to explore this silent undercurrent of so many South African lives, lives that in too many ways to mention are still the embodiments of what apartheid was. This research project could be considered a success if an interpretive retelling of their stories serve to give their voices and experiences a wider audience; an audience that could acknowledge this study not only as an attempt to understand how the women attach meaning to their lives, but also as an attempt to open a political space for change.

If however I were to start this project all over again, I would incorporate and engage the women's need for formal knowledge. I would hope to extend the scope of the project by examining how the learning and knowledge gleaned through the women's involvement in the SADSAWU was applied (and transmitted) in other contexts.

In future I would consider a more detailed, longitudinal study that would focus on the trade union organizational context with a view to more succinctly applying the body of theory on informal learning and knowledge acquisition, rather than focus on a small project located within a particular union context such as the SADSAWU.

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