

Single motherhood, parenting and mental health: The lived experience of  
a single mother from a Coloured community in South Africa

by

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Single motherhood is a growing phenomenon in South Africa, as it is in the world at large. The concept and structure of a family have changed over the last few decades and no single definition will suffice to describe or define it anymore. Various factors impact on the psychological wellbeing of the single mother. The psychological wellbeing or mental health of the single mother can influence her parenting abilities. The aim of this study is to explore the lived experience of a single mother with three dependent children, to gain a deeper understanding of her experiences as a single mother and the meaning she attaches to it. The point of view of this research is from a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm and from an ecological systems theory approach. This qualitative research study uses a single case study method with unstructured interviews to explore the participant's experiences. Interpretative phenomenological analysis is used to analyse data, to identify main and sub-themes from the collected data, and to compare these themes with identified themes on single motherhood from existing research. The participant's lived experience reveals that financial hardship is not the main contributing factor to stress experienced by this single mother. The accumulative effect of diverse stressors and the lack of social support due to prejudice and stigma seem to have a greater effect. This study generates questions around the stigma of single motherhood in South Africa. The reading of this text could raise the reader's awareness of the challenges faced by single mothers and of prejudice against them. Single mothers are not less capable as individuals of handling the challenges of motherhood and parenting, but they are often exposed to more demands and stressors, compared to partnered mothers. Changing our perspectives on single motherhood can reduce prejudice, offer more social support and improve access to other needed resources.

**Keywords:** single motherhood; parenting; mental health; lived experience; demands; stressors; support; resources; maternal characteristics; prejudice.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

“Single-parent households are the norm in South Africa, with the majority of children growing up with one parent – most likely a mother. Increasing numbers of fathers are absent, and a ‘crisis of men’ in South Africa seems to be perpetuating patterns of abuse and desertion that will most likely continue with future generations.” (Holborn & Eddy, 2011, p.6)

This is the picture painted by researchers in the South African context. Holborn and Eddy (2011) found in 2007 that 30% of urban Coloured parents were single, of which 84% were single mothers. The concepts of a single mother and parenting are defined and discussed below.

### RESEARCH PROBLEM

This is an exploratory study with the unit of analysis the lived experience of a single mother in a Coloured community in South Africa. How is life experienced as a single mother and how does she make sense of or give meaning to the events and experiences in her life?

### CLARIFYING CONCEPTS

Concepts that require defining are: single motherhood, parenting, mental health, lived experience and Coloured community. At first glance this appears less complicated than the reality of wrestling with definitions to exclude discrimination against any member of society.

The first challenge is defining the concept of a single mother. There seems to be ambiguity in existing research, with some researchers including the concept of head of a household. Although this is a qualitative research study, it is interesting to note the difficulties faced in operationalising the concept of a single mother from a quantitative perspective, as evident in disputes around definitions included in national

population censuses. The challenge in this regard is to ensure that what is defined is what is being measured (Budlender, 1997). What it highlights is the complexity of defining and measuring the changing family structure. The simple, single nuclear family concept, used in many of the research studies quoted in this paper, with the husband as the head of the household and the mother and children as living in the family as dependents, is inaccurate and excluding more than half of the population in South Africa.

“The term head of household is used to cover a number of different concepts referring to the chief economic provider, the chief decision maker, the person designated by other members as the head, etc.” (Hedman, Perucci & Sundstrom, 1996, p.64). However, the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women advocated the elimination of the term ‘head of household’ (Department of International Economic and Social Affairs, 1988, p.57). The argument against the use of the term included patriarchal connotations and power inequality. There is also the danger of considering all households run by women as homogeneous. Ardington and Lund (1995) concluded that treating woman-headed households as homogeneous was “unhelpful” in that it concealed important intra-group differences (Ardington & Lund, 1995, p.8-9).

Consideration was given to the existing sensitivities around nomenclature and homogeneity. In this study the researcher has refrained from referring to the participant as ‘head of household’. In identifying a suitable participant, the following criteria were used:

- a single woman with dependent children living with her permanently
- main decision maker in the home
- main financial provider in the home

No specifications were given regarding current romantic relationships, extended family living arrangements or ownership of property (home). The participant in this study is a single, never-married mother of three children. She lives with her maternal grandmother and three children in a home she owns. She is currently involved in a romantic relationship, yet remains the main decision maker and financial provider in the home.

‘Parenting’ can be defined by the definitions found in the Oxford dictionary: the occupation or concerns of parents (Allen, 1991). This suggests the responsibilities of guarding and guiding children and the emotional, spiritual, physical and social concerns a parent might have regarding a child or children.

‘Mental health’ in this study refers to the psychological wellbeing of the single mother. It includes the presence or absence of certain symptoms and affects and the influence on her ability to function in diverse roles. Mental health could include a diagnosis of a psychological disorder, but it does not exclusively include that.

A ‘lived experience’ is defined as the participant’s experience of events, behaviour, emotions, relationships etc. and the meaning this holds for the individual. Russell (2007) spoke about how the knowledge we have of some people often comes in the form of statistical generalisations about population-based patterns and trends. She admitted that this data could be useful in some respects, but fail to capture the complexity and uniqueness of individual lives.

Conceptualising ‘Coloured’, as a race indication, could be an emotionally loaded word within the South African vocabulary. Although ‘race’ has no basis in natural science, in South Africa, with its history of apartheid, the population is still placed in racial categories (Budlender, 1997). Research is also conducted across racial divisions and distinctions, possibly (and hopefully) not for political reasons, but to gain an understanding of the complexity of our population and to identify specific needs among different groups. This study of a single mother from a Coloured community includes the definition of ‘Coloured’ as used in the South African context to identify one of the four population groups, the others being Whites, Africans and Indians. The racial identification in this study is purely for the sake of locating the study and not with racial discrimination at its root. “Yet it would be difficult to deny the extent to which the demarcation of South African society into Whites, Indians, Coloureds, and Africans has been normalised – for many, a ‘fact’ of life” (Posel, 2001, p. 109). The possibility of sensitivity to race categorising was kept in mind throughout the study.



Community is defined by the interrelated perspective of Ferrinho (cited in Visser, 2007):

A community is the specific system of action which arises when a human population (demography) settled in a given territory (geography) establishes structural arrangements to organise itself in order to live and survive as a group (economics). It develops interactive relationships among its components (sociology), and defines shared ways of thinking, feeling and acting (cultural anthropology) which are internalised by all members of the population and with which each individual identifies in a particular degree according to his or her personal living experiences and inherited characteristics (p.7)

### JUSTIFICATION, AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of this study is to gain an understanding of the experiences of a single mother in a community in South Africa. There are numerous quantitative research studies available on the topic of single motherhood. Few of these studies were conducted in the South African context or from a qualitative paradigm. Questions can be asked about the reality in the South African context and the effectiveness of intervention, if little research has been done to understand the needs of single mothers from different communities. Budlender (1997) suggested that the task of producing questions that will provide the information to better understand a range of situations in South Africa will require some thought, consultation, piloting and probably qualitative research.

My interest, as researcher, in the topic of single motherhood was sparked whilst working in the mental health department of a clinic in a Coloured community in South Africa. Many of the patients who utilised the mental health services were single mothers. Many of them presented with mood disturbances. Some of the children of these single mothers also presented with behavioural problems at school or at home and mood disturbances. This phenomenon raised questions around the experience of single motherhood. Existing research highlights themes or factors that impact on the single mother's psychological wellbeing, which in turn then impacts on her experience and effectiveness in other areas of her existence. The aim of this study is to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experience of a single mother with

dependent children, and to then compare her experience with the findings of existing research in the field.

My position as researcher is one of participant-researcher. On a professional level I was aware that my position as researcher might be viewed as an authoritative power position. I was the one with the degree and the one asking the questions. On a personal level I am not a single mother. I am not a mother. My personal experience of single motherhood came through one of my siblings becoming a single mother when her children were very small. I witnessed and experienced some of the challenges faced by her and by our family as we formed part of her support structure.

I do not only see the need for research to expand our understanding of single motherhood, I believe the benefit of this research can be manifold. The single case study design could provide an opportunity for the marginalised voice of a single mother to be heard. Her story is told as she lives it. Increased understanding is facilitated between reader and text through the hermeneutic process, as discussed later. In the process of improved understanding by reading the text, tolerance could be increased in the community and amongst mental health workers towards single mothers and their children. The process of telling her story to an empathic listener (the researcher), without being judged or rejected, could have a cathartic effect on this mother.

The research could identify existing and unmet needs in the experience of single motherhood. This could lead to further research in order to improve the delivery of mental health services and intervention programs to single mothers in our communities. Further research could also aid in advocating for policy changes to assist single mothers, should this be identified as necessary. From a systemic perspective the benefit of improved understanding of single motherhood could impact the mother, her family, the school, church, community, health clinic and government at large.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In looking at the phenomenon of single motherhood, one of the challenges faced in research is defining the concept of family, single parenthood, headship etc., operationalising that definition and being clear on what is measured. Confusion further results from the researcher's assumption that a specific phenomenon is being measured and readers of the analysis interpreting it in a different way (Budlender, 1997). I have clarified the concepts used in this study in the introduction, and will only give a brief summary of the criteria for single motherhood. A single mother is someone: who by self-definition classified herself as the person in authority and responsible for controlling the maintenance of that household or was given that status by others in that household; and is the economic supporter of the household (Budlender, 1997).

The concept of family has also changed dramatically over the last few decades. We have moved from the traditional two-parent family (man and woman) to diverse forms of family structure (Dowd, 1997). Today, a family can consist of any two adults co-habiting, with or without children. Most of the studies of single-parent families are still based on a deficit model which views these families in some way dysfunctional or broken (Javo, Ronning, Heyerdahl & Rudmin, 2004). This typifies society as biased and stereotypical in understanding the changing face of family structure.

Kennedy and Spencer (1994) explained that differences existed among single-parent families as they existed among two-parent families. I consider this an important point, as troubles present in single-parent families are often also present in two-parent families. McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) pointed out that the problems in two-parent and single parent families were not that different, the only difference was that single parents might be exposed to more of these difficulties or to greater levels thereof. It seems more beneficial to define a family, not by the traditional definition of two parents and their dependent children (structure), but by the interaction between any of the members in a particular family structure and how that structure functions. Maturana said systems were structurally determined and would function according to

their structure composition (Dell, 1985). Researchers were moving away from examining the effects of single demographic variables to study more complicated family dynamics variables. Some of these studies included the changes in parental relationships, relationships between children and custodial and non-custodial parents, parenthood practices and the division of responsibilities and labour within families (Rosenberg & Guttman, 2001).

If we assume a certain family structure as more acceptable, desirable and the 'norm', it could result in stigmatisation of any structure that deviates from this norm. From some of the research we will discuss now, it appears that the married, two-parent structure is taken as the norm and other family structures compared to the function of this particular structure, and not seen as structures in their own right.

### Single motherhood statistics

Burgess (1970) stated that the single parent family was an ever increasing phenomenon in contemporary American society. Now, four decades later, the single parent household is considered the norm in South Africa (Holborn & Eddy, 2011). Single motherhood increased in the United Kingdom from 8% in 1971 to 21% in 1992 (Brown & Moran, 1997) and in America from 12% in 1960 to 40% in 1995 (Antecol & Bedard, 2007). Between 1990 and 2000, the number of single-parent families in the United States increased from 9.7 million to 12 million families (Field & Casper, 2001). However, Professor Acheampong Yaw Amoateng, PhD Chief Research Specialist Child, Youth and Family Development (HSRC), in his Ten years of democracy seminar series in 2004, explained that either a longitudinal or consistent time-series data on events central to the definition of family as a social institution would be necessary to address any questions of family structure change. In his experience this was not the case in South Africa, as data had been collected very inconsistently.

### Family structure

The structure of the family, specified in the literature as single- mother families, had been the focus in many research projects. Conclusions were made based on the

structure. Krein and Beller (1988) concluded from their study to determine the negative effect of living in a single-parent family, the effects increased with the length of time living in this type of family, the impact was greatest in the preschool years and was larger for boys than girls. Although they concluded that the reduction in parental resources for investing in the development of their children lowered the children's educational attainment, they acknowledged the rapid change within society and questioned if these findings would still be in effect in future generations. This was a very appropriate question that is still in need of answering today.

Bramlett and Blumberg (2003) concluded that children living with grandparent-only or single-mother families had poorer physical health than children living with two-parent families or single-father families. Dawson (1991) supported this finding by stating that children from single-mother families had an increased risk of asthma. She further stated that children living in single-mother families were more likely to: repeat a grade at school; be treated for behavioural or emotional problems; and be expelled from school. McLanahan (1983) compared single female-headed families with two-parent male-headed families on three stressors: chronic life strains; major life events; and absence of social and psychological support. She found that single female-headed families experienced more stress than the male-headed families, and attributed it to the marital disruption as a major contributor to the findings. Marital disruption had also been associated with a higher incidence of several behavioural problems in children. The problems seemed more negative with more transitions in family structure and persistent conflict within the structure (Peterson & Zill, 1986). Single-mother families were also associated with increased material hardship, which included ability to meet essential expenses, housing conditions, neighbourhood problems and enough resources to buy adequate amounts of food (Lerman, 2002). This particular research article claimed that marriage lowers material hardship, compared to co-habiting couples or households where more than one adult were present.

### Financial hardship

Financial hardship was considered the primary factor associated with poor mental health in single mothers, according to cross-sectional data from a nationally

representative longitudinal Australian household survey. The prevalence of mental health issues among single mothers compared to partnered mothers was 28.7% to 15.7%. Socio-demographics, household income, financial hardship and social support accounted for 94% of the association between poor mental health and single motherhood (Crosier, Butterworth & Rodgers, 2007).

Financial resources played a vital role in the psychological wellbeing of the single mother and in the quality of her parenting. Jackson, Gyamfi, Brooks-Gunn and Blake (1998) found in their study of single Black mothers in America, employment had a moderating effect on the relationship between a mother's psychological functioning and her decision to spank her children. Employment reduced the frequency of spanking by mothers with more symptoms of parental stress and depression.

Studies on the impact of financial resources often only focus on household income and not on parental asset holdings. Assets are important as they bring security, increase power and control, change the way people think, make more opportunities available and position the individual with more power in society. Assets may also lead to a future orientation, form a basis for risk-taking, increase personal efficacy, increased political participation and improve wellbeing of children (Sherraden, 1991). Zhan and Sherraden (2003) focused their research on the influence of maternal assets on children's educational outcomes. They asked three questions: was there a direct relationship between a mother's assets and her child's educational achievements; was there a relationship between a mother's assets and her educational expectations for her child; and did a mother's expectations of her child's educational achievements mediate the relationship between her asset holdings and the child's educational outcome. Their conclusion showed a statistically significant relationship between a mother's assets and her child's educational achievements, a positive relationship between a mother's assets and her expectations and between her expectations and her child's educational outcomes.

One of the factors that negatively affected financial strain was maternal educational attainment. Jackson, Brooks-Gunn, Huang and Glassman (2000) completed a study with welfare recipient single mothers and their preschool children in three neighbourhoods in New York. The results of their study showed maternal educational

attainment positively associated with earnings and together with instrumental support negatively related to financial strain. Financial strain was implicated in elevated levels of depressive symptoms, which negatively affected parenting quality. Quality parenting or the lack thereof was associated with children's behaviour problems and preschool ability.

It is not only the financial status of the single mother household that plays a role in the functioning of the family, but also the neighbourhood poverty. Klebanov, Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (1994) investigated whether neighbourhood poverty influenced maternal conditions over and above the effects of family poverty and family conditions, the influence of family poverty on maternal conditions and whether maternal characteristics could account for the effects of family poverty and conditions on mother-child directed behaviours. They did an eight-site study of 3-year olds and their mothers in the US, distinguishing between low-income and high-income groups. They assessed three home environment measures, including physical environment, provision of learning experiences and warmth of the mother. They assessed three maternal characteristics, including depression, social support and coping. Results showed that home environment was adversely affected by family poverty, large household size, female headship and low maternal education. Neighbourhood poverty and home environment and warmth of care giver were associated. The neighbourhood was one context in which children developed and also influenced parents' behaviour. Neighbourhood poverty did not however influence maternal depression, coping styles or provision of learning experiences. The challenge with neighbourhood poverty might be that single mothers under financial strain were forced to live in poorer neighbourhoods due to the lack of financial resources and often lack of social support. Wilson (1991) suggested that living in poor neighbourhoods where few individuals held jobs and where single parent households were prevalent, might produce, what he called, social isolation, which in turn produced practices and lifestyles that did not reinforce practices that would improve future prospects and expectations. Although neighbourhoods influenced some aspects of family life, family conditions were stronger indicators of maternal characteristics and behaviour.

### Mental and physical health

In the area of mental health, researchers in the past compared single mothers with their married counterparts. Davies, Avison and McAlpine (1997) found that single mothers in their study reported a higher rate of lifetime and 1-year prevalence rates of depression than the married mothers. They found early adversities in childhood and adolescence increased the risk of early onset depression, which had a higher prevalence in the single mother group. Single mothers were more likely to seek professional help from mental health services, compared to married mothers, even when controlling for major depression and socio-demographic factors (Cairney & Wade, 2002). One of the reasons for this, according to Davis, Avison and McAlpine (1997), was the significantly higher levels of stress experienced by single mothers due to sole-parent and financial strains. This led to higher reported levels of psychological distress, compared to married mothers, which was reason enough to seek professional mental help, even if a psychiatric disorder was not diagnosed.

Brown and Moran (1997) did a study in inner-city London to investigate the relationships between depression, poverty and marital status. They found the risk of onset of depression was double among single mothers and single mothers were twice as likely as married mothers to experience financial hardship, although they were twice as likely to be in full-time employment. A link was also found with experiencing humiliating and entrapping severe life events, which single mothers had more risk of, especially if they had poor self-esteem and lack of support. Financial hardship was also linked to the risk of a chronic episode of depression, lasting at least a year. It is interesting to note that chronicity seemed to reduce with length of time spent in single parenthood, which could indicate some degree of adjustment.

Cairney, Boyle, Offord and Racine (2003) completed a study to examine the effects of stress and social support on the relationships between single-parent status and depression. They found that single mothers were more likely to have suffered an episode of depression, reported higher levels of chronic stress, had recent life events and more childhood adversities, compared to married mothers. The single mothers also reported lower levels of perceived social support, involvement in the community and contact with family and friends. Stress and social support accounted for almost 40% of the relationship between single parent status and depression.



## Single motherhood and children

Single motherhood affects the psychological wellbeing of the mother, as discussed above. It necessitates questions around the intergenerational effects on the offspring of single mothers.

Aquilino (1996) explored the complexity of living arrangements of children born to single mothers in the US, and the impact of childhood living arrangements on the young adult life course. Results from this study showed that living arrangements of children of single mothers influenced the likelihood of high school completion, enrolment in postsecondary school, the timing of independent living and the time of entry into the work force. Higher rates of early marriage and divorce (Sandefur & McLanahan, 1990) and adolescent childbearing (Wu & Martinson, 1993) had been linked to growing up in a single parent family. Astone and McLanahan (1991) attributed this to reduced involvement of single parents with less supervision of children. There is evidence that children raised by single parents are more likely to perform poorly in school and participate in behaviours like smoking, promiscuous behaviour, substance abuse and crime (Antecol & Bedard, 2007). It should be noted that time of dissolution of the marriage, individual characteristics of the single parent and the involvement of the father were factors that influenced the above findings.

Collins, Maccoby, Steinberg, Hetherington and Bornstein (2000) suggested that influences on children include multiple sources, like temperamental characteristics and behaviours of child and parent, peers, neighbourhood and school influences. It would be a limited perspective to attribute all the developmental influences on the child to a single parent. Understanding the development of the child is a complex interplay between inherited and experiential components.

Positive parental characteristics and behaviour might however influence the development and outcome of children. The presence of positive maternal attitudes, maternal education and parenting resources and ability might significantly mitigate adverse child outcomes (Ricciuti, 2004). Belsky (1984) explored determinants of individual differences in parental functioning by research on the aetiology of child

maltreatment. The three domains that he identified were: psychological resources of the parent; characteristics of the child; and contextual sources of stress and support. He found the personal psychological resources of the parent more effective in protecting the parent-child relationship from stress, than contextual sources of support or the characteristics of the child.

Correlations between single motherhood and children's behavioural problems were often reported by the single mothers, which raised the question of validity. The maternal psychological wellbeing and mental health might affect the reporting of child behavioural problems by the mother (Najman, Williams, Nikles, Spence, Bor, O'Callaghan, Le Brocque & Anderson, 2000). Single mothers reported poorer overall physical health for their children, compared to married mothers. Maternal depression was the most significant predictor of the assessment of children's health by their mothers (Angel & Lowe Worobey, 1988). On the other hand, research showed mothers and children to be more useful informants on children's internalising problems than teachers, with mothers being more accurate than children themselves, except on worrying. Mothers were also better informants on children's oppositional behaviour than teachers, although teachers outperformed mothers on information regarding hyperactivity and inattention (Loeber, Green & Lahey, 1990).

In a study comparing mothers' ability to report problem behaviour in their children, compared to psychiatrists, mothers tended to over report externalising problems (noncompliance, aggression and poor impulse control) and under report internalising problems (fear and anxiety) of children at age two. Mothers could predict children's social and language abilities at later stages. The reports by mothers and psychiatrists for children's problems at age five were more similar than at age two. Mothers' reports, compared to psychiatrists, were more closely related to difficult temperament of the child and the mother's own psychological functioning, whereas the psychiatrists' reports were closely linked to the child's gender. Mothers and psychiatrists were similar in their report on insecure attachment issues and poor parenting influences (Clarke-Stewart, Allhusen, McDowell, Thelen & Call, 2003).

#### Social support, networks and neighbourhoods

The effects of neighbourhood and family poverty on maternal psychological and behaviour characteristics were referred to in the discussion on financial hardship. The conclusion of that study showed neighbourhood poverty associated with poorer home environments and less maternal warmth (Klebanov, Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1994). Residents of poor, single mother neighbourhoods showed higher levels of depression than residents from more affluent neighbourhoods, even when adjustments were made for individual factors like education and income (Ross, 2000). Depression was the result of daily stress of living in a neighbourhood where the social order had broken down. Ross (2000) described a neighbourhood where social order had broken down as one with limited opportunities, low employment, lack of social integration, non-conventional behaviour where people loitered on the streets and where substance abuse, crime, graffiti and vandalism were evident. This environment caused distress on the inhabitants. Single parent families were a contributing factor to the breakdown of social order due to less control being exercised over teenagers, low employment rates, lower income and social isolation (Wilson, 1996). Ross (2000) concluded that perceived disorder mediated the impact of neighbourhood conditions on mental health, and single parent families were a distressing aspect of such neighbourhood contexts. This reciprocal relationship between structure of family and neighbourhood was also evident in the following study on community structure and social resources.

Structural community characteristics like poverty and ethnic heterogeneity influenced community social resources (Wickrama & Bryant, 2003). Community social resources included social integration, where families were involved in community activities and services (Massey & Denton, 1993), and collective socialisation, where parents got involved in raising all other people's children in the community (Coleman, 1990). The social resources influenced family social resources, which included involved parenting and parental acceptance of their children. Family social resources eventually influenced adolescent depressive symptoms. The findings from this study concluded that parent-child relationships on adolescent depressive symptoms were weaker in more adverse communities, compared to less adverse communities (Wickrama & Bryant, 2003).

Another variable, role orientation of the mother, was identified by McLanahan, Wedemeyer and Adelberg (1981), which influenced the effects of structure and

support on psychological wellbeing of the single mother. They identified three network types that could potentially offer support to the single parent: family of origin; extended network; and conjugal network (significant male at the centre of the network and seen as the major provider of support for the single mother). The different networks also provided different kinds of support: direct services (material aids, advice); emotional support (security, intimacy, reassurance of worth); and social integration (participating in community activities, new social contacts). The researchers acknowledged that the needs and goals of the mother would determine which structure and kind of support fitted best to ensure her psychological wellbeing. It is important to guard against assuming that all support structures can serve all single mothers equally successfully.

### Single motherhood and stress

Stress and social support accounted for 40% of the relation between single mother status and depression (Cairney, Boyle, Offord & Racine, 2003). Simons, Beaman, Conger and Chao (1993) conducted a study with 209 divorced mothers in the US, to investigate the causes of variations in functioning between single parents. Two perspectives of single parenthood were considered: the strain perspective that perceives the stress the single mother was under as intruding upon emotional wellbeing and the quality of parenting; and the selection perspective that considered a link between the problematic characteristics of the individual and her marital status, psychological wellbeing and the quality of her parenting. Their findings supported both perspectives. They found single mothers with limited education had little access to social network support, which was complicated further by severe economic pressure and high exposure to negative life events. These stressors were associated with psychological distress and ineffectual parenting. From the selection perspective, antisocial behaviour trait was associated with economic strain and negative life events, which resulted in ineffectual parenting practices. Economic pressure (material hardship), low education, limited social support and negative life events were positively linked to psychological distress and ineffectual parenting. Other stressors that impacted on the single mother's psychological wellbeing included: parental role-strain, parenting and job-family strain.

Simon (1992) conducted a study to investigate the impact of role identity on psychological wellbeing of both women and men. His conclusion suggested individuals would be affected by problems in the role domain to the degree of importance attached by the individuals to role identity. If a certain role identity, like being a mother or wife, was very important to an individual, problems in this area would threaten a valued aspect of self. The parental role strain severity would depend on the importance of the parental identity on the individual's self-concept. Simon's research concluded that women were more vulnerable to psychological distress from role strain than men, due to the salience of parental identity in women.

Parenting might have negative consequences for the psychological wellbeing of adults, regardless of family structure. McLanahan and Adams (1987) found that parents experienced increased levels of anxiety, worry and depression, compared to childless adults. The difference was not between single and married parents, but between parents and non-parents. This again confirmed the challenges of raising a child and was not restricted to single parenthood. Being a parent might be stressful and this role was complicated further if the parent was employed. Being a single parent in employment could add job-family role strain to often already stressed households. Campbell and Moen (1992) investigated this role strain in 160 employed single mothers in Canada. Job-family strain was positively related to the number of children, child's age and hours worked. It was negatively related to positive attitudes to work and higher work satisfaction.

### Protective factors

Although there were many variables which caused stress and psychological distress in the lives of single mothers, research had also found some protective factors that mitigated some of the negative effects. Moriarty and Wagner (2004) identified six types of rituals used by single-parent families to facilitate family cohesion and values: connection (spending time together), spiritual (finding meaning in spiritual activities like church attendance), love (expressing affection for one another), recreation (doing something fun together), celebration (birthdays etc.), and evolving (changing rituals as individuals grow up). These rituals acted as bonding agents to increase a feeling of belonging amongst family members.

Many research studies focused on the challenges and negative influences faced by single mothers, whereas Brodsky (1999) investigated resilience among a group of urban single mothers in the US. Resilience was defined as the balance between risk and protective factors, as described by the mothers themselves. They found resilience evident in eight areas of their lives: neighbourhood; parenting; family; friends; men; money; personal characteristics; and spirituality. A resilient woman would for instance balance the risks in the neighbourhood, like violent gangs, with a protective factor of creating a safe, cohesive environment at home for her children. Focusing on resilience or women's abilities to overcome negative influences put single motherhood in a different light. Single parenting might be a way of escaping a negative life event like domestic violence, which could lead to a positive outcome (Mednick, 1987). Single mothers who were successful in coping with the demands of single parenthood had an awareness and appreciation of the positive elements in their lives (D'Ercole, 1988).

### Interventions

Single motherhood is a complex phenomenon, influenced by a wide selection of variables and circumstances. Simplifying it to linear causality seems unwise and unjustified. Interventions should be custom made to fit the need of the single mother family. Buvinić and Gupta (1997) argued that women in charge of maintenance of households should get special attention because they were disadvantaged through poverty, gender discrimination and absence of support in this role. They however expressed concern that targeting benefits to single mothers might have a perverse effect of promoting rather than discouraging single motherhood. From their research in Chile they concluded that interventions should be directed to areas like income generating opportunities, child care support, policies that prevented discrimination against women accessing resources and services, health and education promotion and creating social networks.

Brodsky (1999) commented on the tendency for intervention policies and programs to focus on the individual single mother and her family, without taking into consideration the impact of stressors and resources on social and community level.

She further challenged intervention programs that considered the single urban mother as satisfied with only her basic needs met (food and clothing), with no prospect of furthering her aspirations (academic excellence and independence).

Avison, Ali and Walters (2007) concluded that the psychological distress single mothers experienced were not because they were in some way less capable than married mothers to deal with challenges, but they were exposed to greater amounts of stress. They therefore concluded that interventions should focus on reducing chronic strains among single mothers. They considered intervention programs that focused on the needs of families in the community, with the aim of reducing life stress and improving social and economic conditions, preferable to programs that considered the personal inadequacies of the mother the cause of family difficulties.

## CHAPTER 3

### PARADIGMATIC AND THEORETICAL POINT OF DEPARTURE

#### CONSTRUCTIVIST-INTERPRETIVIST PARADIGM

A paradigm can be defined as “a set of interrelated assumptions about the social world which provides a philosophical and conceptual framework for the organized study of the world” (Filstead, 1979, p. 34).

The choice of the paradigm influences the selection of participants, methodology, tools and instruments and the philosophical assumptions made about the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Confrey (1990) reminds us that constructivism does not only highlight the role of the constructive process as important, but also enables the researcher to be, at least partially, aware of these constructions and to reflect on the construction process.

Constructivism has its roots in the model of knowledge developed by Immanuel Kant, an 18<sup>th</sup> century philosopher. Knowledge, according to Kant, was an invention of an organism (or a person) interacting with the environment. Kant’s view emphasises a central concept of constructivist thinking, that you cannot separate an objective reality from the person who is experiencing that reality (Sciarra, 1999). This view of knowledge was in direct contrast to the view of the Empiricist, John Locke, who regarded knowledge as the product of the environment leaving an etched copy on the blank mind of the observer (Efran, Lukens & Lukens, 1988). These two views represent knowledge as invention and discovery, respectively. The way we regard knowledge will influence the way we experience our world. Krippendorff (1996) describes the change from external observer to subjective participant as a move from first order to second order cybernetics, from privileging the perspective of the neutral observer to acknowledging the participation of the researcher in the world she observes.

Ponterotto (2005) refers to the conceptual roots that undergird our quest for knowledge as the philosophy of science. He incorporates within this science the



beliefs we hold about ontology (nature of reality), epistemology (study of knowledge; interaction between participant and researcher), axiology (values in the research process), rhetorical structure (language and presentation of research) and methodology (process and procedures of research).

Constructivists believe reality to be constructed in the minds of individuals and it is not a singular, external reality (Hansen, 2004). This is a relativist position that expects and acknowledges multiple and equally valid realities (Schwandt, 1994). Reality is subjective and contextual. The construction of reality is influenced by the individual perceptions and experiences of an individual, the social environment and the interactive process between the researcher and the participant (Ponterotto, 2005). This underscores the critical characteristic of constructivism, the emphasis on context and meaning (Efran, Lukens & Lukens, 1988). Consciousness presents us with a world, an organised structure of things around us, including ourselves, through meaning (Smith, 2007). There are not only multiple realities and meanings of a certain phenomenon in the minds of the people who experience it, but there can also be numerous interpretations of these multiple realities.

My role as researcher is not to excavate a single truth or reality from the experiences of a single mother, but my aim is to understand, as far as possible, what it is like for my participant to be a single mother. This dynamic interaction between researcher and participant is central to describing the participant's perspective and experience. The interaction and dialogue between researcher and participant encourages reflection, which gives rise to deeper meaning. Interaction occurs when the interacting objects mutually influence one another through their communication (Wagner, 1994). People speak to one another, live in the stories they tell, construct themselves in discourses and continually negotiate their roles in communication and contrast to each other (Krippendorff, 1996). Schwandt (2000) emphasises the goal of research to understand the lived experience of the participant from her point of view as she lives it day to day. The phenomenological researcher studies the ordinary life world of the participant: their interest is in how people experience their world and how best to understand that experience (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott & Davidson, 2002)

As the researcher cannot be removed from the interaction with participant and the co-creation of reality, so the researcher's values cannot be amputated from the research process. The researcher should be aware of and acknowledge values and aim to "bracket" them. Bracketing is a phenomenological concept. The rule of epoch stipulates suspension of expectations, assumptions, initial biases and prejudices by temporarily setting them aside (bracket), to be free and open to focus on primary data (Spinelli, 1989). The rhetoric of the constructivist-interpretivist stance allows detailed, thick descriptions of the researcher's expectations, biases, values and impact of the research on her intellectual and emotional world, and of the lived experiences of the participant. Descriptions are personalised and in the first person (Ponterotto, 2005). This paradigm encourages naturalistic inquiry designs (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and qualitative research methods like in-depth face-to-face interviews. As research in this paradigm is idiographic in focusing on understanding each individual as a unique, complex entity, the writing is also idiographic with detailed, descriptive presentation of, for instance, a case study (Ponterotto, 2005).

### ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS THEORY

Families are very diverse and one single definition cannot suffice (Anderson, 1997). Gelles (1995) defines a family as a social group with a distinct structure, positions, and interactions among those in these different positions. The structure completes generalised functions, like raising children. Members of a family are recognised as all those involved in naming a problem, and not necessarily those identified as such through social roles and organisation (Milewski-Hertlein, 2001).

Bronfenbrenner, the father of ecological systems theory, recognises the family as the principle context in which human development occurs, but it is only one of many settings that influences individuals' development and these settings are interdependent. Human development occurs as a result of the complex reciprocal interaction between a person and other persons, objects and symbols in that person's immediate environment. These interactions in the immediate environment that occur regularly over extended periods of time are called proximal processes. The form, power, content and direction of these proximal processes depend on the specific

characteristics of the individual developing person, the environment and the nature of the developmental outcomes being considered (Bronfenbrenner, 1995).

A feature of the ecological model is the description of the environment as a set of systems that interlink, from micro to macro (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). The family is defined as the microsystem. The next system that could influence development of those in a microsystem is the mesosystem. A mesosystem can be defined as the interaction of two or more microsystems. An example of a mesosystem is a school environment that affects a child's development even at home, as the home environment could influence development at school. Exosystems are systems that an individual is not directly exposed to, but can be influenced by, for example a parent's workplace can influence the parent, who in turn could affect the child at home. Exosystems include the parent's workplace, parent's social networks and community influences on the family.

Small and Supple (1998) distinguish between neighbourhood and community and ask the question whether a community is more than the sum of its parts. They define a neighbourhood as "a physical place defined by socially shared boundaries which includes a population of people who usually share similar life chances, socio-economic status and physical proximity" (p. 3). Community refers to social relationships, shared norms, values, goals and feelings of identification, belonging and trust. They refer to the direct influences of a setting (microsystem effects) on a developing individual as first order community effects. Some community settings include families, schools, peer groups, health care facilities, religious institutions and child care settings. The influence on an individual is not only determined by the setting, but by the processes present in those settings, like peer influences, modelling by older individuals and parental socialisation. They further identify second order community effects (mesosystem effects), determined by interrelationships between community settings.

Single motherhood could imply family structure, role and other forms of transition. Bronfenbrenner investigated the influence of transitions on developmental change. He identified two types of transitions: normative (puberty, marriage etc.) and non-normative (death, divorce etc.). He stipulated that transitions not only directly

influence development, but it also affects family processes, which indirectly influence development (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Non-normative transitions, together with other social and economic factors, could create chaos in the lives of families, neighbourhoods and everyday environments in which people live their lives. This chaos could undermine the formation and stability of relationships and restrict activities necessary for psychological growth and wellbeing. The outcome of such continued chaos could be reflected in the increase of single parenthood, youth crime and violence, teenage pregnancies etc. (Bronfenbrenner, 1995).

Several themes emerge from Bronfenbrenner's work: context (social and historical); the active person (shaping and interacting with environment); and development does not occur in isolation (Darling, 2007). Bronfenbrenner (1995) states four life course principles: an individual's developmental life course is situated in and affected by conditions and events happening during the historical period through which the person lives; the timing of biological and social transitions influence development as they relate to age, role expectations and opportunities; the lives of all family members are interdependent and influence one another; and a person influences her own development through her choices and actions. Role expectations are firstly externally determined. Changes in role expectation lead to behavioural changes, which influences development if they persist over time. Roles are not only determined by the environment, they affect development as powerful environmental levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1999).

Darling (2007) refers to the phenomenological nature of ecological systems theory, which stipulates that a person's reality is what she perceives to be her reality and she will experience consequences based on this perception. Beale Spencer, Dupree and Hartmann (1997) go one step further in saying experiences in different cultural contexts (home, school, community) affect one's perception of self. The way one processes experiences does not only influence self-esteem, but also how one attributes meaning and significance to different aspects of oneself. So, it is not only the experiences a person has, but also the perceptions of those experiences that influence how the person will view herself. This perceptual process is influenced by social-cognitive processes, which is unique to each individual.

## CHAPTER 4

### METHODOLOGY

#### QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The aim of qualitative research is to understand and represent people's experiences and behaviour as they live and engage through different situations. The perspectives of the research participant are the most important and the researcher aims to understand the phenomenon under study from this perspective (Elliott, Fische & Rennie, 1999) and illuminate it in the research presentation (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott & Davidson, 2002). Qualitative research is a broad term for research methodology that describe people's experiences, behaviours, interactions and social contexts without using statistical quantifications (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Silverman (cited in Willig, 2001) defines methodology as a general approach to a research topic, compared to method, which implies a specific research technique. Qualitative researchers explore ways of increasing the understanding of a phenomenon and the meanings attached to it by the participants. They do not attempt to validate any claims about these experiences or meanings (Frost, 2011).

The quality of qualitative research depends on the extent to which: the perspectives of participants have been authentically represented; interpretations made from the data are authentic; and findings are coherent with data and social context from which it was taken. The criteria for quality of qualitative research interact with the standards for ethics. Openness and honesty about the power relations between researcher and participant, data collection, data analysis and presentation are central requirements for quality research (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott & Davidson, 2002). In most traditions of interpretive research, the researcher is viewed as the main instrument of inquiry, which brings challenges of its own (Poulin, 2007). This subjectivity can be managed through reflexivity, where the researcher sets aside assumptions and judgements and records all thoughts, feelings and experiences in a self-reflective journal (Schwandt, 2001). Willig (2001) identifies two types of reflexivity: personal and epistemological. Personal reflexivity includes reflecting on ways in which the researcher's beliefs, values, identities etc. have influenced the research, and how the researcher has been

influenced and changed by the research. Epistemological reflexivity questions the influence of the research questions, design and method of analysis on the data and findings of the research. The assumptions and constructions of the researcher and the impact on research findings are questioned. Critical language awareness forms part of reflexivity, where the choice of words influence meanings attributed to experiences and could influence findings (Willig, 2001).

Elliott et al. (cited in Ponterotto & Grieger, 2007, p.228) presented seven “publishability guidelines especially pertinent to qualitative research”: owning one’s perspective; situating the sample; grounding your findings in examples; providing credibility checks; being coherent; accomplishing general versus specific research tasks; and resonating with the reader. The researcher needs to own her own perspective by detailing personal frames of reference, theoretical orientations and personal connections with the topic and the study. The researcher needs to situate the sample by describing the research participant(s) in detail, allowing readers to form a clear picture of the main characteristics. Coherence can be achieved by showing how themes are related and how they illuminate the phenomenon under study. The researcher must specify if a more general understanding of a phenomenon or a specific comprehensive understanding of a selected case is intended. When presenting the findings, the writing should be fluid, providing enough evidence to convince the reader that findings are credible and relevant. Social validity is important in any research. Morrow (2005) defines social validity as the importance of the topic and the research study to society at large and to the profession.

### INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS (IPA)

IPA is an approach to qualitative research that aims to understand the world from the participants’ point of view, to explore the lived experience and meaning making of their personal and social world, as mediated by the context of cultural and socio-historical meanings (Eatough & Smith, 2008). The meaning making process is interpretive and complicated by the researchers’ own conceptions. IPA is suitable for research: where the focus is on the uniqueness of the participant’s experiences and meanings; the specific topic holds existential significance for the participant; the research is concerned with complexity, process or novelty; and no pre-determined

hypothesis exists (Frost, 2011). IPA is “an approach to qualitative, experiential and psychological research which has been informed by concepts and debates from three key areas of philosophy of knowledge: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography” (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p.11).

### Phenomenology

Phenomenology acknowledges the life world of a person as a historical, cultural, social and subjective product (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott & Davidson, 2002). Phenomenology is the study of consciousness as experienced from the first person perspective. It represents a form of consciousness from the person’s own subjective perspective, a description of what the person is experiencing and what it is like to have that form of experience (Smith, 2007). The things we perceive exist in the way they exist through the meaning we give to them. This action is referred to as intentionality, where the mind reaches out to stimuli in the external world to translate it into the internal realm of meaningful experience (Spinelli, 1989). In using a phenomenological method in research we must keep three rules in mind: rule of epoche, rule of description and rule of equalisation. The rule of epoche allows the researcher to set aside her pre-conceived ideas and judgements to allow her to focus on the primary data of her experiences. The rule of description guides the researcher to give a descriptive account of the subjective variables of experiences, rather than theoretically explaining or speculating about experiences. The rule of equalisation states that the researcher should not have expectations that will place her focus more on some items than others, but should initially give equal significance to all items (Spinelli, 1989).

### Hermeneutics

Heidegger said it is only possible to understand someone as a function of our involvement with that person’s world, keeping in mind that every interpretation will already be contextualised in a previous experience in a specific context. A person is a person-in-context, which includes historical, social and cultural context. He stated that reality is not dependent on us, but the nature and exact meaning of reality is (Heidegger, 1962). Schleiermacher, the father of modern hermeneutics, says

psychological interpretation aims to reconstruct or re-experience the writer's mental and creative processes in order to develop an empathic understanding of the text (Prasad, 2002). The aim of hermeneutics or interpretation is to recover the original intention of the writer of the text. Four major concepts of hermeneutics explain how this can be achieved: hermeneutic circle, hermeneutic horizons, fusion of horizons and author's intention. The hermeneutic circle implies that the reader of the text will understand the meaning of the text to the extent she knows herself and her world (Ricoeur, 1974). Hermeneutic horizons refer to the preconceived ideas or prejudices we bring to the text and the reader only becomes conscious of these if the meaning of the text challenges the truth of the prejudices (Gadamer, 1975). A fusion of horizons takes place when a conversation or dialogue develops between the text and the reader. The reader is challenged by the truths communicated by the text and the text is submitted to the questions asked by the reader (Gadamer, 1975). From these concepts we conclude that the author's intention is not always understood or interpreted, but the conversation between text and reader creates the meaning of that text.

In IPA we are dealing with double hermeneutics: the participant tries to make sense of her world; the researcher aims to make sense of the participant's effort to make sense of her lived experience; and the researcher is simultaneously aware of her own prejudices and preconceptions which could influence interpretation (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006).

### Idiography

IPA is idiographic in nature as it aims to focus on an in-depth, detailed analysis of lived experience and actual life (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Idiographic studies focus on specific individuals and specific events (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006). The idiographic nature of this study provides the rationale for the selection of a single case. The details of a single case, if rich and compelling, will bring us closer to aspects of a shared community or shared commonality (Smith, 2004). Collins and Nicholson (2002) say "working across cases could miss a potentially rich source of data, that of a contextualised, unfolding and sequential account within a single interview" (p.100).



## CASE STUDY METHOD

Yin (2003) stated, “You would use the case study method because you deliberately wanted to cover contextual conditions – believing that they might be highly pertinent to your phenomenon of study” (p.13). In selecting a single case, it is possible to confuse case study research with narrative research. Narrative research focuses on individuals’ stories and positions these within personal, cultural and historical contexts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), often in chronological order. Case study research focuses on specific issues or phenomena with the selected case illustrating the issue (Stake, 1995). The case is described in detail and set within contextual conditions, with multiple data sources used (Yin, 2003). In the selection of a purposeful case (one specifically selected because it meets certain criteria, like information-rich), there is an interest in generalising the research findings (Stake, 1995). Stake (1978) writes,

I believe that it is reasonable to conclude that one of the more effective means of adding to understanding for all readers will be by approximating through the words and illustrations of our reports, the natural experience acquired in ordinary personal involvement (p.5).

He further explains naturalistic generalisation as the understanding of similarities and differences of issues and objects in or out of context. Flyvbjerg (2006) confirms that generalisation on the basis of a single case study is possible, but finds it more desirable to read case studies as narratives in their entirety. We might not be able to predict any theories or universal behaviour from a case study, but we can certainly learn something and gain understanding. Hans Eysenck (1976) said, “Sometimes we simply have to keep our eyes open and look carefully at individual cases – not in the hope of proving anything, but rather in the hope of learning something!” (p. 9).

## CASE STUDY METHOD APPLIED

A single case study was the preferred choice in this research study, because of the complexity and novelty of this particular case. An in-depth exploration of a single case would give a deeper understanding of the lived experience of one individual.

Comparing four or six cases could have resulted in less in-depth exploration. The findings from the single case are compared with the findings of existing research on single motherhood.

### SAMPLING

Frost (2011) considers purposive sampling the best option for an interpretive, phenomenological study. Participants are selected due to the presence of certain characteristics or features that enable thick descriptions and detailed exploration of the phenomenon under study. The size of the sample will be dependent on the quality of the data collected. Thick descriptions will enable thick meaning, with understanding the context of the situation or behaviour (Ponterotto, 2006).

Thick description evokes emotionality and self-feeling. It inserts history into experience. It establishes the significance of an experience, or the sequence of events, for the person or persons in question. In thick description, the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals are heard (Patton, 1990, p. 430).

Polkinghorne (2005) prefers the term “selection” to “sampling”, as he states that sampling could suggest some form of representation of a population. He says the unit of analysis in a qualitative study is the experience, not the individual. The aim is to understand the phenomenon and not to explore the distribution thereof in the population.

### PROCESS OF SELECTION OF PARTICIPANT

In searching for an appropriate research participant, I consulted with the staff at the community health clinic to help in identifying individuals who met the criteria for the study. The response from staff members indicated an existing expectation that finding a participant might be a difficult task. Staff members, who are also members of the community, reported that there seems to be an attitude of resistance amongst members of the local community when it comes to sharing about personal matters. They reported that the local community try to “save face” and will not easily

acknowledge their shortcomings or admit to their own struggles or challenges. I had a taste of this resistance when I contacted single mothers from the community to ask if they were willing to participate in the study. A few single mothers turned down my invitation to participate in the study and explained that they were too busy with work, family and church demands to assist. This possibly was the only reason for refusal, but we are not to know for certain. The research participant I selected was very open and willing to engage from the first phone call. We arranged to meet at the community health clinic for an information session during which I explained the research aim and process. She commented that she considered herself to be one of the few members of the community happy to admit and talk about her struggles. She wanted her story told and her voice heard. I got the sense that she was somehow an exception to the rule in this regard in the community.

## DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

### DATA COLLECTION

#### INTERVIEWS

“If you want to know how people understand their world and their lives, why not talk to them” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p.86).

The aim of interviews in qualitative research is to extract participants’ views of their lives, through the stories they tell and to enter into their social worlds, their experiences and emotions (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott & Davidson, 2002). The interviewer uses the narrative structure to gain practical knowledge from the participant, preserving the contextual integrity of the data (Drew, 1993). DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) say the purpose of the qualitative research interview is based on the meanings interviewees attribute to their life experiences. Kvale (1996) says the purpose is to, “obtain descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena” (p.5). The interview is not aimed at finding facts, but at exploring diverse human experience and meaning (Forrester, 2010).

The researcher should not presume in advance that she knows what to expect from the interviews. Interviewing is a process of social interaction that generates and co-creates data, where participant and researcher are both equally involved. The way and the reason we are asked questions will influence what and how we answer, which should be reflected on during the research process (Forrester, 2010). Interviews can include unstructured or semi-structured interviews. Unstructured interviews allow the participant to take the lead in telling their stories in conversational style language. Some participation and engagement from the researcher will be necessary if the complexities of meaning are to be explored in full (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott & Davidson, 2002). Van Manen (1990) regards probes by the interviewer helpful to the participant, in expressing contextual details important to the meanings present in the narrative. Access to one's experiences often requires assistance from the interviewer to discover and explore areas and gain access to deeper levels of the experience (Polkinghorne, 2005).

Questions asked during an interview should be open and aimed at exploring the participant's report of lived experience, understanding and meaning-making in the contexts of her life. Questions that encourage the participant to share her story and uncover meanings in her experiences are preferable. The interviewer wants the participant to describe, rather than interpret experiences (Merkle Sorrell & Redmond, 1995). The interview schedule (semi-structured) should be expansive, open, encourage feedback, contain prompts, not make assumptions and ask more sensitive questions once rapport has been established (Frost, 2011). Although semi-structured questions are designed in advance, the researcher should remain flexible in questioning and allow participant to raise any aspect, as she will share what is important to her and this will be consistent with her underlying meaning-making process (Forrester, 2010). The researcher depends on interviewing skills like ability to establish rapport, active listening and focusing on the participant's experiential world. The aim is to achieve the researcher's goal of gaining relevant information from the participant. It is not simply a process of "collecting" information, like picking up shells on a beach, but knowing how and when to ask for information or clarify the understanding of communication between participant and researcher.

### OBSERVATIONAL DATA

Data about the participant's experience is not only gathered through conversations, but behaviours, facial expressions, gestures, clothing and other non-verbal indications offer information on the meaning a participant attaches to a verbal comment. The environment in which an interview takes place, if in a participant's home, the design and decorations can give an indication of the participant's experiences (Polkinghorne, 2005).

### PROCESS OF DATA COLLECTION

Four interviews were conducted over a period of four weeks, one per week. The interviews were one hour each in duration. Each interview was audio-recorded. The first interview started with the following open question: "What is it like being a single mother in your community today, and every day?" No further questions were asked during this interview, except to clarify some of the statements made by the participant. The second interview started with the question: "What is your experience as a single mother in different contexts of your life, like work, family, church etc.?" Further questions were again limited to exploring or understanding the participant's replies and statements to this question. Interview three and four both continued on the theme of the first two interviews and the participant was given the freedom to initiate conversation and share according to her subjective priorities. All questions asked during interviews followed onto the participant's contributions and were aimed at clarifying and exploring her answers.

Interviews one, two and four were conducted in an office at the community health clinic. Interview three was conducted at the participant's home, on her invitation. When arrangements were made for interviewing, I asked the participant if interviewing at her home would be an option. She declined, explaining that her home environment was too busy and as her youngest son and grandmother were at home. We would not get any undisturbed time to talk. This made me think she was uncomfortable inviting me into her personal world, possibly because of a perceived power inequality, distrust, or guardedness. Or maybe it simply was too busy at home. At the start of the third interview she commented that she was nervous during the first interview as she did not know what to expect. She reported feeling a lot more

relaxed. She was on holiday and overseeing some building work going on in the house. We sat in an outside wooden construction, a building she had erected to create a space where she can relax with friends and family. It also had an extra bedroom attached. When I arrived the place was buzzing with family members, children, builders, friends and her grandmother. After ten minutes of her trying to delegate all the demands on her until after the interview, she finally locked us in the wooden house for some time alone. During the interview I was aware of the constant noise outside – children crying, laughing, neighbours shouting, car radios blaring, builders communicating across the yard, grandma consoling a child that fell over in the garden, the baby whining for his mother...there was never a silent moment.

Her anxiety was short-lived and her explanation for inviting me to her home was, because she felt comfortable talking to me and did not experience judgement of any kind. She guarded her self and her world from me in a way during the first two encounters, possibly in order to determine how safe she would be from judgement and prejudice. For someone who had little trust in strangers, or anyone for that matter, this was a sign of inclusion. Her invitation seemed like a way of reaching out to me and opening the doors of her home and thus her life for me to enter. I appreciated her invitation and felt privileged that she allowed me into her life and her home.

### DATA ANALYSIS

IPA was deemed an appropriate method of analysis for this study, as it is ‘particularly suitable where one is interested in complexity or process or where an issue is personal’ (p. 171) and where one is able to contribute to understanding a phenomenon through a deeper, personal analysis (Kay & Kingston, 2002). The focus in IPA research is on the exploration of participants’ perceptions, experiences and understandings (Frost, 2011; Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005). Smith (2004) describes IPA as phenomenological in its focus on an individual’s experiences and interpretive or hermeneutic in its recognition of the researcher’s central role in analysis.

Although there is a basic process of analysis in IPA, from descriptive to interpretive, Smith (1999) does not consider it appropriate to provide a prescriptive methodology. He focuses on themes and connections within the text, rather than looking for

examples that fit a pre-existing theoretical viewpoint. Turner, Barlow and Ilbery (2002) organise analysis around themes emerging from transcripts and not pre-determined constructs. Smith (2004) acknowledges that analysis can be informed by “general psychological interest” (p.45), but not a specific pre-determined theoretical position. The theoretical orientation should be clearly distinguished from the interpretation in the analysis.

Researcher bias remains a challenge and should be guarded against in the process of selecting themes for analysis (Smith, 1999). Grounding interpretations in the participant’s original account, by re-reading original transcripts and distinguishing between participant’s and researcher’s account, can minimise bias (Collins & Nicolson, 2002; Smith & Osborn, 2003).

Frost (2011) describes the analysis of data using IPA as a fluid, multi-directional, iterative process, involving an initial, second, third and final stage. During the initial stage the researcher reads the transcripts numerous times to familiarise with the data, records observations and reflections and comments on the transcript, while all the while focussing on content, language, context and interpretive comments. The second stage contains the emerging of themes and details to ground it in the text. During the third stage the researcher clusters themes together with conceptual similarities, descriptively labels them and looks for patterns. The final stage includes the production of a table of themes with illustrative data to accompany each theme. In this research study, where a single case was used, a comparison is made between this case and existing research themes and findings.

Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) describe the analytic process in IPA as including the following stages: coding, identifying emerging themes, finding meaning through dialogue between data and researcher, development of a structure to illustrate relationships between themes, organising coded data in order to trace it, auditing data through supervision and collaboration, developing a narrative and reflection of the researcher’s own perceptions and processes.

## DATA ANALYSIS IN THIS STUDY

### Stage 1

Data was collected during interviews and audio-taped. The audio recordings were transcribed and then repeatedly listened to in order to familiarise with the content and any intonations. Data was coded to enable tracing themes and quotes. Comments and reflections were recorded on the transcriptions.

### Stage 2

In order to identify themes and supporting quotes from the text, areas of concern to the participant were identified and linked with the participant's expressed experience. Themes were identified and grounded in the text.

### Stage 3

Themes illustrating similar concepts were then grouped together. These sub themes were represented under a main theme, again grounded in the text. Any patterns that emerged were included at this level. As researcher, I engaged with the data at this stage and incorporated my knowledge of psychology with the participant's experience to find possible meaning. I audited my interpretations by discussing the identified themes and sub themes with my research supervisor and with the participant. During our first auditing meeting opportunity was given for feedback from the participant on the identified themes and the relationship between themes. She agreed with all the themes and interpretations around meaning, but made it clear that she did not feel her current relationship was really adding to the demands placed upon her. A second auditing meeting was held after the completion of the narrative. The participant was given a chance to read the narrative about her experiences as a single mother and to comment if necessary. She accepted it without any corrections or changes needed.

### Stage 4



Finally a table with main themes, supported by sub themes were constructed to illustrate the main findings. After the analysis and discussion of the main themes of this study, a comparison was done between this participant's lived experience and existing research on single motherhood. Similarities and discrepancies were discussed.

### TRUSTWORTHINESS

In quantitative research the quality of the research is measured by evaluating the reliability and validity of the measurements used. Reliability is the quality of the measurement method that ensures that the same data will be collected each time in repeated observations or measurements of the same phenomenon. Validity describes a measure that will accurately reflect the concept or phenomenon it intends to measure (Babbie, 2008).

Many qualitative researchers use parallel terms to describe the quality of qualitative research: credibility (internal validity); transferability (external validity); dependability (reliability); and neutrality or confirmability (objectivity) (Schwandt, 2007; Sharts-Hopko, 2002; Shenton, 2004)

### Axioms of qualitative research

Qualitative research is based on certain axioms that influence observations and interpretations, including axioms concerning the nature of reality, truth, researcher-participant relationship, explanation of actions and role of values. The nature of reality from this perspective denies a singular reality, but acknowledges multiple, socially constructed realities, where "truth" is not sought as a generalisable, context-free statement. Human behaviour is seen as time- and context-bound and influenced by multiple interacting factors, processes and events. The researcher-participant relationship is one of mutual and simultaneous influence, with the values of the researcher, choice of research paradigm and theory, and contextual values all interdependently influencing observation and interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

### Reflexivity

Finlay (1998) recommends continual evaluation of both the researcher's subjective responses and the method of research. She refers to these as personal and methodological reflexivity respectively. The researcher continuously questions and evaluates the research process to distinguish if and how subjective elements interfered with data collection and analysis. A researcher working in a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm may use bracketing and a self-reflection journal to monitor subjectivity throughout the research process (Schwandt, 2001). Transparency is vital in allowing readers of the text access to the researcher's data collection and analysis procedure and process. Qualitative findings are both descriptive and interpretive and the way findings are presented must include sufficient detail for the readers of the text to determine the applicability of the findings to their own and other settings (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott & Davidson, 2002).

### Credibility

Credibility involves the "truth" of the research findings (Sharts-Hopko, 2002). Ways to improve or ensure the credibility of the research include: prolonged involvement with the phenomenon and study participants; persistent observation; triangulation; peer debriefing; negative case analysis; member checks; examination of previous research findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1986); adoption of well-established research methods; familiarity with the culture of participating organisations/individuals; random sampling; iterative questioning; researcher's reflective writing; qualifications and experience of researcher; and thick descriptions of phenomena (Shenton, 2004).

### Transferability

Transferability aims, through the adequate description of the participant's lived experience, to assist readers of the text to evaluate how the findings apply to their situations (Sharts-Hopko, 2002). A thick description is the detailed narrative that develops about the context to enable readers to decide on the similarities and differences between the experiences of the participant and theirs or others' (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Shenton (2004) states that information on research participant(s) (number, type of person), data collection methods, number and length of interviews

and time period over which data was collected should be communicated in the research report. The aim of qualitative research is not to generalise findings or to find universal qualities in human beings and their behaviours.

### Dependability and confirmability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to the adequacy of information as confirmability or auditability. They include all raw forms of data, data reduction and analysis results (field notes, summaries, theoretical notes), data synthesis results (categories, findings, conclusions), final report connecting existing literature to emerging themes in research, process notes and researcher's journal. Shenton (2004) considers communication about research design, implementation, data gathering and reflective appraisal of the project necessary to improve dependability of the research. Ensuring that research findings report the experiences and preferences of participants, and not researchers, will increase the confirmability of the research.

Sandelowski and Barroso (cited in Rolfe, 2006) reminds us that judgements or interpretations are not about the actual research study itself, but of the study as it is presented in the report. They say the report is "a dynamic vehicle that mediates between researcher/writer and reviewer/reader, rather than a factual account of events after the fact" (p. 3).

### ETHICS

One of the distinctive features of the principle of justice in research (equal share and fairness) is the protection of participants from abuse and exploitation (Orb, Eisenhauer & Wynaden, 2000). Munhall (1988) states that qualitative researchers are expected to present the research experience in an authentic manner, which could be contrary to the researcher's own aims. The research protocol should therefore contain enough information to ensure the protection of the participant. Protocols should include details on how the study will be conducted, details of access to participant, informed consent and access and storage of data. It is not always possible to predict exactly what will happen in interviews or observations, but the researcher has an

obligation to anticipate outcomes, as far as possible, and to consider possible benefits and potential harm (Streubert & Carpenter, 1999).

### Consent

Consent can be considered as a negotiation of trust between parties, and it implies continuous renegotiation. It also means that a participant can exercise her right as an autonomous person to voluntarily refuse or accept participation in the research study (Field & Morse, 1992; Kvale, 1996; Munhall, 1988). A participant's willingness to share her experience will determine her desire to participate in the study. The focus of qualitative research is on exploring, examining and describing individuals and their natural environments. Qualitative research requires relationship between researcher and participant, which implies a power dynamic. This power relationship must be acknowledged and reflected upon (Orb, Eisenhauer & Wynaden, 2000). At the start of each interview the participant was asked if she was willing and able to continue with the interview. On all occasions the participant reported being in a good frame of mind and willing and able to participate. The participant reported at the start of the third interview, which took place at her home on her request, that she felt very relaxed and comfortable talking to the researcher as she never felt pushed in a corner with questions.

Written informed consent was obtained from the participant prior to commencing interviews. Explanations regarding the purpose and the process of the research were given to the participant and opportunity given to raise any concerns or questions. The participant was informed that participation was completely voluntary and she could withdraw from the research or interview process at any stage.

### Confidentiality

The principle of beneficence requires the researcher to oversee the potential consequences of making the identity of the participant known. Using pseudonyms are recommended, but that does not guarantee anonymity, especially in smaller communities where an individual can be identified through the details of their life story (Orb, Eisenhauer & Wynaden, 2000). It might be necessary to restrict the

circulation of the study in certain domains to protect the participant. Information on the publishing of results was made available to the participant and she had an opportunity to approve any quotations used in any publications. Confidentiality is an ethical responsibility of the researcher, as is ensuring the rigour of qualitative research. Records of all activities included in the study are to be securely stored in the Department of Psychology at the University for fifteen years.

The issue of confidentiality was discussed before commencement of any interviews. The biographical details of the participant have been kept anonymous and pseudonyms used instead of real names. It might be possible from the detailed, thick descriptions of the participant's lived experience that she might be recognised by members from her local community. However, this possibility was discussed prior to the research commencing. The participant expressed no concern in this regard as she believed her hidden, real identity as expressed in this study will not be recognisable to most people in her community. People only know the person she pretends to be.

### Respect

The participant was treated with the utmost respect at all times. Her psychological and physical wellbeing were monitored at all times and the interview process would have been halted at any sign of distress on the part of the participant. Interviews were only conducted once the researcher was convinced of the participant's wellbeing. At the start of each interview the researcher monitored the participant's state of mind and mood and checked if she had any need for further support. Each time the participant confirmed her wellbeing and reported being in control of her emotional experiences. She was seeing a therapist at the start of research and continued doing so throughout the research process.

### Benefit

Hutchinson, Wilson, and Wilson (1994) identified the benefits of qualitative interviews as catharsis, self- acknowledgment, sense of purpose, self-awareness, empowerment, healing, and providing a voice for the marginalised. Smith (1999) wrote about the potential therapeutic benefits of participants' remembering and

sharing unpleasant memories and stressed the importance of seeking on-going consent.

The benefits of the research were discussed as part of the justification and aim of the research. To recap it can be summarised as follows:

The participant may experience a cathartic effect from being able to tell her story to an empathic listener. The results from the research could benefit the community clinic through increased understanding of the experiences of single mothers within the community and could impact on intervention programs. The impact of a single mother's psychological wellbeing on her children could also give more insight into the needs of children growing up in single parent households. The results of the research could also identify areas for further research, which could influence policy makers. Adjustment to existing policies or new policies benefitting single parents could be a direct result from further research.

## CHAPTER 5

### INTRODUCTION TO RESEARCH PARTICIPANT – MEETING SAM

#### The first meeting

I shared the details of my study with the staff at the mental health department of the community health clinic, in order for them to help identify a suitable participant. Sam's contact details were given to me by a psychologist at the community health clinic. She had been working with Sam in therapy. Sam met all the criteria of single motherhood for this study. The psychologist asked Sam if she would consider participating and she agreed to meet with me.

I telephoned her to arrange for a meeting to explain the process of research, her role and rights as participant and to give her a chance to ask any questions or raise any concerns. Her manner on the phone was easy. She was very flexible and sounded eager to meet. We arranged to meet in the reception area of the mental health department the following Thursday.

Our first encounter was coloured by my expectations and misconceptions. I arrived in the reception area ten minutes before our appointment. There was already a person waiting in reception. She had earphones on, listening to something, and busy on her cell phone. We made no eye contact. She wore jeans, sneakers, a T-shirt, baseball cap and heavy jewellery. At first glance I did not expect this to be my potential research participant. She appeared too young and trendy to be a mother of three children. Her physical appearance reminded me more of a contemporary rap artist. These thoughts crossed my mind within the first few seconds of seeing her. The stereotypes of my own mind and programming were activated and I was pre-occupied. I sat down in silence. She sat in silence. After a few minutes I looked over and asked if she was waiting for someone. We simultaneously realised that we were actually waiting for one another. I introduced myself and shook her hand. Her handshake was firm. Her face brightened as she smiled broadly. Our interaction felt instantly comfortable. The closed space between us opened and the earlier

observations and misconceptions were lost in the presence of the warmth of our interaction.

We used one of the empty offices at the clinic for our discussion. I explained the aim and process of my research and the role of the participant. Sam listened intently. She wanted to participate. She seemed eager to help, eager to tell her story. She had no fear of possibly being recognised from the details of her life story (pseudonyms are used), as people in her community would not recognise the real Sam as reflected in this account. They only know the person she projects to the outside world. I could relate on two levels. My first impressions of Sam in reception and the woman I now saw and experienced were totally removed and alien to one another. I could also personally relate as I am someone who comes across as guarded during first encounters. Sam commented that most women in the Coloured community would not be willing to talk about their experiences as single mothers. They keep their problems and failings hidden to the outside world to keep up appearances. She was different. I sensed that she did not identify with the community at large and the reasons why they would not talk about their lives. Maybe her reasons for being guarded differed from theirs. At the end of our discussion I handed her the consent form and asked her to return the form signed the next week if she was content with the process. We set an interview date and time for the next week. I gave the option of meeting at her home or the clinic. She chose the clinic. At the end of the information session I was intrigued by this single mother of three and excited about the journey of exploring her experiences.

### Life details

Sam is thirty years of age. She was born and grew up in the community she presently resides in. She has three children: a daughter Bianca aged 11; her son Brian, aged 7; and another son Mark, aged 18 months. The children all have different fathers. None of the fathers are financially or otherwise involved with the children. Brian sees his father very occasionally at his grandmother's house. Sam grew up with her grandmother, who still lives with Sam and the children. She is in her seventies now. Sam's biological parents divorced two years ago. Her father was physically abusive to her mother. This was the reason Sam went to live with her grandmother as a child.



She has two younger sisters, both of whom have their own families. Her highest qualification is a three year tertiary qualification. Sam was sexually molested at the age of six by a stranger who used to hang around the school and the parks where they played as children. She never told anyone. She was physically assaulted and raped while unconscious at the age of 28 by a stranger on her way to work. She now suffers from epilepsy as a result of the head injuries sustained in that attack.

During high school Sam got involved with her life partner, Carol. They were together for seven years. Sam's life partner died in 2004 in a motor accident. Sam's first child was an unplanned pregnancy, the result of an impulsive act during an emotionally upsetting time in Sam's life. Carol was unfaithful and Sam wanted some form of revenge on her partner. She did not bargain on falling pregnant at age 19 with Vernon's child. Carol accepted the baby as her own and they planned to have another child. Carol was pregnant, with their second child, when she died. The father of the child, Robbie, was a friend of theirs from the community, who agreed to be the surrogate father. After this tragedy, Sam decided to have a baby with Robbie. She wanted to complete the family she planned with her partner. Brian was born when Sam was 23 years old. Sam was in a relationship with Robbie for three years after Brian's birth. One day he came home and announced that he was marrying another woman. After this disappointment she was in and out of relationships, but never committed to anyone. She got involved in a relationship with John when she was 27 years old and fell pregnant with Mark, but the pregnancy was unplanned. John was from the Ndebele culture and when he found out she was pregnant he wanted them to arrange to get married in the traditional Ndebele way. The men in her family had to meet with the men in his family to discuss the marriage. She found the demands foreign and could not adhere. John took no responsibility for the child after her refusal to marry. Sam met her current partner, Jo-Anne, when she was 29 years old. Her partner has a four year old boy. They are committed and have discussed getting married in the not too distant future, but the couple do not co-habit. They only see one another at weekends if work responsibilities allow it, as Jo-Anne lives some distance away from Sam.

## INTRODUCTION AND DISCUSSION OF THEMES

Four interviews were held over the next four weeks, one interview per week. Themes were identified from each interview. The following themes were identified and will be discussed in detail:

**TABLE 1: Themes identified in the lived experience of the research participant**

- Demands and stressors
  - Work-life balance
  - Sole responsibility
  - Financial demands
  - Time demands and restraints
  - Parenting
  - Family expectations
  - Accumulative effect of stressors
  - Sexuality
  - New relationship
  - Internal pressure
- Guardedness and boundaries
  - Self-reliance and withdrawal
  - Boundaries and rules
  - Triangles and walls
  - Judgement and prejudice
- Ambivalence and inner conflict
  - Identity confusion
  - Sexuality
  - ‘Coming out’
  - Motherhood and sexuality
- Psychological distress and mental health
  - Demands
  - Judgement
  - Rejection
  - Trauma
- Positives and protective factors
  - Attitudes
  - Routines and rituals
  - Maternal characteristics
  - Priorities
  - Support structures

## DEMANDS AND STRESSORS

During our first interview the majority of information shared supported the theme of demands and stressors. Sam's first response to my open question about the experiences of being a single mother was, "It's not easy first of all". She continued within the first five minutes of the interview to say a further three times that being a single mother in her experience was not easy. What were the reasons for this experience of difficulty? The sub themes identified under this main heading include: work-life balance; sole responsibility; financial demands; time demands and restraints; child rearing and conflict resolution; family expectations; sexuality; new relationship; and internalised pressure.

### Work-life balance

Sam has a tertiary qualification and a good job in the police force. Her job requires her to work shifts and weekends from time to time. This means that she sometimes does not see her three children before they go to school or before they go to bed. When she comes home they are already asleep and when they get ready to go to school she is still asleep. Her maternal grandmother lives with her and the children and takes care of the children when Sam has to work. Her grandmother is in her seventies and not as mobile as she used to be. This is not the only challenge with work. Sam gets exhausted with trying to balance her work with her home life. Sometimes she will be called out at night to attend to an emergency, get home at 4am and be up again at 6am to get ready for the next day.

Her daily routine of getting the children ready in the mornings adds to the weight on her shoulders. Her daughter gets up at 5.30am to catch the bus for school at 6am. Sam has to walk her girl to the bus stop. Her son gets up very reluctantly every morning at 6.20am. She has to coax him to get ready before his transport picks him up at 6.45am. And then there is the baby of 18 months who also wakes up with his big brother and wants mom's love and attention. She says, "Sometimes you get to work and you're already tired. Work is very demanding and there are 122 things you must do as one person." She adds that she sometimes thinks she must be mad, juggling so many things at once.

### Sole responsibility

The theme of feeling burdened by the reality of being the only person taking responsibility for everything runs through the text like a thread. The reality of her life is that she is the sole responsible person that has to be both mother and father to her children. Her two school going children are in two different schools. She wanted to have them both attend the same school, but on the day her son had to register at his sister's school, he blankly refused. He wanted to attend the school where all his friends from nursery school were attending. She put his happiness and wishes first and registered him at the school where his friends attend. The implication of this is her inability to attend both their schools for parent evenings or school events if it is on the same day. Sam says, "One parent can't be broken in two". She makes alternative arrangements with the school when this happens. There is nobody else to take on some of the responsibilities. The children's fathers are not involved in their lives and if anything needs to be done or resolved, Sam is the only one to do so. She tried to get all three fathers to see their children, but she gave up trying as all the effort was coming from her side. Again she was alone in her endeavour. She says, "I got really angry yesterday because it is always me who has to do something, because I never say no to people". When the house needs renovating, when the children want to be entertained, when sibling conflict erupts, when decisions have to be made, there is, according to Sam, always only one name on everyone's lips – hers!

She takes on a dual role when it comes to the children - mother and father. She says she is mother when the children need an empathic ear, or a loving touch or when they ask for something. She is father when she has to make difficult decisions and she cannot defer it and say "go ask your dad". She takes on the role of disciplinarian and comforter. Her first son introduces her to outsiders as both mom and dad. She says her children do not need a father figure, they have got her and she is and does everything.

### Financial demands

Being the sole breadwinner in this family, Sam finds the financial demands challenging. At the same time she wants to provide for her children and give them the things they need. She says, “You break your arm to buy them what they want to accommodate them, even if you do yourself short. What you can’t afford one month you try and recover the next.” It’s a constant balancing act. She is also financially responsible for her grandmother. Sam owns the home they live in and at the time of our interviews was renovating the inside on her grandmother’s request. As she explained, others make the demands, she only pays the bills.

### Time demands and restraints

Sam complains that she cannot really spend time with her kids on a daily basis. Work demands and daily routine demands are partly to blame. Their hectic daily routine leaves little room for idle chatter and simply relaxing. She says about the hectic routine, “I don’t know if I’m coming or going. I have to rush mornings and evenings.” With working a full day, getting three children ready for school and ready for bed, helping with homework, commuting to and from work, preparing for the next day and engaging with family and friends, 24 hours seem not enough. They struggle to have quality time as a family, but try to have movie nights occasionally. Sam is a self-confessed television addict if she gets a chance. It gives her an opportunity to switch off from everything and everyone. This is the one thing she finds relaxing, yet seldom enjoys without interruption. Her son chooses the 7pm news broadcast as the perfect time to entertain his mom with his latest comedy act. Her current partner sees her time watching television as unnecessary and wants that time spent together.

### Child rearing and conflict resolution

Sam finds the upbringing of the children at times demanding. Her teenage daughter can be very demanding and temperamental. She has mood swings and Sam says that “as a mother you have no idea what is upsetting your child”. Sam tries everything to help her daughter, but feels she is at her wits end to know what more to do. At the same time the younger two brothers want their share of mom’s attention and she is not always in a position or state of mind to meet everyone’s demands. Conflict between siblings is resolved by mom laying down the law and neither child having their way.

On days out when the children cannot decide together on an activity or a movie, it usually ends up being what mom decides or nothing. Sam at times “feels lost as a parent” and handles conflict by “throwing my toys too”.

### Family expectations

Sam explains that in their culture and in her family in particular, the extended family has certain expectations of members of that family. Her family has expectations of her as a single mother. Her one aunt expects her not to go out at all with friends and leave the kids with their grandmother. It is frowned upon and seen as irresponsible. Sam interprets the expectations as limiting and unfair. She says, “My mother’s family has expectations for how I should live my life. You have to take your partner to the family gatherings and they will approve of them or not. They will tell you if he is acceptable”. They also expect her to marry a suitable man so the children can have a father. This expectation is strongest from her grandmother. “My grandmother keeps saying she wants to see a son-in-law”. Sam avoids family gatherings as far as possible as she believes they only gossip about people. She only answers what she considers they need to know about her and her life and for the rest she lives her life in secret. She does not agree with any of the expectations and says, “I disapprove of people telling me what to do”.

### Sexuality

Sam’s sexual orientation will be discussed in due course. However, it is worth noting that her experience of others’ expectations and inquisitiveness add to the demands placed on her psychological resources. She says, “Some people make a person nervous. The first thing people ask is if I’m straight.” She feels uncomfortable in answering their questions and this leads to her withdrawing and guarding herself. Her desire to ‘come out’ and be honest about her sexual orientation adds to the pressure, as she feels uncertain about how this will be received by all the parties involved in her life.

### New relationship

Sam is currently in a romantic relationship with Jo-Anne, a single mother with one son. Although this makes her happy, it still adds to the demand on her resources. She describes “it is like being two people at the same time. You want to be a committed loving mother and a committed loving partner. It takes a lot out of a person. There are always issues in the relationship with spending time together. If I spend it with the kids, my partner gets upset and if I spend it with her, the kids are upset.” She also does not live with her partner. They live quite a distance apart and mostly meet up over weekends. Her partner also holds different religious beliefs, which causes some conflict at times.

### Internalised pressure

It appears that Sam adds to the demand on her psychological and other resources through her own beliefs. She will walk the extra mile for any individual that asks her to, even at her own expense. She admits that saying ‘no’ is hard and she believes that if she does not help or sort something out, it will not get sorted. She wants to please other people and meet their needs. It is as if she believes it is her obligation and duty. She has cultivated these beliefs somewhere along her developmental road through life and puts pressure on herself to live up to these standards. We will take a closer look at more of her beliefs later in the discussion.

Sam’s life appears to be a delicate balance between available resources and demands, with the balance often disturbed by the events of every day. The demands on her emotional, intellectual, physical and financial resources seem overwhelming to one individual. One gets a sense of exhaustion, desperation and burden from listening to the challenges of her daily routine and the diverse roles she has to play.

### GUARDEDNESS AND BOUNDARIES

During the second and third interviews the theme of guardedness was the most common theme. The second interview’s main topic was her experience of single motherhood within her family, work, church and community context. The third interview’s main topic was her experience of single motherhood and her sexual orientation or preference. It is interesting that during these interviews more themes of

being guarded were identified. The sub-themes supporting this theme include: self-reliance and withdrawal; boundaries and rules; triangles and walls; and judgement and prejudice.

### Self-reliance and withdrawal

Sam grew up in a home and a community filled with domestic violence. She left home very early and was raised by her grandmother. She describes her father's violence, "he was really physically abusing my mother. He used to break things of her. Once he broke her ribs. He used to hit her like he would hit another man." Sam had no relationship with her parents growing up and said "my parents were like strangers. I could not confide in them." In the light of the physical and emotional unavailability of her parents, Sam developed a mindset of independence. She learned early on that she was responsible for herself and her troubles were her own to solve. The unreported sexual molestation she endured at age six, testifies of this. She tells how after the incident, when the stranger molested her, she was confused. She knew the offender was still out there and she was afraid it might happen again. She used to be hyper vigilant. She made sure there were always other children around when she was playing outside. She used to cry at night when she was alone in bed. She did not tell a single soul. She said, "If you tell your mother it will be a big shock and then you will never hear about it any more." Things would be ignored or swept under the carpet as if it never happened.

Sam always withdrew from her family, as a teenager, by watching television. She used to ignore any guests who arrived at home and did not socialise with family. She did not speak much with anyone. Her mother arranged for her to see a psychologist at age 16 as she believed Sam was troubled by something. Sam says, "I might have been depressed when I was younger but paid no attention to it. Nobody spoke about it or knew about it. I always thought I was depressed." She did not experience the psychologist to be helpful at that time. Sam says, "There were things upsetting me but things happen as a part of life."

The theme of self-reliance nurtured in childhood and adolescence continue throughout Sam's adult life. Her self-reliance is flavoured with hints of distrust, resistance and



anger. She makes comments like, “What I do is nothing for others to disagree with”, “I just don’t care what others say. I do my thing the way I do it to make me happy”, “...I never ask any of them for anything” and “I disapprove of people telling me what to do; I’ll do something when I want to do it.” Sam does not find it easy to ask for help from anyone. She reports not talking much about her life at work, “I’m very private. My personal life is off limits. I don’t talk about it.” She still ignores uninvited guests at her house, as she did not invite them for a reason and would rather do what she had planned for herself than entertain others.

### Boundaries and rules

Sam has very clear boundaries at home and her family and friends are well aware of these. She says, “In my house and yard you are not telling me what to do. Once a party was arranged by my family, without checking with me first. I dislike that. I don’t like short notice. You are upsetting my plans. I have my own plans and will keep to that. I don’t care if they say I’m rude.” She loves to participate in and watch sport and everybody knows “soccer time is soccer time”. During this time she does not like to be disturbed. She dislikes impromptu events. If the children want to bring a friend home they have to let her know a week in advance. At weekends the children refer to home as ‘boot camp’, as they are expected to live by the rules set out by mother. She is very punctual and expects the same of everyone else. She says, “Planning helps to order my life. I have to plan my week and I don’t like dysfunctional things.” Planning her days and setting very strict boundaries could be a way of containing the experience of being overwhelmed by numerous demands.

### Triangles and walls

Sam says, “I avoid sharing myself with anybody. In therapy I’ve drawn myself a triangle. What happens inside is me, what happens outside I block out. I also have a wall around it. Outside is the world. Nobody gets in.” She explains that the wall is up because people ask too many questions. She feels invaded by others’ questions about her relationship status and feels they should wait until she is ready to share. Sam keeps part of her identity secret at work, in church and in her family. I enquired to find out which part of her identity. She replied, “I keep my sexuality secret and

there are some more things in my private life I'm not happy to talk about. Certain things are a no go." She does not hide her single motherhood status and says, "I'm prepared to answer any questions about single motherhood. I will tell them the fathers are timewasters and useless. They are abusers. They took away a certain pride in my life...all three of them broke my heart. I'm guarding my heart now. I don't cry anymore. I've cried too much in my life. I've cried about a lot of things. I've had too much pain in my life. I've put the pain and the people out of my heart. I've told my partner that my boundaries are not to be crossed. If you break my heart you are out."

The hurt she has experienced in relationships in her life has caused her to enclose her heart to protect it from further pain. Her life speaks of a lot of trauma and hurt. She experienced: her father abusing her mother; sexual molestation as a child; her first partner's infidelity; her partner's death and the death of their unborn child; the rejection from all three fathers of her children; physical assault and rape; the death of her cousin in a car crash; the sexual abuse of her daughter by her stepfather; and possibly other traumas she is not willing to reveal.

### Judgement and prejudice

Apart from her experience of traumatic life events, she has been subjected to continuous judgement and prejudice from people in different contexts or from different systems in her life. On the home front, some of her family members have judged her as a single mother by considering it irresponsible for her to still enjoy her youth and socialise with friends. Her family also have expectations of her to marry a man so the children can have a father-figure. They have arranged dates for Sam with men they approve of, without consulting her in the matter.

On the community level Sam reports that people are often judgemental when they see her with her three children and no husband. They assume "you open your legs for every man you get." Sam disagrees with their comments but does not consider it worth her while to answer or defend herself. She just ignores them and walks away. She is also aware of rumours within the community that she has been married seven

times and has five children. She does not know why people spread these rumours, but when she can, she sets the record straight. It makes her cautious of people.

At work Sam is also very guarded. She explains that her department exists mainly of women. The women are always sharing about their husbands and families at work. Sam refrains from sharing about her life as she considers herself to have “half a family”. She says people at work know she is a single mother, but they know nothing beyond that. When I asked her what it means to be a half a family, she said, “They talk about their husbands. Where I’m concerned there is no husband. A family is normally a mother, father and children and I’m not married yet and then I’ll be a full family. If you only have a boyfriend or girlfriend they can walk at any time. With marriage there is a bit of legal-ness there. Women at work say they have papers for their husbands. I am still borrowing. I have no papers for my partner. I am considering marriage.” It appears she considers herself less complete compared to her married colleagues.

Apart from her single status, she also does not talk or share about her sexuality at work. She suspects that some colleagues know she is in a same sex relationship, but it is never openly discussed. She shared with some of her junior colleagues, or “home boys” as she refers to them, because she knew that they would keep the conversation confidential and will not reject her for the truth.

Sam experiences significant judgement and prejudice at church. She says, “You are preached at if you’re a single mother and are not married to the father.” She once challenged the pastor regarding his preaching that having children out of wedlock is a sin. She wanted to know why divorced mothers and the single fathers, who fathered children out of wedlock, are not getting preached at, but never married mothers are. She reported that the pastor did not give her a specific answer, but told her that she was cheeky. He did proceed to explain that women are the back bone of the church and they have to therefore set the example of pure living. She feels she “thinks outside the box while they are still in the old age.” She feels men have more rights than women and the only way women can have a right is if they take it. She “feels you are breaking a person down and not building them up”, referring to the church.

Apart from prejudice against single never married mothers, some people in the church are also prejudiced against people in same sex relationships. Sam has two pastors in her extended family who are accepting of her sexual orientation. They consider it to be something she alone will be accountable for before God one day. There are other family members who are pastors who she suspects “will throw the Bible at you if they found out” about her sexuality. She says about people in church, “If they know you are married to another woman you will hear your sins from start of church to the end.” Sam’s expectation of prejudice and judgement has led her to keep up a false appearance at church. She only ever wears a dress when going to church. She says, “Church is a different thing. You have to keep it straight. You get tired of pretending. My relationship and my sex life are difficult. At church you pretend to be straight to avoid being preached at. It is my business and not theirs.”

Her experience of prejudice against her sexuality in different contexts has caused her to put up a wall to protect against endless questioning and possible discrimination or rejection. She expresses a desire to come clean and to be open about her sexual orientation and her same sex relationship. She explains that the “guardedness will change. The wall around the triangle will be removed, but the boundaries of my self will not change. I will still guard me, the inner person that is the more emotional part of me. If people see you are emotional they will want to scratch to find out something. Nobody goes behind my personal walls.” It seems as if ‘coming out’ regards her sexuality will remove some of her pretences or defences to hide her true identity. However, the hurt and pain experienced in relationships, over an extended period of time, have injured her ability and willingness to trust again.

### AMBIVALENCE AND INNER CONFLICT

Sam’s guardedness due to her distrust of people and her expectation of judgement and rejection creates inner conflict. She is not being authentic and true to herself most of the time. She pretends and hides to protect herself. Her experience is a constant roller coaster ride of satisfying her own desire versus feeling under pressure from others’ expectations of her. Sub-themes discussed include: identity confusion; sexuality; and motherhood and sexuality.

### Identity confusion

Sam's ambivalence and inner conflict come across in her communication. Her account of her lived experience at times sounds contradictory and confusing. I do not believe she is consciously contradicting herself or aiming to tell half truths. I think her own experience of confusion filters through in the messages she communicates. During our first interview she chose to tell me first about her current relationship, before telling me about the relationships she had with the fathers of her children. It might be that the current relationship is part of her life in the present and therefore the obvious first topic of conversation. It could however also be more of a priority in her life as it reflects more accurately who she considers herself to be.

Sam became aware of a feeling of being different from her peers at a young age. At primary school she started wondering about her lack of interest in boys and relationships with boys. In Grade 7 she experienced a romantic incident with a much older woman, which confused her about her own identity and sexual preference. She did not discuss her experiences with anyone. In high school the life orientation classes used to confuse Sam. Sam says, "Sex education only prepared you for sex with boys, but I felt I didn't belong there. The boys always hit on you and wanted to be your boyfriend." Sam was not interested. She decided to tell her mother about her attraction to women, but feared the worst. She said, "I was shocked my mother accepted it so easily. Most of the Coloured fathers and mothers would throw you out the house, tell you it's a sin or throw the Bible at you." She was scared to tell her mother as she did not want to "break her heart". She explains that her mother had always said "When you are married one day..." Her mother had dreams and expectations that Sam would get married, have a family and live a 'normal' life like most of the people in her family and community. All Sam's mother asked of her was to bring whomever she was dating home for her family to meet. Sam was in a relationship with her life partner for seven years, yet she did not introduce her partner to her family. She kept the relationship secret, but constantly questioned whether her family and friends actually knew what was going on. She was in constant uncertainty about who knew what and what they thought about it. When her partner died, Sam could not grieve the loss of her loved one openly. She believes her grandmother got suspicious about the nature of their relationship at the funeral, and afterwards when

she withdrew for months with grief. When Sam fell pregnant with her first child, she says, “While I was crying, my family was rejoicing. There was a bit of a rumour about my relationship, but when the news was made known my grandmother said she was delighted that I wasn’t a lesbian. I only ever told them what they needed to know.” After her partner’s death Sam decided to “go straight” and started a relationship with Robbie. He left after deciding to marry another woman. Sam says, “The men hurt. Even when I was with them they hurt me. I was confused about my sexuality and was not comfortable with men. I was confused for myself.” In the second interview she seems to try and make sense of her reality by saying, “I don’t understand why women stay with abusive men? Maybe that’s why I don’t want a husband. They abuse. I’ve heard too many things from married women and others’ boyfriends.” After the father of the last baby deserted her and the child, she finally decided “men are not for me. I am now no more confused and happy with my choice of partner.”

### Sexuality

Although Sam reports being content with her sexuality at present, her secrecy about the matter seems at odds. When people ask her about her sexual orientation, she replies, “Oh, ok. I don’t really answer...I know what they think.” She comments being used to questions about her sexuality and says, “I’m used to it. It’s a bit confusing. Sometimes I get lost with it.” Due to her inner conflict over this matter, she reverts to guardedness, “I always take people in another direction, around the block. I avoid answering questions.” Sam says she keeps part of her identity secret at work, in church and with her family. The judgement and prejudice experienced in these contexts have been discussed. The part she hides is her sexuality. She says, “Sexuality is a huge part of my identity. It’s half of the cake. I’m getting tired of hiding now. It’s difficult.” In the last interview she says, “I want to do what I want to do. Some days I don’t think I can hide anymore. I think I should come out.” Her desire to be honest, about who she is and what her preferences are, is counteracted by her uncertainty about and fear of others’ reactions.

Sam shares that her family all have their suspicions about her when it comes to relationships, but nobody is prepared to openly talk about it or to leave her alone. She

says, “My family says the children need a father figure. They say they know I’m busy with something. They know what I know so why keep at me?” It is confusing to know who knows what. It sounds as if most family members have their own idea about Sam’s life, but yet they still make their expectations of marriage to a man known to her. Although her mother knows and accepts her sexuality, she does not seem to influence or communicate with other family members. Sam says it was easier to talk to her mother than her grandmother, because her mother is like a sister to her, but her grandmother raised her and is like her real mother.

### Motherhood and sexuality

Sam questions how she will communicate her sexual preference to her children. She does not question her motherhood or her sexuality. She says, “I just live like I live each day. I am just myself”. At the same time she says, “‘Coming out’ will be hard with the kids. How can you have a girlfriend if you have kids? This is what my family members will ask.” Sam has her own questions. She asks, “How are you going to tell the kids? How are they going to react? How will they be towards you?” She has hinted to her daughter that she wanted to date again and that she might want to date a woman, but has not been honest about her relationship with her current partner. Brian does not suspect anything and refers to her partner as her ‘friend’. Yet again, she reports that the kids do not know anything, but at the same time she says they call both her and her partner ‘mommy’. Her concern is wider than her own children’s reactions. She wonders, “What are the children at school going to say? What will their friends say?” Her uncertainty and confusion come through when she says, “I don’t have any answers to all my questions, but my patience is running out now. I used to park things, but they have to come out, be dusted off for people to see.” The intensity of her conflict, between her sensitivity to others’ opinions and her growing desire to be true to her own identity, is increasing.

When I first met Sam and during our interviews I often thought and felt she was trying to portray herself in such a way as to win my approval. Understanding the lack of mirroring of her identity from others in her life contextualised her need for acknowledgement. This woman has been denied the support from her environment to explore, expand and express her true identity. She adopted certain protective

behavioural patterns since childhood to ensure her own survival in a threatening and dangerous world. She internalised early messages of rejection and tends to constantly strive toward being good enough.

### PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS AND MENTAL HEALTH

I have already discussed the participant's experience of being overwhelmed by demands, from daily routines to work-life balance. She is subjected to judgement from members of her family, the church and community, which includes prejudice against her status as single mother and her sexual orientation. She was exposed to traumatic life events since a young age and had to process numerous traumatic experiences. She experienced rejection and hurt from her parents, her life partner and all three fathers of her children. Added to this she is confused and divided in her experience of her sexual identity and the ambivalence it creates in her inner experience and in most of her overt relationships with other people. The following section will focus on the impact these stressors might have on her psychological wellbeing and mental health and include: demands; judgement; rejection; and trauma.

#### The impact of demands

Sam says about all the demands in her life, "Sometimes I can't cope, stress related, with the pressure of being a single mother. Juggling is sometimes too much. Then I become a totally different person. I used to have a short temper, get very angry and break things. You just have to get on and put a smile on your face even if you don't want to. You just carry on. You get angry up to the point you can handle. Tomorrow the anger is still there, but you carry on." She mentioned in just the next sentence, "You often feel angry and depressed, and a lot of sadness, but you carry on as if you don't have a care in the world." Her dismissive approach toward her challenges acts as a defensive strategy, but the negative reality is that there is a saturation or break point. Her break point came in 2010 with her suicide attempt. She tried to overdose on drugs during a night out with a friend. She is not a drug user. She thought the drugs would put an end to the invading thoughts and accusations of her family that kept repeating in her head "like a stuck LP". Her suicide attempt was the result of mounting stress and depleted psychological resources. Her cousin, who was as close



as a brother to her, was killed in a car accident. The next day she found out that her daughter had been sexually molested by her stepfather for some time. She had no idea. In the process of trying to deal with the bad tidings, her father's family turned on her and accused her of not being a suitable mother. This was the final straw that broke the proverbial camel's back. Sam says, "I know I'm a good mother and I look after my children very well and I never ask any of them for anything!" The attack on her prized identity as a mother proved too much to digest. She was admitted to hospital and experienced this as well deserved respite. She has not had any other suicide attempts, but acknowledges that she does not have any weapons in the house as a safeguard.

She admits in a later interview that "I just put my stressors aside. If they come up they come up again. Normally I'll just pretend nothing's wrong. I leave things. I don't go back to things that's bothering me. One day I will crack from all these things for real. You can hear them whispering in your ear and you know they are still there. I park my stresses, the financial problems, people phoning you with their problems, 122 people's complaints at work, at home the kids and grandma complaining."

Sam expresses a feeling of powerlessness and an inadequacy as a 'rescuer' or 'saviour'. She had endured a lot of trauma up to this point in her life and managed to deny or avoid painful emotions. It seems as if she had managed the internal pain she experienced as an individual. Pain caused by other people rejecting or abusing her. The pain she struggles to deal with is pain she feels responsible for in other people's lives. She feels guilty for not protecting her daughter from sexual abuse. Her response to finding out about the abuse is, "Where did I go wrong? Why didn't I see it?" She also mentions that it was something she never expected would be a part of their lives, the abuse, the court cases and the weekly therapy thereafter. She says, "Molesting of children in our community happen a lot. The grown-ups just find out too late, but it's a part of life." When a family rift occurred around this incident, Sam responded, "I couldn't handle being caught between the two families. It was too much. I caused it. I'm to blame and I should fix it, but I couldn't." She shows a strong sense of responsibility for the wellbeing of her family and her perception of failing to prevent or solve everyone else's problems leaves her feeling helpless. Being accused of not being a good mother "made a person feel bad." After her

overdose and hospitalisation she says, “I still sometimes feel depressed, but I’ve removed all firearms from the home as a safety precaution.” Sam remarks, “In this situation it would have been easier with a partner, someone to back me up.” Her experience amidst the demands is being alone in her struggle.

The demands of parenting also contribute to her psychological distress. She says about her relationship with her daughter, “Bianca has mood swings and screams at me and I’m at my wits end to know what to do. She is very demanding. As a mother you have no idea what is upsetting your child. It makes me sad and angry. The doctor says I must remain patient, but I can’t do it anymore. There are too many demands. Bianca’s tantrums take too much attention. Sometimes I want to just slam the kids against something the way they carry on. I’m trying everything to help the child, but can’t do it anymore.” Sam has a very good relationship with her children and has never hurt any of them physically, but it is evident that the demands on her emotional resources as a parent runs very low at times.

In the second interview Sam shares, “I’ve been depressed the last three weeks. I’m not sure why. Work is becoming too much. Pressure is mounting with annual reports due, and then the boss is never happy with anything...and at the end of the day you are angry because your day was a mess.” A big part of Sam’s day is taken up with work responsibilities and it is clear that at the end of a working day her psychological resources are already taxed. Her responsibilities and duties do not end there. She then returns home and has to meet the demands at home.

### The impact of judgement

We have discussed her experience of prejudice and judgement regarding her status as single mother and her sexual orientation. She has been confused about her sexual identity for a long time, which in itself would affect her psychological wellbeing. She has been called promiscuous by people in her community, because she has three children from three different fathers and is not married to any of them. Her perception and experience of others’ prejudice has caused her to guard herself and to hide from people. The question is: how does this affect her?

Sam reports, “I’m tired of hiding. It feels like I’m stealing....You have to pretend to be a person you are not. I want to be the person I am. It can be confusing to act straight when you are not, a fake me. When I have to pretend it’s a bit depressing. Being real, you are free and happy. Having to pretend, you are angry again at the whole world.” She says that once she has openly accepted and communicated about her sexual orientation she “won’t have to hide in my own home anymore.” It might seem as if Sam only hides her sexuality, but she also reports refraining from sharing with other women at work about her family. She shows how others’ prejudices can be internalised, and shape one’s own perspective and experience of your reality. Using others’ measurements and definitions of acceptable reality to determine your own stance could have a negative influence on your psychological wellbeing.

Sam is divided in herself regards her current relationship status and sexual orientation. She appears to contradict herself by saying on the one hand she has accepted who she is and on the other avoiding being honest about her relationship and preferences. She experiences shame and guilt over her hidden identity. Sam says, “I’m ashamed for dating another woman because my grandma expects a son-in-law” and she fears “telling her about my sexuality will hurt her.” Sam feels responsible for protecting her grandmother, the children and other family members from hurt, as she believes her sexual orientation will disappoint them and she will then be the cause of their hurt. Her experience is ambivalent: Sam, the one responsible for keeping everyone happy by being what they expect; and Sam, the one desperate to be authentic and honest about her true identity. I wonder what this ambivalence and confusion does to Sam? She says, “It hurts a person. I want to have my own family, what makes me happy. Unfortunately I don’t have the freedom to live the life I want. I’m expected to live the life my family wants for me.”

### The impact of rejection

Sam has experienced rejection from a few significant relationships in her life. Her parents’ early abandonment of her, her life partner’s infidelity and death and the rejection from the fathers of her children all contribute to her experiencing rejection. What impact did these rejections have on her psychological wellbeing? Sam’s parents were physically and emotionally removed from her. She experienced a lack of

emotional support, evident in her inability to communicate with her parents about her abuse and later confusions. Her life partner's infidelity added to her already guarded heart. She says, "You broke my heart, so I was going to break yours." This refers to Sam's impulsive act of sleeping with the father of her first child to spite her partner for being unfaithful. Her emotional pain led to impulsivity and reckless behaviour.

Not only was her first pregnancy an unexpected shock, but the father of the child denied paternity. He demanded paternity tests, which came out positive. Sam says, "He was only a part of her life for three months...in court I said I didn't want him a part of her life. I don't want him near us as he didn't want to be a part of our lives." His refusal to accept responsibility and his mistrust of the baby being his elicited the following response from Sam, "He went after his mother's story that it's not his child and I feel he was weak in not making his own decisions. I felt he thought I was sleeping around and you know it is only him." She felt unsupported, rejected and again left alone to deal with this challenge on her own. He recently made attempts to get to know his daughter, but Bianca has refused to see him. Sam says she respects the wishes of her daughter.

The father of her second child, Robbie, the original surrogate father, made promises when the baby was born. He "supported emotionally. He said he wanted to be around for the boy and be his father, until he found another woman." Sam was in a relationship with him for three years. He left and married another woman, but the marriage only lasted one year. Sam says about the split, "When the dads left it kind of broke me. After Robbie left I was in a depressed state. What am I doing wrong? When their wives leave them, they want me back. They still want to date me, but no thank you, they had their chance."

Sam says of the father of the last baby, John, "I really liked him. He was the first guy that made me feel like a girl. I had feelings for him. He understood me and was fine with me liking women. He was very supportive of my sport. He was very proud of me and put me in the number one spot. I introduced him to my family as my boyfriend. He was the first one I took home. We had a good thing going on." Her dream was quickly shattered when she fell pregnant, unplanned and unexpected. He wanted her to marry into his culture and tradition and when she refused, he shirked

responsibility for the child. Sam asked him for financial assistance once, when Mark needed some diapers and she had no money. John made excuses and refrained from answering her calls. She decided “it’s not worth the effort.”

Sam is currently in a relationship with Jo-Anne, who is open about her sexual orientation. However, it is not the end of the rejection. Sam says, “My partner is out. Her whole family knows. They don’t accept it. When I go to their house her mother ignores me and walks out when I come in.” The impact of this: “Rejection from my partner’s mother hurts a lot...I didn’t expect her family to reject me.” This seems ironic. Sam has experienced a lot of abuse and rejection from the men in her life, maybe expecting things to be different with the woman she loves. Her dreams and desire of having her own family and being happy do not seem too much to ask, but the reality of it seems more complicated than even Sam expected.

#### The impact of trauma

Sam’s life is dotted throughout with traumatic life events. We have mentioned most of them, but one incident remains unspoken of. Four year ago Sam was attacked on her way to work. She usually uses public transport to get to work and on this day she took the train. On the platform of the station she exited, she was abducted at gun point by an unidentified man. He walked her away from the station into an area protected by trees and shrubs. He hit her unconscious with the gun and raped her. When she regained consciousness, she stumbled back to the station and got help. She was admitted to hospital. The impact of this incident on her psychological wellbeing is note worthy. She says, “I take my life one day at a time now. Most mornings I say everything I want to say to the kids, because I might not come home. If you’ve had a fight you explain to them, tell them you love them and how much they mean to you. I give them hugs and kisses.” She does not plan ahead anymore. She says, “I used to put my life ahead of myself and plan. After the accident in 2008 I’m not planning my life anymore. I take it day by day. Routines are planned, but no life plans.” She reports that she still receives mystery cell phone messages threatening her. She is scared to go out at night and will not go out unless accompanied by friends. She is hyper vigilant when out and fears this man could return any day. The uncertainty of his identity and motive for threatening her drains her energy on a daily basis.

It is clear from Sam's account that the demands, stressors, judgement, rejection and trauma have a negative impact on her psychological wellbeing. She describes feelings of anger, sadness and depression resulting from exposure to negative life events. Her personal style of coping with distress through denial and avoidance makes her vulnerable, in a sense, to the accumulative effect of these stressors. It is important to acknowledge the influence and impact of systems like family, community and church on Sam's wellbeing.

### POSITIVES AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Amongst the overwhelming demands, traumas and distresses, there are several positive factors present in Sam's life that could act as protective factors. These include: attitudes; routines or rituals; maternal characteristics; priorities; and support structures.

#### Attitudes

Both mother and children show a positive attitude toward life and the family. Despite all the traumatic life events Sam has experienced, she constantly utters some form of rationalisation that helps her cope with her demands. This might be seen from a certain psychological paradigm as denial or a form of defence, but be it as it may, Sam is showing resilience and perseverance to continue her life. She says things like, "I just get on with it", "But you carry on" and "it's a part of life." She has a never-say-die attitude that sustains her through the darkest of nights. She also takes responsibility for her life, and often for others', as well. This has depleted her resources and left her feeling overwhelmed at times, but on the positive side she takes action and strives to solve problems. She does not give up hope or play victim.

Her children seem to display the same positive attitude present in their mother. Sam says of her kids, "I have very understanding children. When there is no money they accept it." She struggles as one person to meet demands coming from different directions, like from both children's schools. The children assist her in this dilemma.

She explains that one will give up an event at their school to make it easier for the family to attend the other one's school event. Next time they will swap around.

### Routines or rituals

Sam and her children have quality time together in the form of "movie nights". They love to watch DVD's or play games together. Sometimes they will go out to see a movie together. That tradition is being continued now with Sam's new partner and her child included. They all love going to the mall for a day of shopping. Sam says Jo-Anne is much better at entertaining the children, as she loves shopping as much as they do. Family days out now happen on a more regular basis, as it is easier with two adults. Since Sam got involved with Jo-Anne, they have attended her partner's family gathering over weekends. Jo-Anne comes from a big, tight-knit family unit. Although there are still some difficulties with being accepted as a couple, they do socialise as a family.

### Maternal characteristics

Sam describes herself as follows: "I just live like I live each day. I am just myself. That person is full of nonsense everyday, gets very angry very quickly, doesn't agree with everything others say and is a good listener with lots of patience." In another interview she says, "I have a fun personality, am quick to socialise, open, straight forward, yet closed at the same time." She shows good insight into her own personality and is honest about her shortcomings, as well as her achievements. She says her family responded to an aunt's criticism of her by saying, "Don't let her get you down. Do what you do, cause normally when you do something it's a good thing." She has a reputation for being successful at what she does. She says people in the community know about her, because of her sporting achievements when she was at school. To succeed in sport, which she did both at school and as an adult, you need certain characteristic like dedication, perseverance, motivation and a lot of hard work. Sam has proven to possess these traits. She reports that she was promoted at work after only a short time, which some of her family members' responded to with jealousy. She says, "I deserve my job and my success in hockey." She is not apologetic for the results she gets from the hard work she puts in.

Sam's perseverance also shows in her ability to continue with daily life, despite setbacks. She expresses in many different ways a belief and an approach to keep going amidst resistance. She often says things like: "you just carry on"; "you carry on as if you don't have a care in the world"; "I put all my stressors aside"; and "I just live like I live each day." The strength of her character supports her when the chips are down and provides motivation to keep going.

Other positive characteristics are her sense of humour and her positive outlook on life. She often makes funny comments and jokes before interviews. She says that when her grandmother tells her to not be late home when she goes out, she replies, "I won't be late. I'll be home early morning!" She then proceeds to laugh out loud. Her energy during interviews was contagious. She says, "I'm a very strong woman. I never stop smiling. If you ask me how it's going, you'll never get a negative answer." Her resilience is commendable. After her discharge from hospital, after the overdose, she responded by getting straight back into the gym to exercise. When the father of her second baby left her, she responded by focussing on "work, sport and my children." She constantly strives to improve her family's life. This is evident in the renovations she had done in the home and the fact that she bought a car to make their lives easier. This is woman who has taken life by the horns and is refusing to back down. She loves her children, her sport, her friends and keeps holding onto her dream of having her own 'complete' family.

Sam is always concerned about helping other people. This characteristic can have a negative impact on her life when she overstretches herself beyond her own resources to assist others. However, it also shows her willingness to be there for other people and to reach out where help is needed. She was very willing to assist me in my research, which is true to character. She says, "I don't do anything for myself. I do what other people want all the time. Everyday is the same routine and you know exactly what will happen. You just keep going although it's boring. You must just shut up and listen and please everybody. You say your say but it doesn't count. I am always the only one that can make anything happen." She continues to joke about her grandmother and partner, as her 'bosses', but they don't pay her a salary. She also adds at the end that she doesn't really mind doing things for them. She jokingly talks



about the conflict between her children and her and says, “We fight like cats and dogs. I’m then the child in this picture. My daughter is the mother and my son is the father. I do as I’m told.” Her humour is a healthy way of dealing with the conflict and possibly diffuses situations that could have ended up a lot worse.

### Priorities

It is interesting to note which area of her life Sam chooses to share about first, after being asked an open question about her experiences as a single mother. She says, “The children ask why my dad isn’t here. You have no answers for them really.” She proceeds in the next three sentences to share about the difficulty of the children’s morning routine and the struggle to spend quality time with them. Her children are definitely a huge priority in her life. She mentions that the first question she asked of her current partner was if she liked children and if she had any of her own. She confirms that this is crucial and if somebody would not accept her children, they were not suited. She says, “If you don’t accept my children you can go as you are wasting my time.” She experiences a lot of difficulty with being a single mother, especially because she wants to be involved with her children’s lives and routines. She wants to attend their school activities. She wants to be there when they wake up and when they go to bed. She mentions that sometimes when she is really tired or stressed she asks, “Why did I have children?” but she very quickly responds with “I wanted them and now I’ve got them so I get on with it.”

When Sam talks about her children it is with a sparkle in her eye. She seems very proud of them. She has some difficulties with her teenage daughter, but still respects her enough to give her choices about school activities and whether she wants to get to know her father or not. She respects Bianca as a separate individual with her own preferences. When she talks about Brian it is always with a smile on her face. She says he “has a great sense of humour. He is a character.” When he wants to entertain her with his latest drama performance in the evenings when she is tired and wants to relax in front of the television, she says she can’t help but laugh. Sam refers to Mark, her last born, as “baba”. The day we interviewed at her house I could see from her interaction with the children that they wanted to be with their mother. Mark only had eyes for his mommy and whined, outside the door where we interviewed, for nearly

an hour. Sam has been selected to compete in sport internationally, but she has sacrificed this dream and opportunity, because of her children. She is not willing to leave them on their own with her grandmother for extended periods of time.

### Support structures

I asked Sam at the start of our third interview how she is managing with the interviews and the content of our discussions. She replied, “Certain things are a bit stressful to talk about. Other things are OK. I’m seeing a therapist and have a good support structure.” It is clear from her account of her life that she does indeed have support available in her family and friends.

Although Sam did not grow up and have a close relationship with her biological mother, she is able to confide in and share with her mother. She told her mother about her attraction to girls when she was a teenager and her mother accepted this. Sam says about her mother now, “My mother carries us on a platter. My mother completely accepts my partner.” Sam’s grandmother also supports her with caring for the children. She says of her grandmother, “Grandmother is the one I’m most concerned about. She’s grown very attached to me and me to her. We have the mother-child bond I never had with my mother. My mother is like my sister.” As her grandmother lives with her and her children, she helps to look after the children when Sam has to work. Sam’s sisters help with child care from time to time. Sam’s mother and stepfather used to have the children over at weekends, but after the sexual abuse incident she does not allow her children to go there anymore. Her mother now visits at Sam’s home. Sam has many family members living in the same community and who often visit, as I witnessed on the day we interviewed at her home. Sam does not necessarily experience her family as supportive when it comes to her personal issues, as she says, “I like to meet with people I want to meet with. I don’t want to hang with family. You can’t do certain things around family...they only gossip about one another.” The expectations of the family, to decide on a husband for Sam, are a burden and an added demand on Sam. Her family members are however still available and willing to assist her when she needs help. Before she had a car her cousin used to take her to the shops for her monthly grocery shop. She is not an isolated individual, but part of a network of extended and immediate family members.

Sam has a lot of friends, both at work and in her community. She is a fun-loving person, full of energy and always willing to engage with and help others. Her positive attitude attracts you to her. She reports going out to watch sport with the 'home boys', playing pool at her local club and going out with her partner and some of her cousins and friends over weekends. Sam also has a godmother, who lives in her neighbourhood, whom she confides in regularly. She says she can talk about anything with her godmother.

Apart from the distress her current relationship causes, due to the secrecy of it and the fear of rejection and judgement if it was to be made known, it offers support in many ways. Sam explains about her partner, "We made a pact that the kids won't come between us. It's not happening. We are all cool. We both have a best friend. We're all cool with that story." Sam's children have a good relationship with her partner, "The kids like her. At first Bianca was a bit rebellious, but now everyone's great friends." Sam jokingly says that Jo-Anne is more concerned about Sam's children than she is about Sam. She helps with the children, especially with outings to the mall or the movies. Sam explains that she is not good with entertaining the children. She will do as they ask or give them what they have asked for the first time, but there is no room to change your mind. Jo-Anne is different. Sam says, "My girlfriend and my kids are tight friends. She entertains them." Sam expressed a desire or a wish for a partner when she got selected to participate in sport overseas but couldn't go because of the children, "Yes, someone else could have watched the children so I can play sport. Someone to fill my shoes". She repeated the wish when she had to deal with her daughter's abuse and the family feud on her own, "In this situation it would have been easier with a partner to back me up". She again wishes to complete her family, "I won't have to hide in my own home. Being married is more than a girlfriend. I'll be out there being myself." Sam believes that marriage somehow will give permanency and stability to her relationship. It will give her acknowledgement for who she is and for the family they are together. Being in a relationship and having discussed marriage as a future option, Sam is supported in what she believes and values. Her current relationship is keeping her dream alive. She jokingly says at the end of our last interview, "Our living together will be a mad house with four kids."

It seems that despite all the negative events and experiences in Sam's life, she has remained optimistic and hopeful regarding her future and interested in people and relationships. She offers many positives that counterbalance some of the challenges she, and her children, face.

## DISCUSSION

In this discussion a comparison will be drawn between identified themes in the research participant's lived experience and existing research on single motherhood mentioned in the literature review. The themes identified and discussed in the literature review include: the concept of family; family structure; financial hardship; mental and physical health; single motherhood and children; social support, networks and neighbourhoods; single motherhood and stress; and protective factors. Are these themes present in and applicable to the research participant's lived experience? Are there any difference? Are there any emerging themes in the participant's lived experience not present in the literature review?

### Concept of family

A single mother is defined earlier in the literature review as someone: who by self-definition classified herself as the person in authority and responsible for controlling the maintenance of that household or was given that status by others in that household; and is the economic supporter of the household (Budlender, 2003). Sam indeed meets this definition. She is the sole breadwinner, financially responsible for both the children and her grandmother. She receives no help in any form from the fathers of the children. Her report that everyone is always looking to her to solve everything confirms that she is seen by the members of her family as the responsible one.

McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) point out that the problems in two-parent and single parent families are not that different, the only difference is that single parents might be exposed to more of these difficulties or to greater levels thereof. Sam's description of the demands she experiences, as the sole responsible person, and of sometimes feeling overwhelmed by juggling everything expected of her, supports this finding. It

thus suggests that it is not the single mother as individual, but the sheer volume of demands, that could influence research findings.

### Family structure

The studies by Bramlett and Blumberg (2003) and Dawson (1991) both conclude that children living in single-mother families have poorer physical health. Dawson (1991) also states that children from single-mother families are more likely than children from two-parent families to repeat a grade at school and be treated for behavioural or emotional problems. Sam did not comment on her own or her children's physical health at all, which could suggest that problems are either absent or not considered priority enough to share. Bianca is experiencing emotional problems, related to the sexual abuse by her step-grandfather. This would possible still have been the case if she was part of a two-parent family. Sam does not report any other behavioural problems in the children and both her children do well at school. Bianca's tantrums could be suggestive of emotional problems, but it could also simply be the natural developmental challenges associated with adolescence.

McLanahan (1983) found that single female-headed families experienced more stress than male-headed families and attributed this to marital disruption. The stress included: chronic life strains; major life events; and absence of social and psychological support. It is difficult to attribute the stressors in Sam's life to marital disruption, as she has never been married. Even this fact raises questions about whether research includes never-married mothers. It is possible that the transitions in family structure in Sam's family could have a negative impact on everyone (Peterson & Zill, 1986). She was involved with Carol, when Bianca was small, then with Robbie, after Brian's birth, then with John, before Mark was born, and now with Jo-Anne. One area where Sam's family conditions differ is in the absence of constant conflict within the structure, something often associated with relational disruption.

Lerman (2000) found single-mother families associated with material hardship and suggested that marriage could lower this. Sam, as a single mother, reports having a lot of financial demands, but she never complained of an inability to meet essential expenses. One would assume that marriage could possibly lower financial hardship,

if the chosen partner was employed and the family income could be supplemented. Lerman (2000) says that married parents experience less hardship compared to single parents, cohabiting couples or single parents with another adult. He says, “The benefits of marriage in avoiding hardship might still be due to some other, unobserved individual differences that both contribute to the likelihood of marriage and to the ability to avoid hardships that goes beyond the ability to earn additional income. However, it is equally plausible that marriage itself makes actions that limit hardship – better budgeting, planning, pulling together in a crisis – more common, even among people with similarly low income and education” ( p. 21). One wonders if the ability to budget and plan is limited to married couples only or if a single mother or cohabiting couple could not achieve this as well? Sam’s desire to be married seems to revolve around being acknowledged by other systems in her life and to have someone to support her, more than her desire to handle her finances better.

### Financial hardship

Financial hardship is considered the primary factor associated with poor mental health in single mothers in a study in Australia (Crosier, Butterworth & Rogers, 2007). That might be the case in this specific study and location, but is this reflected in the research participant’s lived experience? From Sam’s account of her life, she mentions financial demand as one of many stressors that affect her life, but at no stage during our interviews did she emphasize financial hardship as one of the main causes of her distress. Sam’s account seems to indicate the volume of demands, her emotional hurt from diverse traumas and rejections and her ambivalence regarding her sexuality as the main contributing factors.

Zhan and Sherraden (2003) reported that assets could improve the single mother’s feelings of power and security, and are related to maternal expectations for children’s educational achievements and educational outcomes. This could possibly be true in Sam’s case. She earns a steady income, owns her home and owns a car. However, her own educational attainment could be an influencing factor in her expectations of and outcome of her children’s achievements. Sam’s maternal characteristics of resilience, perseverance, coping and problem solving skills also play a role. A study by Jackson, Brooks-Gunn, Huang and Glassman (2000) found a link between

maternal educational attainment, financial status and parenting. They say that financial strain could lead to maternal depression. It seems hard, from the complexity of Sam's shared lived experience, to isolate and identify the factors contributing to her psychological distress. It seems more like an interwoven, interrelated experience between different factors, characteristics and systems. From their findings it seems depression affects parenting, regardless of the initial influencing factor. Again, how do you isolate the influence of one factor in the complexity of a lived experience?

Klebanov, Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (1994) investigated the influence of neighbourhood poverty on single-mother families. They found that neighbourhood poverty did not influence maternal depression, coping styles or the provision of learning experiences. They acknowledge the challenge with single mothers as a possible lack of financial resources or social support, which could prevent the family from living in better neighbourhoods. In Sam's case she has the financial resources to own her home in a reasonable neighbourhood. Many of her extended family members live in and around the same neighbourhood. Her daughter goes to school in a different neighbourhood where more learning opportunities are offered. This costs more, but Sam is happy to pay for her daughter to have this opportunity. Maternal characteristics and psychological wellbeing of the mother seem to affect the conditions in the home more than the neighbourhood you live in. Sam creates a safe environment for her children in the home and their wellbeing is her priority. This could mitigate any possible negative influences from the neighbourhood.

### Mental and physical health

Some of the studies done on single motherhood seem to compare single mothers with their married counterparts. Cairney, Boyle, Offord and Racine (2003) found a relationship between stress, social support and depression in single mothers. They state that single mothers experience more depression, chronic stress, life events and childhood adversities than married mothers in their study. From Sam's account it is clear that stress is a factor, but would the impact of childhood adversities only be related to single mothers? Another study by Davies, Avison and McAlpine (1997) found that adversity in childhood and adolescence, and higher stress from financial strain and sole parental responsibilities, contributed to single mothers' depression.

Sam complains of feeling depressed as a teenager, possibly as a result of her childhood sexual molestation and the domestic violence in her home. She also sometimes feels overwhelmed by all the demands placed on her, which could fuel feelings of depression. Brown and Moran (1997) state single mothers are twice as likely to be depressed, compared to their married counterparts. Cairney and Wade (2002) state that single mothers are more likely to seek mental health support, compared to married mothers. Sam had her first experience of mental health support as an adolescent. She is currently in therapy. Whether there are more single mothers who seek mental health support in this Coloured community cannot be confirmed. I have to agree with Avison, Ali and Walters (2007) that the psychological distress single mothers experience are not because they are in some way less capable than married mothers to deal with challenges, but they are exposed to greater amounts of stress.

Questions have to be asked of researchers attributing many of the phenomena discussed to the status of single motherhood or at least presenting research in a way that makes single motherhood seem a lesser option. The other question that comes to mind is the reason single mothers are compared to married mothers. Is marriage still seen as the ideal option for family structure and parenting? What about committed cohabiting couples? Are same sex marriages included in the research comparing single mothers with married mothers?

### Single motherhood and children

Influences on children incorporate many different system and factors, like temperamental characteristic of both the parent and the child, peers, school and neighbourhood influences (Collins, Maccoby, Steinberg, Hetherington & Bornstein, 2000). Bronfenbrenner recognises the family as the principle context in which human development occurs, but it is only one of many interdependent settings that influences individuals' development (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). The presence of positive maternal attitudes, maternal education, parenting resources and ability might prevent or influence adverse child outcomes (Ricciuti, 2004). Sam has a very positive mental attitude, a tertiary education and shows a keen interest in her children's welfare. These factors might protect her children from adverse outcomes in future, but as



stated, the influence of the parental home is only one of many. Some research has linked growing up in a single parent family with early marriage and divorce and adolescent childbearing (Sandefur & McLanahan, 1990; Wu & Martinson, 1993), but there is no way of knowing if Sam's children will be part of this statistic. She is very involved in their lives and the children have constant supervision, which could counteract this predicted trend (Astone & McLanahan, 1991).

### Social support, networks and neighbourhood

Ross (2000) found that perceived disorder in a neighbourhood mediates the impact of neighbourhood conditions on mental health, and single parent families is a distressing aspect of such neighbourhood contexts. That is assuming that single parent families contribute to the lack of order through lack of supervision of children, unemployment and lack of financial resources. Sam reports that her neighbourhood is very noisy and that 'racket-making' starts on Thursdays and continues until 2.30am on Sundays. She says people are partying, fighting and shouting all the time. She also reports domestic violence as 'fashionable' in her community and child molestation as something that happens a lot. Are these signs of a neighbourhood falling into disorder? How will this affect Sam and her children? And are single mother families a distressing aspect of her neighbourhood context?

Social integration (Massey & Denton, 1993) and collective socialisation (Coleman, 1990) are identified as protective factors within a community. Sam does participate with her children in school and church activities. Her extended family situation means that her children will be looked out for and supported in their development by other adults in her family. Although Sam has instrumental support from her family, work colleagues and church members, her fear of rejection in making her sexual orientation and relationship status known, prevents her from getting emotional support for her self. She is not isolating herself or her children from the support and influence of others within her community or neighbourhood, but with the added psychological distress of secrecy and fear (Tropp, 2003).

Sam is involved in different networks that aid in her support. Her family of origin (mother, grandmother and sisters) support her. Her extended network including

extended family members (aunts, uncles and cousins), godmother, friends, work colleagues and mental health professionals assist her. McLanahan, Wedemeyer and Adelberg (1981) acknowledge these two sources of support, but add a third network, the conjugal network. In Sam's case, this network is her current partner, although they are not married yet. The researchers in this study refer to a conjugal network as having a significant male present as the major source of support. In Sam's case the significant person is female. One assumes the support offered by a female significant figure will be the same as a male, in which case the wording would be more accurate as 'significant other' present, not 'significant male' present.

### Single motherhood and stress

Stress and social support account for 40% of the relation between single mother status and depression (Cairney, Boyle, Offord & Racine, 2003). Stress, in this instance, refers to a negative impact on a mother's psychological wellbeing due to her subjective experience of the demands placed upon her by her environment. Campbell and Moen (1992) found that work-life or job-family strain was positively related to number and age of children and hours a single mother worked. If the mother had a positive attitude to work and high job satisfaction, the impact was lowered. Sam works a full day with some weekend shifts required, but she loves her work. At present her children are young, but she is already noticing a change in her relationship with her daughter, who is now entering her teenage years. It is possible her parenting demands will increase as her children grow up.

There are two stress perspectives attempting to explain the origin of stress and the impact on the wellbeing of the mother: the strain and selection perspectives (Simons, Beaman, Conger & Chao, 1993). The strain perspective considers the demands a single mother experiences to impact on her emotional wellbeing. The selection perspective considers the characteristics of the mother, her marital status, her psychological wellbeing and quality of parenting to be linked. Sam is experiencing extensive demands on her financial, time, energy and psychological resources. The strain she is under impacts on her psychological wellbeing. Her personal characteristics act as a protective factor and she appears to cope well with her parenting responsibilities. It is difficult to tell how her marital status has influenced

her psychological wellbeing, as she has never been married. From her own account it does appear as if her desire to get married is linked to needing someone to support her personally and to help with parenting the children. In this regard her psychological wellbeing could be improved by having a partner to help carry the load and responsibilities.

Simon (1992) conducted a study to investigate the impact of role identity on psychological wellbeing of both women and men. Sam attaches a great degree of importance to her role as mother and provider for her children. Her reaction to the accusations from her father's family after the abuse of her daughter speaks of this. Simon (1992) found that if a certain role identity is important to an individual, challenges in that area will threaten a valued aspect of self. Sam is very clear on her role as mother. She is however experiencing many challenges in the area of her sexual identity. The judgement and prejudice she experiences could be affecting her sense of self and adding to her psychological distress, which could affect her parenting. Sam describes feeling that half of her identity and life is not being acknowledged, which one can only imagine to have a negative impact on her self-concept.

We should keep in mind that parenting may have a negative impact on the psychological wellbeing of any parent, regardless of the family structure (McLanahan & Adams, 1987).

### Protective factors

Sam's family displays many rituals that facilitate family cohesion (Moriarty & Wagner, 2004). They spend time together watching movies or playing games (connecting), go to church together (spiritual), express love and affection toward one another (love), go to mall to shop together (recreation) and celebrate birthdays (celebration). It not clear how these rituals may change, as the children grow up?

Brodsky (1999) defines resilience as the balance between risk and protective factors. He found resilience evident in: neighbourhood; parenting; family; friends; men; money; personal characteristics; and spirituality. Sam shows resilience in creating a

safe and comfortable home environment for her children. She has never been involved in any relationship where her children were not accepted. She does not tolerate domestic violence and will not allow her family members to have parties at her home where lots of alcohol is consumed. She is aware of the positive elements in her life and has dealt successfully with single motherhood up to this point (D'Ercole, 1988).

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

The aim of this study is to explore the lived experience of a single mother in order to gain a deeper understanding of her life. The aim is to introduce the reader to a person, not a statistic. In reading this text the intention is for interaction between text and reader. What was your reaction as reader when introduced to Sam? What was your reaction to her life history and the challenges she face? From a psychodynamic perspective some might focus on Sam's internal experiences and conflict, whereas from a systemic perspective others might consider the influence and impact of external systems on Sam's wellbeing.

When I first met Sam and started recording her experiences, I wondered how it was possible for a young person to have endured such a great amount of trauma and disruption. After the first interview I was questioning the validity of her account, in disbelief. I lost track of the different relationships and the time line at first, but the longer I worked with Sam and the more I could verify the details, the more I realised that her story did indeed measure up. She had experienced extensive distress by the age of 30. What she shared about her life and her references to others with similar experiences gave the impression that her experiences are not exceptional in her community. She reported knowing many other single mothers in the community who experienced domestic violence and abuse in their homes. Some of these mothers were in same sex relationships and some have married their life partners.

Questions arise regarding existing intervention programs and policies for single mothers. If the bulk of existing research findings highlight stress, social support and financial hardship as the biggest challenges faced by single mothers, how does that translate into intervention programs in Sam's local community? If Sam is not an exception to the rule as far as motherhood and same sex relationships are concerned, how are these women assisted? Financial hardship in her case does not seem the biggest hindrance, but stress from accumulation of demands, and added psychological distress, with lack of social support due to stigma are high. How are these challenges addressed?

We can define three concepts to aid our understanding of Sam's experience of her identity: stigma, heterosexism and prejudice. Stigma exists as shared knowledge that is absorbed in cultural ideologies that define family structure and sexuality, demarcate social groupings based on the definition, and assign values to member of those groups and the groups themselves. Heterosexism is when these ideologies are expressed through a society's institutions, structure, and power relations. The systems include beliefs about gender, morality, and danger associated with a minority group membership. Heterosexism considers heterosexual relationships, and marriage between husband and wife, as the only acceptable norms. Minorities are then defined as sinful, threatening, deviant and dysfunctional. Prejudice is when these internalised ideologies are expressed through attitudes and actions (Herek, 2004). Prejudice can include sexual, marital status and family structure prejudice.

Sam has been exposed to prejudice from a young age, not only as a non-heterosexual individual, but also as a never-married single mother. She has accepted her motherhood and her sexuality. If a person's identity is not accepted and reflected by others in interpersonal relationships, it causes psychological distress in the person who is denied (Burke, 1991). This distress is part of an experience referred to by Meyer (2003) as minority stress. Other experiences that lead to the experience of minority stress include: experiencing a prejudice event; experience of rejection; hiding and concealing of true identity; and internalised homophobia. Sam experiences some acceptance of her single motherhood, marital status and sexuality in certain contexts, but there is no consistency or predictability. She constantly lives with the expectation that somewhere someone will disapprove of who she is and how she lives her life. She might always be vulnerable to the beliefs and behaviours of the majority. In the hierarchical power equation of heterosexism she is the lesser. Her single motherhood and sexuality are frowned upon by acquaintances in her neighbourhood, some of her family, some of her work colleagues and by some in the church community. She is seen as sinful and deviant. It begs the question: Which ideology is supported and expressed in the systems she interacts with in her life? Do these ideologies influence the services provided by government organisations and if so, how? Some existing research isolates the single mother as individual and focuses on her psychological wellbeing and her ability to function effectively in her role as

mother. If we take a systems theory perspective, it is evident that the family, school, church, neighbourhood, work and government systems all impact Sam's life and contribute in some way to the demand placed upon her. Sam is not a less-able, less-effective parent or individual, but her experiences are intertwined and interrelated to all the systems in her life. We have to be careful not to identify the single mother as the problem, but should understand her functioning as part of a collection of systems.

Women are disadvantaged through poverty, gender discrimination and absence of support in their role as sole responsible adult for their children (Buvinić & Gupta, 1997). I would like to add sexual discrimination, as in Sam's case. It is interesting that Buvinić and Gupta (1997) do not encourage financial support for single mothers, as financial help, according to them, will promote single motherhood! Could that statement not be considered discriminating? Some of their recommendations include policies that prevent discrimination against women accessing resources and services, health and education promotion and creating social networks. Should we not also promote policies that prevent discrimination against women who are single mothers, whichever way they arrived at this point, and mothers in same sex relationships? Creating social networks is a noble idea, but will it not yet again exclude those who do not fit the heterosexist mould, if these networks are influenced by heterosexist ideology? The impact of stressors from social and community level on the individual single mother and her family should not be denied (Tropp, 2003).

A binary, heterosexist approach, that considers a family to exist of a father and a mother with their dependent children, could alienate single mothers and same sex couples. All types of stigma are grounded in society's power relations, which mean non-heterosexuals have less power than heterosexuals, less access to resources, less influence over others, and less control over the outcome of their own lives (Link & Phelan, 2001).

### LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY

The aim of this study is not to generalise any findings, but to gain a deeper understanding of the individual experience of single motherhood. It is important to remember that this account of the participant's life is a self-report, given by the

participant, and interpreted by the researcher. As researcher my own prejudice and priorities could have influenced my perspective and possibly have coloured my interpretations. However, self-reflection was constantly exercised, thoughts and experiences noted in my research diary, and statements constantly grounded in the text, to limit subjective interpretations.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

I read existing research on single motherhood, before I collected and analysed the data of this study. I had no expectations of the outcome of my study before interviewing the research participant, as I wanted to be as open as possible to reflect my participant's experience from her point of view. What I found was indeed unexpected. Nowhere in the existing research I investigated, did I find any reference to single motherhood and sexuality. It is not clear whether same sex relationships were included in comparative studies between single mothers and married mothers. Domestic violence, the experience of and expression of sexuality, and a strong religious undercurrent within the Coloured community also captivated my curiosity. Is there any correlation between domestic violence, abuse and sexuality? What role does religion play in the experience of single motherhood or non-heterosexuality?

Existing research seems to contribute the psychological wellbeing of the single mother to external factors like financial strain and internal factors like maternal characteristics. From this study it seems as if the influences from systems like family, work, church and neighbourhood, and the prejudice, stigma and discrimination associated with them, have a big impact on the mental health of the single mother. More research and further education, to raise awareness of prejudice and stigma, are required. This study has opened the door to further research in understanding the changed face of family structure, motherhood, mental health and the influence on and contribution from other systems on the experiences of the single mother.

I would like to finish with words spoken by Eleanor Roosevelt (cited in Swim, Hyers, Cohen & Ferguson, 2001),



Where, after all, do human rights begin? In small places, close to home – so small that they cannot be seen on any map of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person: the neighbourhood...the school or college...the factory, farm or office. Such are the places where every man, woman, and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless there rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere (p.32).

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