FRIDA NILSSON

Creating spaces for action

ANC-women politicians’ views on bridewealth and gender-related power
ABSTRACT

The first aim of this work has been to analyse and understand the ways in which a group of ANC-women politicians reason about bridewealth/lobola – an institution about which they express differing views, in particular about whether or not it is oppressive to women. The main body of the empirical material is based on 27 interviews conducted in South Africa in the period 1996-1998.

One finding of the study is that there are explicit defining discourses on lobola as well as more implicitly expressed understandings. The explicit discourses make a distinction between ‘good lobola’ – which is expressed in a family-related discourse as ‘a bond between families’ – and ‘bad lobola’ which is expressed in, for instance, an economic discourse about ‘the purchase of women’. The family-related discourse is interpreted as part of a discursive strategy to create spaces for action with respect to relations of gender-related power. (Re)definitions of lobola may be used not only to counter men’s abuse of monetary lobola but also to counter ‘traditional’ gender meanings associated with lobola. Furthermore, explicit discourses on lobola are interpreted as a ‘political discourse’ which is formed both in relation to pragmatic ‘political realities’ but also in relation to hegemonic Western discourses. The political discourse on lobola in connection with ‘African identity’ constitutes a discursive strategy to provide discursive space in order for ‘Africans’ to be able to (re)interpret a cherished but also controversial institution.

A second aim of the study has been of a self-reflexive character. It constitutes a critique of a ‘doing gender’ theoretical perspective as well as an attempt to transcend the ‘actor/structure dichotomy’ in sociological analysis.

Key words: ANC-women, bridewealth/lobola, discourse, discursive strategy, gender, gender-related power, hermeneutic approach, structure, agency, self-reflexivity.

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I look at my son, two and a half years old, such a happy, trusting and wonderful being. I think of men and women in my life and I think of men of power in the world - what happened to them? Why are there so few men who respect women? And why are there so few women who, in a self-evident way, take up social space and positions of power?

I remember my frustration and confusion some years ago – not having words for it. The relief of finding women’s groups where the frustration can be formulated and accepted by others – but then, after some time, the discovery of new relations of power between women. Who is in? Who is out?

I think of my close relationships with men and women. I thought I was a conscious feminist – and still the same old song – adapting to my partner, loosing my sense of self. And I have been trampled over by women friends too.

But there are women and men who respect me and care for me. So then, what is women’s oppression?

Did feminist theory help in finding new paths of conducting my life in a more fulfilling way which makes me happier? Did it help in understanding women’s oppression in a more general sense? Maybe, to some extent – I do think women’s lives in parts of the world have improved in many ways as regards life possibilities, and feminist theory may have had something to do with it. It is necessary to find a language and theoretical approaches to express experiences of gender-related power and to formulate and analyse what happens with men and women more generally. Feminist theory provides that. But does feminist theory also provide new normative frameworks – new do’s and don’ts – new reductionist understandings of social life? Yes, I believe it does.

I think of the African National Congress (ANC)-women politicians/activists I interviewed in this dissertation. Women struggling with their lives and relations of gender-related power the way I do. Trying to find ways to be able to do what they want; partners who do not always accept their choice of political activism; male power in political life and in the liberation movement. Trying to find room for their children in the middle of a busy and demanding life. Formulating relations of gender-related power into a political agenda. Similar problems of transforming theory into practical political programs. And the vast differences between them and me – personally and politically. The race related violence these women had to endure. Some be-
ing imprisoned tortured and separated from their children. Others having to leave children behind to go into exile. Hardships, I cannot even imagine. And the poverty and terrible life conditions their political constituencies have to live under and which they attempt to change.

Why ask these women about their views on lobola/bridewealth? – Another study about ‘the other’? Analyzing oppression of other women making ‘them’ the oppressed and ‘we’ the enlightened? I hope not. Lobola is a controversial political issue, which ANC-women have discussed among themselves in terms of its possible oppressive character. Furthermore, the institution may be culturally specific, but the women of this study deal with and strategize against relations of gender-related power more or less like any other woman living in a patriarchal society. I hope my analysis, together with their generous discussions with me, will help us understand a little more about lobola, and more generally about relations of gender-related power and how we may attempt to change them. And we certainly need better feminist analytical tools and theoretical frameworks to understand our lives as well as to take relevant political action. Women of the world still have a long walk to freedom.

Field of interest

When women’s studies became a field of academic interest in the 70’s it was directly linked to the women’s movement in Western societies. There was an interest to be able to explain women’s oppression and causal monolithic theories were commonplace. There was also an interest to find societies in which women were not oppressed and the study of ‘other cultures’ in anthropology became important in the quest of questioning the Western gender-order.

Anthropological gender-studies soon threaded into the road of cultural relativism, which has also been a problem for the discipline more generally. Cultural anthropological gender-studies thus, have had a problem with dealing with relations of power.

Feminist studies, in a more general sense, has had a tendency of not taking ‘culture’ seriously but have used theoretical and analytical concepts as though they were applicable universally.

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1 This critique has been directed to anthropologists as well as feminists studying ‘others’. Even though researchers’ biases may have been a problem in this regard there is also the problem of inadequate theoretical frameworks which ‘create’ such dichotomized and paternalistic worldviews. As will be seen in this chapter, I have not been immune to the problem even though my wish was not to fall into analytical traps of this kind. See also Methodology and Method.

2 This is alluding to Nelson Mandela’s autobiography *A long walk to freedom*.

3 Post-colonial gender researchers who have specifically discussed this problem in an African setting are Imam, A. Mama & Soe (eds) (1997), Acholonu, Obiannuju, (1995), Amadiume, Ifi
I started my doctoral studies in anthropology but could not agree with its cultural relativism. I was actively involved in student politics on gender equality and in other feminist activities. There was a tension between my political interest aiming at changing relations of gender-related power and the anthropological insensitivity to relations of gender-related power. Furthermore, I felt much feminist theory was difficult to apply in my political work, as it seemed quite remote from empirical reality. But I was convinced that anthropology held insights about ‘culture’ which would be of much help to question feminist theory and politics which I felt were to narrow in its approach to the cultural complexities of gender relations. Finally, I changed departments, as my supervisor was not fond of my anthropological field of interest.4 Thus, sociology became my new discipline. Now my knowledge in feminist theory was not considered ethnocentric but as competence in the field.5

It is still this tension between ‘culture’ and ‘power’ and between feminist theory and politics which catches my interest. How do we study gender-related power and take ‘culture’ seriously without falling into the trap of cultural relativism? How do we theorise relations of gender-related power in a way, which say something relevant about women’s and men’s lives? And how do we provide theoretical and analytical tools, which may be used to change relations of gender-related power?

It was during an undergraduate course in African studies I wrote a paper on women’s organisations in South Africa that I became interested in the active women’s ‘movement’ there. I began to plan for conducting further studies on this theme at the graduate level. I share the political dimension of my field of interest with the women interviewed. Most of them have worked actively with issues of women’s empowerment, and some have conducted gender studies at the university and are aware of different theoretical and ideological views on gender. This political dimension is central to the choice of study. The women interviewed share an understanding of gender as central to oppressive structures in society and they share my interest in attempting to change them. How do they understand and conceptualise women’s oppression and how to change relations of gender-related power in a different socio-cultural and political setting than mine? I have interviewed the women on different subjects but lobola came to be the focus of the study as it seemed interesting from the point of view of studying ‘what is women’s

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4 To study ANC-women and gender equality issues could not be considered cultural anthropology in her view. As I wanted to interview politicians she labeled my field of interest ‘political science’ and furthermore she was very critical to me wanting to use feminist theory, which was not ‘anthropological’.

5 This does not mean that feminist studies is fully accepted within sociology but only that there is/was more room theoretically, at my university, to problematize relations of gender-related power.
oppression’ in a different socio-cultural and political setting. Furthermore, I was curious about getting to know their reasoning better.

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First and foremost I would like to thank the ANC-women who took time off from their busy schedules to participate in this study. I feel privileged to have been speaking with women with such pioneering roles in the New South Africa. I do hope this study can give something back in the learning process on how to conceptualise and combat gender-inequalities.

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*Frida Nilsson*
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Chapter 1 – Introduction

Lobola is a way of tying two families together /.../ You are not selling a child; you are pulling the two families together and they get united around lobola. That’s why I married in the African custom, it’s not a marriage between the two individuals – it is the families (Interview with Cholofelo).

I think it’s in the tradition of bride price … the manner in which it’s been used today. That if you marry and your husband and his family pay the bride-price and therefore you then become some kind of a slave when you get there./…/I think that is very humiliating (Interview with Sindiwe).

The aim of the study

Lobola is a widespread custom in South Africa, which has survived despite the tremendous strains the black communities have gone through. The nature of lobola has changed considerably during industrialisation and apartheid. Traditionally cattle was transferred from the grooms family to that of the bride upon marriage, but nowadays bridewealth is mostly paid in the form of money (See Chapter two for some accounts of the complexities of the institution). Despite the changes surveys indicate that people remain deeply attached to the institution. (Samuel 1999:27).

Lobola is a sensitive political question among the black African National Congress (ANC)-women politicians/activists I have interviewed. There is a wide range of views on the issue – some regard it as a form of slavery and against the constitution of South Africa and others accept it.

Lobola is also an institution, which have different practices in the different socio-cultural groups in South Africa as well as in urban and rural settings. Furthermore it is discussed academically from very different perspectives. No attempt is therefore made to define the institution. It is rather the understanding of the women interviewed which is sought after and which is interesting to study in such a diverse political and socio-cultural environment as the South-African.

Lobola is a controversial issue which I think brings out perspectives on what ’women’s oppression’ might be. Lobola may, from a ’Western viewpoint’, be considered clearly oppressive as money is actually transferred

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6 See Chapter two for a discussion on different theoretical perspectives on lobola.
from the groom to the bride’s family upon marriage. It is difficult not to see it as a purchase. But highly influential ANC-women who work for women’s empowerment argue for, or at least accept, lobola’s continued existence.

An assumption made when studying the issue of lobola was that there were probably meanings expressed on different levels. One level would be a more explicit one as lobola is discussed politically. Another level would be one which is more connected to ‘habitus’ in Bourdieu’s terms. Lobola is a socio-cultural institution with a long history which may link it to levels of meanings, relations and practice which are not as reflected upon. The following research questions are thus linked to assumedly explicit and implicit levels of meanings and relations. How can we understand the women’s reasoning about-and dealing with lobola and gender-related power? How is gender-related power conceptualised and dealt with in discourse and practice in the context of lobola? Is it possible to understand discourses on lobola as discursive strategies in relation to personal and political contexts? How can we understand the women’s discourses on lobola in a context of socio-cultural gender-meanings and relations?

Another aim of the study could be described as a discussion of a methodological and theoretical journey. It consists of an exploration of how my own analysis has developed throughout dissertation. During the course of analysis I have tampered with social scientific problems which are many times thought of in dichotomous terms: actor/structure, culture/social relations and sex/gender. These distinctions have both hampered the analysis and stimulated it to take new routes in order to evade them. The dissertation will mirror the different stages of the analysis and how I have dealt with some of these distinctions. How did the distinctions trap the analysis and how did I attempt to transcend them? I have struggled, not always very consciously, with transcending them in order to do more justice to the empirical material. The analysis of the empirical material started with a hermeneutic approach, which made it difficult to deal with social relations. My initial focus on agency also had a great influence over the development of the analysis as regards the relationship between actor and structure. This will also be explored throughout the dissertation. Finally, the sex/gender distinction is explored analytically and theoretically. My feminist theoretical background has, to a large extent been constructionist with a ‘doing gender’ theoretical angle. In the last chapter I discuss how the analysis have departed from such a perspective and I analyse some of the shortcomings of ‘doing gender’ as a theoretical concept and analytical tool.
Methodology

An methodological journey

A longstanding question in the social sciences is that between objectivity and subjectivity (Alvesson and Sköldberg 1994; Giddens 1993 [1989]). Closely related to this dichotomy is that of quantitative/qualitative, social fact-causal explanation/interpretation and in the post-modern era that between authenticity and representation. One problem in qualitative social science is the so-called positivistic heritage.7 Another problem, which I think influence methodological discussions, is that dichotomizations like the above still organise our thinking and traps the analysis in an either/or approach.

A central theme of this dissertation is to unravel how such dichotomizations have steered the course of analysis and how I have attempted to evade them. This has been a process which hasn’t been very clear to myself but which I started to formulate when summarising the empirical analysis. I began this study with a hermeneutic approach, which I think trapped my thinking on the side of ‘culture and interpretation’. Hermeneutics has a history of focusing primarily on texts as its empirical material.8 Its central concern is to discern or expose meanings which are not always clear to the subject of study’s themselves. A hermeneutic tradition also includes the working procedure and philosophy that it is not possible to understand the meaning of a part without relating to the whole; and it is not possible to understand the whole without relating to the parts. The hermeneutic circle may be applied as a working method also in relation to, for example, studying a text in relation to a certain context. It is the constant moving back and forth between the contexts for interpretations and the empirical material, which provides a possibility to reach a deeper understanding of the subject of study. The aim of a hermeneutic study is to grasp such meanings. The means for doing so includes a moment of intuition in contrast to more positivistic approaches. Furthermore, a hermeneutic approach speaks of, for example, the text or the interview as its empirical material and subject of study – it does not refer to ‘empirical reality’. This is in line of the hermeneutic mode of grasping the meaning of a text rather than explaining a social phenomenon.

7 Alvesson and Sköldberg argues that many books on qualitative methodology are not ‘qualitative’ enough in that they (like books on quantitative methods) focus on procedures and techniques instead of problematising the complexities of interpretation and stressing the importance of reflexivity (1994:9).
8 The following summary of a hermeneutic approach is based on Lundgren (2001) and Alvesson and Sköldberg (1994). There are different hermeneutic schools but I describe a broad approach, which initially guided my analysis. The reason as to why I discuss Lundgren’s hermeneutic approach is that she was professor at my department and was leading the feminist research seminar at the department during my first years as a PhD-student and to a large extent influenced my thinking on qualitative research.
In my hermeneutic approach to the interview-material, I found it difficult to include social power relations and human agency. Social power relations traditionally had largely been studied in a positivistic mode and conceptualised as 'social facts'. Furthermore, agency and structure are regarded as irrelevant concepts for a hermeneutic analysis (Lundgren 2001:32 ff.). When these kinds of difficulties became apparent, I continued with an interpretative approach but relations of gender-related power and agency had to be given a different status than a continuation of a hermeneutic approach would have allowed. Instead of interpreting social power relations solely in terms of cultural or linguistic meaning I switched focus to the concrete relations the women had to deal with – to 'real life conditions'. The first switch of focus in line of this is made already in Chapter three when I first interpret the women as attempting to shape a discursive space. Later the analysis sees to them making a 'space for action' in relation to concrete social relations of gender-related power. The interviews were not only analysed as text but also as a social act directed to concrete others as well as to concrete contexts. My analysis started to creep out of the 'safe' hermeneutic interpretative framework and to relate to something that I would like to call 'the real world'. This is not to say an objective world but a world of flesh and bone. This means that I hold the view that an interpretative analysis should be evaluated on the basis of whether it's saying something more and relevant about gender relationships 'out there'. I do not hold the view that 'experience' necessarily reflects a 'true reality' as the 'holder' of a particular experience may be motivated to articulate and explain experience on the grounds of, for example, 'hidden' interests. This might be formulated, as

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9 I use Alvesson and Sköldberg (1994) as a discussion partner in this part of the chapter in order to analyse my own research-process and make it clearer.
10 This was not a conscious choice on my part as the analysis progressed but I now think it was a reason as to why the analysis took a new direction.
11 Lundgren argues that all contexts of meaning are linguistic and that language is contextual, collective and cultural (2001). When making language central to every context of meaning she seems to be following a strand in hermeneutics in which language is put centre of the stage and in which language is seen as the medium through which a person’s life world appears (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 1994:136).
12 With a hermeneutical approach social acts are often studied 'as texts' (Alvesson & Sköldberg 1994:121)
13 Sociological analyses of interviews often, in my view, have an empiristic touch in that they take the interview to directly reflect some aspect of 'the real world' without discussing the problem of interpretation. Even though I bring back 'the real world' into the (hermeneutical) analysis I do think we have to consider all the difficult aspects of interpretation.
14 Lundgren (2001:36ff) argues that hermeneutical analyses only can be evaluated as good or bad interpretations according to scientific standards. She does not discuss a possible evaluation of the analysis of 'empirical material' in relation to 'empirical reality'.
15 A group in power may be an example of interviewees who may not be very interested in recognising an analysis, which differs from their self-perceptions, which may serve to legitimate their position of power.
experience is one of several relevant aspects, which could be taken into account when evaluating an interpretative study.16

My hope is for the reader to find the analysis increasingly ‘truthful to reality’ and improved throughout the dissertation.17 The means that for the reader to make this judgement though, may only be through the material I provide (if the reader does not have her own experiences of lobola). It is thus important for qualitative analysis to provide the reader with adequate interview-texts as well as contexts and a thorough argumentation for the interpretations made. Even though the analysis of the interviews has departed from a hermeneutic approach as indicated above, I have a hermeneutic view of the research-process in that I don’t separate strictly between methodology, theory and empirical material as I see them as intertwined in the interpretation-process. As a matter of fact, a significant part of this chapter on methodology is written after the other chapters and can be read as an interpretation of the analysis in hindsight.

An interpretative approach is still central to my work but it is not only interpretative in a hermeneutic sense. What I discuss as a ‘reality out there’ has to be interpreted by the interviewees, by myself as well as the reader of my work. But I argue that there are interpretations, which are closer to reality and more relevant than others are. One difference between my view and a positivistic and empiristic approach is that I don’t believe in ‘complete interpretations’. Social life is too complex to grasp in a complete sense.

Furthermore, researchers are never in total control over their work and interpretations. We all have ‘hidden agendas’ and are driven by personal, not always conscious, motivations and we all have cultural (as well as ideological, theoretical etc) blind spots and ways of thinking of which we are not

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16 Experience is not considered unmediated by for example language and culture. The point is that experience might have a more central role in our analytical procedures and evaluations. This is to avoid the worst excesses of theoretical and methodological reductions of ‘empirical reality’. At the same time, experience, cannot be considered a scientific ground for argument taken on its own but must be integrated/combined with systematic argumentation.

17 Alvesson and Sköldberg (1994:358) seem vague to me on the issue of how the quality of a qualitative study should be evaluated. They want to avoid an empiristic approach to the empirical material and argue for the complexities of interpretation. At the same time they would like to keep the possibility open that one interpretation could be preferred to another and considered more ‘true’ on the ground that it has more support from the empirical material than another. I think this way of reasoning is similar to Lundgren’s in that the judgement of the interpretation is only related to the ‘empirical’ material and not to the ‘world out there’. If we argue for one interpretation to be more ‘true’ than another I don’t see the point of only relating it to ‘the empirical material’ in some textual sense, if we don’t think this material say something about ‘the world out there’. Our motivations for selecting the empirical material as well as the questions we put in the interview are probably our wish to investigate some aspect of empirical ‘reality’ and I think we have to keep that in mind when discussing methodology and how our work should be read and judged. This is the great advantage of analysis based on empirical work in contrast to theories made ‘out of the blue’, just as Alvesson and Sköldberg points out. Nevertheless, they seem to shun to discuss the judgement of interpretations in relation to empirical reality, probably as this could be seen as a positivistic view.
aware. Therefore, objectivity is not possible in social life or in the social sciences. But intersubjectivity and reflexivity makes it possible to argue for interpretations to be more or less truthful to reality. And it is the empirical material which the researcher presents together with a rigorous and honest analysis which makes it possible for the reader to make a judgement of whether interpretations seem consistent with reality or not.

The women interviewed mediate the reality, which I interpret in this study. It is my interviews with them, which constitutes the empirical material. I adopt the position of the feminist critic which Tanja Modlesky proposes in an article which also criticises the position of the ‘enlightened, detached ethnographer’ who unravels ‘systems of meaning’ and ‘social structures’ (1989). Modlesky proposes a position in which both researcher and the subjects of study (women) are ‘cultural dupes’ as well as ‘enlightened’. By this, she means that none of us are free from culture but at the same time none of us are totally steered by culture. She puts dialogic exchange centre-stage: “Her [the feminist critic] work is, then, ideally plurivocal, not denying the differences of other women, but learning about them through dialogic exchange, rather than through ethnographies that posit an unbridgeable gap between the critic’s subjectivity and the subjectivity of ‘the others.”

Modlesky’s article discusses how to study ‘romance readers’ but I think it is quite applicable to any feminist study, which concerns women subjects. She also points out the contradictories of being woman in a patriarchal society, which applies to both ‘romance readers’ (the women of the study) as well as to the researcher. These contradictories must be taken into account:

A recognition of that romance readers may be self-contradictory in their attitudes and behaviour does not necessarily open up the analysis to the charge of elitism /…/ especially if we are willing to acknowledge how much we ourselves are implicated within those very structures we set out to analyse, how much of our feelings, desires, anxieties, etc., are caught up in contradiction – in short, how much our fantasy lives, for all our cherished feminist ideals, may resemble those of the women we study (ibid:12).

Thus, I agree with Modlesky that the researcher is never in total control when interpreting and that an important feature of research is learning through dialogue. This approach is also fruitful in contemplating dialogue between two women of different socio-cultural backgrounds. In dialogue it is possible to learn about each other’s cultural frames of reference as both researchers and the interviewed women are both ‘cultural dupes’ and to some extent free of their culture or backgrounds. I also think it is an important point she makes that the feminist researcher could morally pursue research

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18 This is a critique of a more ‘traditional’ ethnographic approach, which have been criticized by for instance James Clifford (1986). Nevertheless, I think ‘the traditional’ approach is well and alive in actual practice.
on women without always agreeing on the interpretations of the women interviewed and without necessarily become ‘elitist’. The researcher may interpret the woman interviewed in a way which is more ‘truthful to reality’ than the woman herself does. But it may also be that the researcher misses out on things because of her blindness or lack of awareness, which the interviewed woman may have a ‘better’ understanding of. I think a thorough presentation of interviews and analysis makes it possible for this process of dialogue continue after my own analysis is finished. The reader may make new interpretations, which may be better and more ‘truthful to reality’.

I would like to propose a view which does not make a distinction between the social sciences and natural sciences on the ground that one is objective and the other subjective and interpretative. Or, I should rather say that I would like to question the distinction between objective and subjective social science, which is often depicted as coming from a cleavage between the natural sciences and the social sciences. There is a common interest of the natural sciences and the social sciences to describe and understand a ‘reality out there’ as truthful as possible. Instead of seeing qualitative research as distinct from research with objectivity claims (often quantitative) as it is defined on the grounds of its subjective nature I propose that research may be more or less dependent on interpretation. Some natural scientific work may be less open to interpretation than others. A phenomenon in physics may be described and explained through a physical formula, which is not much disputed whereas for example Darwinist evolutionary biology is much more open to dispute. In a similar way some aspects of social life may be less open to interpretation than others and may be close to what has been termed ‘social facts’ (or cultural facts) in a positivistic framework. An example would be that a woman who sleeps with many men, or is suspected by others of doing so, would probably find it difficult to avoid being defined as a whore whereas a man who sleeps with many women will not get the same derogatory definition. This, I believe, is true in both in South Africa and in Sweden although the consequences for the parties involved and the contexts may be very different.

An institution like lobola is complex to interpret, and the institution is contextually dependent. An urban middle-class feminist married by lobola may have a lot to say about how the institution should be interpreted in her own relationship compared to a poor, uneducated woman in the countryside.

When interpreting more complex social phenomena we may have the ambition to make partially truthful interpretations in that we are only able to grasp some aspects and understand some of its contexts.

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19 The natural sciences have been criticised by social scientists for the objective ideals on the ground that ‘natural facts’ are often infused with socio-cultural interpretation of which the scientist is not aware (See, for example Giddens 1993).
As social scientists we are dependent on theoretical frameworks and analytical concepts which have limited interpretative capacities, partly due to inherent shortcomings of theories. But theories and analytical concepts are also reductionist due to the incapacity of the social sciences (or natural sciences for that matter) to grasp all aspects of life. This shortcoming becomes very clear in Chapter three when I make a discourse analysis of 'love'. I argue that the woman interviewed uses a 'discourse on love' and so makes her partner 'a man without responsibility'. This may be read as a strict and rigorous discourse analysis which say something about how this woman use a discursive strategy to make a space for herself (which is the interpretation I argue for). But without further comment I think it is a quite reductionist analysis, which reduces her experience of love for her partner. With the theoretical and personal insights gained later in the interpretation process I may have been able to do more justice to her. That is – to have been able to do an analysis which doesn’t reduce what she says (about what she does out of love for her partner) so much to seem truthful to her reality. As the analysis develops throughout the dissertation and become more integrated (regarding, for example, structure and agency) it also become less reductionist. But even so I don’t think it’s possible to reduce 'love' into scientific and linguistic terms only.

Unfortunately, I think much social scientific work is too reductionist to be interesting. But such work must be reductionist, since it may not be possible to capture a social phenomenon in a more holistic sense. But how do we avoid analyses from becoming too reductionist to be interesting? And how do we legitimate our 'scientific' interpretations in relation to a 'lay' interpretation? Sometimes our work is legitimated on the grounds that the researcher should be able to make interpretations which are not mere ‘common-sense’ and which shed new light on phenomena (Alvesson & Sköldberg 1994:398 ff.). I agree with this but I think it is a view, which is based on a hermeneutic understanding of 'meaning' in that interpretations are seen as linguistically or culturally 'grounded'. The concept of 'interpretation' should be broader than what is permitted by such a definition of 'meaning'. I think there may be 'hidden' meanings, which are more experience-based and may not be very articulated. But social acts may also be interpreted as 'meaningful' and intentional without being directly related to 'systems of meaning' or to language. I propose a concept of 'meaning' which is more directly linked to inventive agency and which is relational. With such an approach to 'mean-

20 An example would be that functional anthropology has been criticised for ‘making’ cultures into static ahistorical entities.
21 In Chapter six I make another interpretation of Mhudi’s choices, which is closer to her own interpretation.
22 I still think we can theorise a subject like ‘love’ but we have to keep our reductionistic framework in mind in order to be as ‘truthful to reality’ as possible.
23 See Chapter six for a discussion of how this concept of ‘relational meaning’ is developed.
ing’ social acts may not only be interpreted as ‘texts’. The text must thus be used by the researcher to understand and interpret such ‘other’ ‘non’-linguistic and ‘non’-cultural relations and social acts in social life. When I interpret Mhudi to make a space for herself in relation to her partner and in relation to socio-cultural structures surrounding marriage, my interpretation is connected to her intention when acting through and on her situation. My interpretation is not only an interpretation of linguistic meaning but of what I consider her attempting to do in relation to concrete structural and relational constraints and opportunities – she makes a space for action. She is not independent of socio-cultural structures when doing so but she is inventive and does not simply follow (or break with) a given structure.

Self-reflexivity

I agree with Alvesson and Sköldberg (1994) who argue that reflexivity is a key aspect of good qualitative research. The social sciences should increase our understanding of society and be able to function as a resource in the quest for improving people’s lives. In feminist research the political dimension is often clearer than within ‘mainstream’ research. Feminist research is therefore sometimes accused of being ideologically based and biased. But the engagement in society and the wish to improve people’s lives could also be seen as an asset in the important activity of reflexivity. Just as any person who would like to make improvements in her personal life needs to make an honest assessment of herself and the situation – social scientists need to do the same in order to do good research. A wish to improve people’s lives may help in holding our feet on the ground and not thread too far away from reality in our analytical and theoretical work.

Reflexivity has been discussed from several angles in the social sciences: critical theory problematises the influence of ideology on theory, feminist theory has pointed out male bias in research and post-modern thinkers have discussed the narrative aspects of scientific representation, to name a few. But how should we be reflective about our own individual academic work? For feminist researchers the solution have sometimes been to make a ‘con-
fession’ in the beginning of their work as to their white middle-class back-
ground. – A solution which may not really add anything of analytical impor-
tance to the overall study. Sometimes personal accounts of, for example
fieldwork, have been presented in separate anthologies. The separation of
such work from the academic analysis probably reflect the strong dichotomi-
ization between the personal and scientific in the academic world. A di-
chotomization which in turn is a heritage from a positivistic scientific
framework. The far most difficult and frightening part of writing this disser-
tation has been to include a personal side to it. It is still not commonplace to
be self-reflective about academic work although the positivistic view of sci-
ence has been strongly criticised for its lack of reflexivity.

We all have hidden motivations for the choices we make as well as biases
and fears, which we bring into our studies. Hidden in the sense that they are
not reflected upon and articulated. To be self-reflexive is important in the
process of attempting to make truthful interpretations. How do we bring in
the personal without becoming navel-gazers? Is it possible to systematise
self-reflexivity in our work to a larger extent than we do today? Maybe we
should make it ‘compulsory’ to analyse our own analysis – why did the
analysis take this route and not another? I will attempt below to bring for-
ward some of my own motivations and biases which have guided the course
of analysis and which I have reflected on after the empirical analysis was
completed.

A theoretical journey partly guided by hidden motivations

Much of the work of interpretation is quite chaotic. The researcher attempts
to bring some order into a complex interview-material. I believe the course
of interpretation can take many different routes during this process, but
something drives the interpretation going along a certain route. This chaotic
process can seldom be detected in the final work and certainly not very often
in books on methodology. It appears as though the research-process is quite
a straightforward one. I believe the research-process is much more complex
and involves the whole personality of the researcher as well as the usual
theoretical and methodological considerations. With such a view it is impor-
tant to investigate what motivates the researcher to make one interpretation
and not another. When asking about motivations it is not only motivations of
a theoretical or methodological character, which are interesting but the hid-
den motivations for making certain choices along the way. Some of the
choices may have improved the study while others have hindered the re-
searcher from making interpretations as truthful as possible.

I believe this study is influenced by my fear of making the women studied
‘the other’ through a culturally relativistic analysis. I was afraid to make
lobola into a culturally specific institution not comparable to relations of
gender-related power in the West/North. I have also been hindered by ‘white
guilt’ in interpreting the material.

The first interpretations made in Chapter three were done as a discourse
analysis. I think this choice is heavily influenced by a wish not to make ‘cul-
tural interpretations’ but to be able to look at the specific and contextual
aspects. I did not want to interpret and reduce what the women were saying
about lobola into some cultural or other theoretical framework defining
whats ‘lobola is’. I also wanted to avoid reducing women’s agency into
structural explanations which I felt were commonplace in interpretations of
empirical material from a ‘cultural’ point of view. The views or behavior of
interviewees were, in my view, often explained in terms of ‘culture’ or sys-
tems of meaning. The interpreter just had to ‘unravel’ the hidden cultural
structures/systems of meaning. Thus, I focused on how the women were
talking about the institution. The how went hand in hand with a focus on
agency. This choice of focusing on agency (or of not focusing on culture)
and keeping strictly to the text without contextualising it very much made
the analysis, to some extent, both reductionist and moralistic. It might appear
as though the women are collaborating with patriarchy in their attempts to
make spaces for action. And it might appear as though they are free to make
any choice regardless of socio-cultural structure. This analysis makes the
women seem insufficient and may seem to place a responsibility on the indi-
vidual woman to change her life circumstances. I have already mentioned
how I have reduced Mhudi’s discussion on love through a discourse analy-
sis. It is interesting to note that I was very impressed by Mhudi when inter-
viewing her and that I liked her – even so, my analysis of her discussion to
some extent ‘objectified’ her in that it was not sensitive to her intentions.

The, somewhat, harsh character of the analysis may partly be explained
by the choice of discourse analysis. But why didn’t I see the harshness until
my supervisor Birgitta Holm softly pointed it out to me? I think the analysis
was also influenced by a fear on my part not to make ‘white guilt’ steer the
course of interpretation. And that same fear made me less emphatic to the
women both in my interpretation and in then not seeing what I had done.

But this focus on discourse and agency also laid the ground for a theoreti-
cal development throughout the dissertation which was able to combine
agency with structure, and avoided ending up as a structural explanatory
analysis. In Chapter four and five political realities and socio-cultural struc-
ture become integrated as contextual constraints and opportunities which the
women deal with in concrete social relations and situations. A relational
approach is thus developed as a way to do justice to the empirical material
and which also, to some extent, evade the trap of theoretical dichotomiza-
tions. In Chapter six I use new theoretical and personal insights to deepen
the analysis and through this contextualisation the previous more reduction-
ist analyses may be read in another light. Here my analysis comes closer to
the women’s own interpretations. I think this is due to the theoretical and
methodological opening gained through the course of analysis. But it is also due to a personal development, which I think can be described, as it has become more important to understand the women than to ‘uncover’ patriarchal structures and relations. It seems like my main interest has changed focus from a theoretical viewpoint to an empirical one.

At a crucial point of writing this dissertation my other supervisor Ron Eyerman had a major impact on the course of writing. I bring this up because it is very clear to me that if he had not expressed confidence in my capacity and helped me to see some good qualities in my work, this chapter and the last chapter would have taken a completely different form. My thinking would have been stifled by a fear of having to comply with some, not very constructive, ‘traditions’ in academic culture. Now, I mustered the courage to develop on the basis of the empirical analysis some lines of thinking on my own.

The many do’s and don’ts of academic culture could certainly be described as ‘hidden motivations’ and as structural constraints steering much interpretative work sometimes in a detrimental way.

The women interviewed

I have conducted interviews with 27 ANC women politicians/activists in national parliament, in one of the provincial legislatures and in one provincial branch of the ANC-Women’s League. 15 of the women interviewed are Africans with very differing backgrounds; some have lived in South Africa all their lives, some have lived in exile longer or shorter periods of time, some have a rural background and some have an urban, they have different mother tongues and religious backgrounds. Three of the women interviewed are Indian, four are ‘coloured’ and five are white. 18 of the interviews brought up the theme of lobola. 14 of those are cited and analysed in the dissertation.

27 See Appendix 1 for a more detailed description of method.
28 The interviews were conducted in 1996 and 1998. One of the interviewees was interviewed both in 1996 and 1998.
29 In Apartheid South Africa people were divided into racial groups: African, coloured (people of ‘mixed’ decent), Indian/Asian and white. These divisions are still widely used as is the term ‘black’, which was introduced by the liberation-movement to unite the oppressed groups.
30 Of the four interviews, which have not been used, one is with an Indian woman, one is with a ‘coloured’ and one is with an African. As I was interested in experiences and implicit meanings connected to lobola the interviews with women with no experience such as the ‘Indian’ and ‘coloured’ woman were not included. As regards the ‘African woman’ who was not included, the interview has been used indirectly and I think her views are represented in the final analysis. It would have been interesting to ask non-African women of their views on lobola in relation to what has been interpreted as a political discourse. But as lobola was not...
The analytical approach and its theoretical motivations

There is a problem in gender studies as well as in any other socio-cultural study that the researcher may be ‘blinded by theory’ when making an analysis of an empirical material. Instead of being as ‘open-minded’ as possible when conducting an analysis the researcher may find herself trying to ‘fit’ the material into theoretical and analytical frames. This is very difficult to avoid partly because there is always the pressure in an academic setting to ‘produce neat results’. In my view ‘theory’ should provide one ‘possibility’ among others in interpreting the empirical material. It should constitute one of many possible ways of making interpretations which do justice to the empirical material and which help in making interpretations which ‘say something more’ about social life – not, as is often the case, reduce the material so that it fails then to improve our understanding of some aspect social life.31

Another problem when working in another socio-cultural setting than your own is the ‘classic’ ethnocentric one. I don’t think ethnocentricity can be avoided but that it may be reduced through the researcher’s dealing consciously with the problem. I have already mentioned my sympathy with Modlesky’s model of ‘good feminist research’ as a dialogue (1989).32 This model also deals with the power-relation between (feminist) researcher and the (women) subjects of study and how such a power-relation may influence the interpretation of the interviews. Modlesky’s model of the researcher as a partly ‘informed’ subject and partly ‘blind’ puts the researcher on the same level as the interviewed woman as she also is perceived as both blind and informed. I have developed my analytic approach with the ‘problem of ethnocentrism’ in mind. Gender is a theoretical and analytical concept, which is extremely socio-culturally (and politically) informed.33 These political connotations and socio-cultural meanings may constitute major blind spots in the thinking of the feminist researcher. Blind spots, which are present when a Western researcher write about women from her own socio-cultural context but which may become more obvious and infused with a political power dimension when researching in a different socio-cultural context which has been colonised.

planned to be the only theme in the dissertation, I did not have enough material on lobola for such an analysis.

31 In this respect I sympathize with ‘grounded theory’ as developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as they emphasize the development of theory from empirical data as a contrast to approaches which analyse data from ‘a theoretical point of view’. My approach probably owes much to my ‘cultural anthropological’ background with its ‘traditional’ emphasis on ethnographic detail and sometimes reluctance of generalising as there may always be ‘a counter-example’ in empirical reality.

32 See A methodological journey.

33 This has been pointed out by, among others, anthropologists such as Collier and Yanagasiko (1987) and ‘post-colonial’ thinkers like Oyewumi (2002, 1997).
The analytic approach is thus theoretically, methodologically and subjectively informed in that it reflects the choices I have made – sometimes, but not always clearly formulated – when approaching and interpreting the material (which includes how the interviews have been conducted). The analytical concepts used have changed during the interpretation-process as my understanding of the interviews has developed in new directions. I will only define some central concepts below whereas others will be defined when they are introduced in the empirical analysis. The concepts have slightly various statuses in interpreting the material. Some concepts are more open and less defined than others. *Gender, gender-meanings and relations, gender related power and structure* are of this open character and are used as analytic tools and devises of orientation in interpreting the material. The analytic concepts *discourse* and *discursive strategy* are more defined and more directly generated from the analysis of the empirical material. These two concepts are thus more empirically informed whereas the concepts *gender, gender-meanings and relations and gender-related power and structure* are generated from theoretical concerns to a larger extent. The analytical concept, ‘agency’, is more ontological in character. ‘Agency’ has a basic definition of intentionality in people’s acting on and/or attempting to change their situation/relations. This intentionality is not seen as necessarily conscious or one-dimensional; it can encompass several dimensions.

The concepts are open in character so as not to reify the analysis in already fixed concepts and theory; rather they are guides pointing to certain aspects of social life which are of concern for the study. But the open and more defined concepts have been developed throughout the analysis. The presentation of the analytic approach and the concepts used in describing it is thus best seen as an attempt, in hindsight, to describe what has been done and to theoretically motivate it. In addition to the concepts presented below there are other concepts developed throughout the empirical analysis which will be defined in the course of analysis.

The first analytical concepts presented below, ‘the analytical trinity’, *gender, gender-meanings and relations and gender-related power* which are used in the interpretations of the interviews have been developed in the interpretation-process (see p. 19 ff). I have attempted to develop an approach which do not close the interpretation in relation to specific theories and/or my own socio-cultural frame of reference but which enable the analysis to be as open to the interview-material as possible. This approach does not presuppose a ‘blank’ interpreter with no frames of references but aims at enabling the interpreter to be flexible in approaching the material. The analytical terms are thus used as searching tools in approaching and interpreting the text. *The analytical trinity has been developed also as a consequence of an insight developed throughout the analysis that gender as a theoretical category should not be separated from gender-related power.* This insight came about as I started to look for ‘gender meanings’ connected to lobola in the
interview-text. I had a definite ‘cultural’ schooling coming from ‘cultural anthropology’ and a hermeneutic tradition. But I was at the same time very concerned about the power dimension, which I found difficult to include in a cultural and hermeneutic approach. As I have described before, my analysis has shifted from a discourse oriented/cultural approach to a more relational in which agency is centre-stage. In focusing on the concrete relations and contexts, to which the women relate, gender as socio-cultural meaning and as part of relations of gender-related power became easier to integrate.

My approach has come to stress that we need to ‘think power’ as soon as we ‘think gender’ in order not to loose important dimensions of the empirical material. But this doesn’t mean that there is a one-dimensional relationship but only that gender and gender-related power must be ‘held together’ analytically. This as gender is seen empirically as both a cultural construction (cultural meaning) and a social power relation. Thus, the first three analytical terms discussed – gender, gender-related power, and gender meanings and relations – should not be seen as analytically separate but as interrelated analytical terms focusing different dimensions of the empirical material.

Gender

Gender as a theoretical/analytical concept is well established in feminist theory but it is not always very clear how it is used (Butler 1990, 1993; Eriksson 1995; Lauretis 1987, Lundgren 1993, 2001; Scott 1987). One problem is whether the concept is used analytically or as an empirically predefined category (Nilsson 1996). This confusion is related to the, by now, thoroughly discussed problems of the sex/gender distinction, which informs the definition of gender in feminist theory. In my use of it as an analytical term I would like to avoid closing it beforehand by connecting it to some established predefined definition of gender as ‘a social and cultural construction of biological sex’. This type of definition presupposes sex to be the base on which gender is built and such a definition closes sex/gender to a dichotomous definition of sex and gender as women or men. The dichotomization is already made when ‘rooting’ gender in two different and dichotomous biologically defined bodies. My perspective is that the problem of the definition of the sex/gender distinction is that it is based on a ‘Western folkmodel’ of

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34 See A methodological journey and A theoretical journey partly guided by ‘hidden motivations’.

It is my view that the development of ‘gender studies’ as a field for studying ‘the construction of gender’ may have had part in such a separation of the concepts gender and power. I also think that a ‘Western’ cultural conception of gender as based in biology and the body has part in such a separation of the concepts. See Chapter six for a further discussion on the sex/gender distinction.
what ‘sex’ is.35 But post-modern feminist theory, which has criticised the ‘rooting’ of gender in biological sex, seem to a large extent dependent on a dichotomous definition of gender as ‘traditional’ feminist theory. This dependence on a dichotomous definition of gender could be seen as a logical outcome of the dependence of this critique on the analytical ‘cutting loose of the body’ from definitions of gender. The cutting loose of the body from analytical definitions of gender will reproduce gender as dichotomous as the definition of sex/gender is socio-culturally connected to the dichotomously defined body in Western societies and the analytical category cannot be cut loose and defined apart from its socio-cultural context.36

Another problem in the sex/gender definition, which can also be detected to problems in feminist theory in general, is if gender should be seen as an over-contextual/universal category or as determined by context and as situational. By making a clear distinction between sex and gender and by defining sex as biology and beyond socio-cultural relations gender easily becomes an over-contextual analytical category with definable ‘contents’ even if the contents are seen as socio-culturally constructed: masculinity is rationality, femininity is emotionality etc. With the above definition of gender as a socio-cultural construction of sex and the distinction made between sex and gender, gender can also be analysed as contextual ‘content’; different organisations may, for instance, be analysed as having different definitions of masculinity and femininity. The extreme end of the contextualisation of gender in feminist theory is the post-modern feminist theories in which the subject and subjectivity is seen as fluid, fragmented and at the same time determined by the subjects positions in relation to different discourses.37

In order to avoid ‘rooting’ gender as part of the traditional sex/gender distinction in feminist theory with its base dichotomous biological definition of sex (Lundgren 1993), I will use gender as an ‘open’ analytical concept without a predefinition. This is also to avoid related problems with predefinitions of gender as purely positional in local contexts or in discursive positions or as an over-contextual category. There is one premise for being able to use ‘gender’ as an open analytical term and that is that there is a socio-cultural categorisation and distinction made between men and women in the society studied. But not that this distinction is founded in biology (although to some extent dependent on the socio-cultural use of anatomical differences in mak-

35 For a discussion on this ‘Western folk-model’ see Collier and Yanagisako (1987) and Errington (1990).
36 Judith Butler’s (1987) discussion on transvestites as a ‘gender-revolutionary’ act is an example of this dependence on defining subversive acts in terms of ‘cross gendering’. And to cross gender you have to cross something, which is analytically and dichotomously defined to start with. This dichotomously defined framework of gender and gender-crossing do not permit a more subtle and complex analysis of what ‘resistance’, ‘subversive acts’ and ‘revolution’ could entail apart from ‘cross gendering’.
37 For a discussion on post-modern feminist theory see for example Walby 1990 and Tong 1993.
ing a distinction between two socio-cultural categories of people) and/or dichotomously essentialized into two different kinds of beings. This premise also includes an understanding of gender as an important part of the socio-cultural organisation of society.38

By keeping gender an open analytical term the construction of gender may be analysed in relation to different socio-cultural contexts and not presupposed. - Is a gender-distinction made and how is it made in relation to a particular context? Is gender dichotomised and how is it dichotomised?

Gender- meanings and relations

This analytical term has been developed by me in order not to confine gender relations to either cultural meaning or social relations but to open up the scope of interpretation. Social science has had a tendency to focus either culture or social structure as the ‘base’ or as more important than the other in understanding and/or explaining culture/society (Sewell 1992).39 Theoretically, my use of the concept gender- meanings and relations is based on the view that social relations and cultural meanings should not be separated from each other either analytically or empirically but should be studied as interrelated.40

The analytical concept gender focuses on the socio-cultural construction and organisation of difference and distinction-making between people and categories as two genders. Gender- meanings and relations focus collective/structural cultural meanings and social relations as well as meanings and relations created by the individual actor in her specific context. As an example there is an interpretation of women creating spaces for action in Chapter three. When they create a space for action in relation to, for example, their partners they create new relations and meanings, but they don’t do that independently from structural gender- meanings and relations.

38 This does not mean that I propose gender to be central to the socio-cultural organisation of all societies but that that it seems unquestionably central to the socio-cultural organisation of South African societies.
39 As an example there has (previously) been a focus in American anthropology on culture and in English anthropology on social structure. This cleavage is also evident in feminist theory in which socio-economic explanations and understandings of women’s oppression and gender relations have dominated some schools of thought whereas others have focused on cultural meanings.
I include the post-structuralist focus on language as constituting the subject in ‘culture’ even though language is even narrower than the focus on ‘culture’ when trying to understand socio-cultural relations.
40 For the purpose of this study it is possible to include economical relations in the concept.
Gender-related power

Gender-related power as an analytical concept has been developed by me as a means to approach empirical relations of gender-related power in a more flexible way than what I think some analytical approaches do which builds on a more rigid theoretical conceptualisation of the relationship between gender and power. I would like to exemplify such theoretical approaches to gender which may lead an empirical analysis to a too rigid approach to the relationship between gender and power. One way to describe an analytical approach developed by feminist theoretical perspectives could be summarised as, as a ‘gender and power’ or a ‘gender-power’ approach. This description stresses that gender and power are seen as two separate analytical entities or as a unity. An example of such an approach would be a ‘doing gender’ approach in which the construction of ‘difference’/gender is put centre-stage and social power-relations seem to become a byproduct of the creation of difference (Chafetz 2000; Hill Collins et. al 1995). Power explains difference and difference explains power. Another example would be Radical feminism and Marxist feminism. Such approaches put gender-inequality centre-stage and as a subject for explanation. Gender inequality, which may be used on a structural level to describe inequality between the sexes in that men as a group is privileged to women as a group, easily makes gender-relations on an individual level into an one-dimensional one in which women are oppressed by men. The complexity of gender-relations are thus reduced into a structural unequal one on the level of the actor. But I would also include some ‘discursive’ and/or cultural gender-analysis in this category of a one-dimensional relationship between gender and power. Discursive analyses which equate ‘the representation of gender’ as (the only) power dimension of gender. An example of such an analysis would be to analyse a certain representation of ‘femininity’ as inherently oppressive or as resistance. If that is the only analysis of the power dimension of gender it does not take social power relations into account and thus makes the relationship between gender and power a one-dimensional one. The analytical concept gender-related power opens up the possibilities of analysing gender and power as interrelated in complex ways. It seems a much more flexible term in approaching this complex field of study. Gender-related power is premised on the theoretical approach that the gender distinction and gender-meanings and relations and discourses on specific subjects are empirically

41 See Chapter six for a discussion on the shortcomings of a ‘doing gender’ theoretical approach.
42 See Walby 1997 (1990) for a discussion on differences in the conceptualisation of ‘inequality’ and patriarchy in different traditions of feminist thought.
43 See, for example Walby 1997(1990) for a description of ‘deconstructionist’ and ‘discourse-oriented’ feminist analysis.
interrelated with socio-cultural power relations. South-Africa is a patriarchal society in that men as a group are socio-culturally privileged compared to women as a group. But how these relations of gender-related power work in specific contexts is a complex issue and must be studied with a flexible approach. As with gender-meanings and relations, gender-related power does not give, a priori, primacy to cultural, social or economic theories in understanding or explaining relations of gender-related power.

Also, gender-related power is closely interrelated with gender-meanings and relations and to discourses on specific subjects at the same time focuses on the power dimension.

Discourse and discursive strategy

Discourse is used as an analytical category to understand, what seems to be more specific and demarcated definitions of subjects or socio-cultural relations than what is included in gender-meanings and relations. The concept is more focused on the level of language: what is the meaning of – or definition given to a certain subject by the interviewed person or in academic schools of thought. Gender-meanings and relations is a concept used to analyse what is seen as more complex empirical relations which are historically more integrated in a broader socio-cultural context. The concepts should not be seen as separate empirically – a certain discourse on gender, such as a liberal political discourse on gender equality, might, for instance, become an integrated in a broader socio-cultural context and not only remain a political discourse.

On the empirical level of the actor discourse is seen as part of socio-cultural relations. The actor is seen as using and creating discourses on certain subjects actively and with intentions - but the concept is used analytically to understand meanings conveyed on a certain subject.

I have developed the analytical concept discursive strategy in order to include the actor in the discourse analysis. The concept also includes how meaning is constructed (not only through specific discourses but also

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44 See Chapter six for a discussion on as to why gender-related power may not be separated from gender. In my view much gender research is based on such a separation and thus has to make a more dichotomised analysis of the interrelationship between gender and power as the concepts are analytically separated from the start.

45 Albie Sachs has expressed this as patriarchy is the only true non-racial institution in South Africa. I find the term ‘patriarchy’ useful in the sense that it describes an unequal relationship between men and women on a ‘structural’ level and I thus agree with Walby (1990) that it still is a useful term.

46 Discourse is used widely (and diversely) by many different scholars (for example see Fairclough 1995; Foucault 1972, 1987, 1993; Laclau 1993). My use of the concepts discourse and discursive strategy does not build on any particular theoretical perspective but have been developed during the course of analysis and is thus used analytically to capture some aspects of the empirical material rather than reflecting theoretical concerns. The uses of the concepts, of course, have theoretical implications some of which will be discussed in Chapter six.
through the ways in which language is used more generally to create meaning) and for what purpose. It includes the actor as part of socio-cultural meanings and relations, which he/she relates to, engage in and attempts to change through using discursive strategies. Central to this concept is the theoretical view that language is not only a system of meaning and/or discourses but can be used to create meaning by actors with specific, more or less explicit, intentions. Language and discourse are analysed as socio-cultural acts. Furthermore, those discursive acts are interpreted in relation to political and socio-cultural contexts as well as in relation to particular situations and personal relations.

My development of the analytical concepts of ‘discourse’ and ‘discursive strategy’ mirrors a theoretical shift in emphasis, which has developed in the interpretation-process. I was first focusing on the level of discourse, which was in line with my original approach to gender as ‘cultural meaning’. I intended to study the meaning of the text in light of different contexts for interpretation such as ethnographic material on what is the meaning of ‘lobola’ and political discourses on what is ‘women’s emancipation’. In the course of my interpretations I understood the women as actively creating meaning. Initially I interpreted this creation of meaning merely on the level of ‘discourse’; the discursive strategies were interpreted as creating discursive spaces on the level of language. The interpretation developed from there to see the actor as intending to create cognitive and normative spaces ‘in real life’, in relation to other specific actors and in relation to broader contexts as well in order to be able to act more freely and more creatively. ‘Discourse’ was analytically connected to socio-cultural practice. In Chapter three this shift in emphasis of the analytical focus and the uses of the concepts ‘discourse’ and ‘discursive strategy’ becomes evident.

Actor and structure

“‘Structure’ is one of the most important, elusive, and undertheorized concepts in the social sciences” (Sewell 1992:1).

In the article A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation, William H. Sewell, Jr. points attempts to “develop a theory of structure that restores human agency to social actors, builds the possibility of change into the concept of structure, and overcomes the divide between semiotic and materialist visions of structure”(ibid.).47 Sewell’s discussion is very illumi-

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47 As Sewell points out there are several meanings of ‘structure’ in the social sciences. In addition to the ‘hard materialist’ and cultural views, which Sewell discusses, there are, for instance, institutional and ecological perspectives. For a discussion on four different concepts of social structure see Porpora (1989). See also Giddens (1984) for a discussion on structure.
nating in regard to the problems encountered in this dissertation as I have attempted to combine a cultural and social relational approach in the interpretation of the empirical material as well as avoiding an analysis which reduces human agency to ‘structure’. I also find his discussion on ‘structure’ as a metonymic device in social scientific discourse illuminating:

Structure operates in social scientific discourse as a powerful metonymic device, identifying some part of a complex social reality as explaining the whole. It is a word to conjure with in the social sciences. In fact, ‘structure’ is a less a precise concept than a kind of founding or epistemic metaphor of social scientific – and scientific – discourse. For this reason, no formal definition can succeed in fixing the term’s meaning: the metaphor of structure continues its essential if somewhat mysterious work in the constitution of social scientific knowledge despite theorists’ definitional efforts (ibid: 2).

Sewell do think that we need the concept of ‘structure’ in the social sciences and he attempts to develop an approach which combines semiotic and materialist visions of structure. Although Sewell’s theoretical model has not been used in the interpretation of the empirical material his problematisation of structure and agency could be said to mirror an attempt made in this dissertation not to lose agency in a structural (either cultural or social) analysis. Sewell’s article made me more conscious about the different traditions of anthropology and sociology, which have influenced my thinking, and how the analysis of agency and structure became problematic. He discusses the very different meanings attributed to ‘structure’ traditionally associated with these theoretical fields:

The term structure is used in apparently contradictory senses in different social scientific discourses, particularly in sociology and anthropology. Sociologists typically contrast ‘structure’ to ‘culture’. Structure, in normal sociological usage, is thought of as ‘hard’ or ‘material’ and therefore as primary and determining, whereas culture is regarded as ‘soft’ or ‘mental’ and therefore as secondary or derived. By contrast, semiotically inclined social scientists, most particularly anthropologists, regard culture as the preeminent site of structure. In typical anthropological usage, the term structure is assumed to refer to the realm of culture, except when it is modified by the adjective ‘social’ (ibid: 3).

In this study, the actor is seen as actively engaged in and relating to different socio-cultural meanings and relations of broader and more particular con-

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48 Sewell’s view of an opposition between anthropological and sociological discourses on ‘structure’ could be criticized especially as there is a growing field of cultural studies within sociology. Sewell’s point is relevant though for my own experience of different ‘traditions’in anthropology and sociology and thus seems relevant in understanding how my analysis has developed in order to combine or integrate culture and social relations.
texts, to discourses on particular subjects as well as to concrete other actors in specific contexts. The interaction is seen as intentional even though intentions are not analysed as necessarily conscious or explicit (cf. Ortner 1989). This means that the actor is never interpreted as a reflection of a socio-cultural structure or discourse but as always actively engaged in, interpreting and acting on, specific situations and contexts. Furthermore, the actor is seen as relating to concrete situations and broader contexts at the same time and thus, cannot be reduced analytically as every situation is seen as multidimensional.

Chafetz (2000) discusses the concept of ‘agency’ in sociological feminist thought and disagrees with a development in which ‘agency’ “is used almost mystically” (ibid:614). She sees this development as a result of feminist scholars’s effort not to depict women as merely as passive victims of male dominance. In Chafetz’ view this conceptualisation of agency risks to ignore the actual structural constraints women experience in a male dominated society. In order not to disconnect ‘agency’ from actual structural constraints she propose a conceptualisation of agency which is structurally informed: “I conceptualize agency as the opportunity to make choices among alternatives that are perceived as variably rewarding and that do not incur heavy penalties. Making the choice to relinquish one’s purse rather than die does not demonstrate ‘agency’ in a sociologically meaningful manner. Further, I conceptualize the term as a variable, not as an assumed constant. /.../ the extent to which one can exercise agency is socially structured” (ibid:614, 615). I agree with Chafetz that an emphasis on agency may ignore structural constraints and may even ‘romantisize’ women’s agency and their possible choices. I don’t think, however, that this is a problem which is solved with Chafetz conceptualisation of agency. Both Chafetz’ concept of agency and the concepts of agency she criticizes, in my view, are dependent on a dichotomized view of agency and structure in which Chafetz’ conceptualisation of agency seems to be structurally defined and loose the intentionality of the actor. The concepts of agency which she criticizes, on the other hand, seems devoid of theoretical links to structural relations. My concept of agency differs from both these perspectives in that an important part of ‘agency’ is intentionality but I also link agency conceptually to structural constraints and opportunities, which cannot be ignored when analysing the choices of the agent. In my conceptualisation both agency and structure are variable in that there are variable structural opportunities and constraints that agents encounter (due to, for instance, race and gender positions of the actors) but these may, to some extent be perceived and interpreted differently by different agents. Furthermore, agents may make individual choices in how to relate to structural opportunities and constraints.

In my analytical use of the concepts ‘actor’ and ‘structure’ it was first used in order to understand how the women conceptualised meanings of lobola on a discursive level. ‘Actor’ and ‘structure’ were concepts, which
seemed to clarify the creation of and uses of certain discourses on lobola as well as what later became interpreted as discursive strategies. The concepts were used to interpret if ‘actors’ were relevant how the women were defining lobola - in their definition of the meaning of lobola - or if lobola was described in structural terms as devoid of actors.

In later stages of the analysis when my own interpretation of the interview-texts has developed from analysing them primarily at a level of discourse into interpreting the text as part of a socio-cultural act; the women interviewed were conceptualised by me as ‘actors’. I have attempted to interpret ‘what the women do’ without falling into the trap of interpreting them as purely autonomous individuals or as determined by cultural or social structures. I see the women actively relating to socio-cultural structures and attempt to analyse how they do it. It has been important to relate their ‘doing’ to socio-cultural contexts but at the same time keep the focus on the interview-text – not to use the socio-cultural contexts as ‘structural explanations’ of the text and the interpretations of the ‘doings’ of the woman interviewed. It is in this process that the analytical concept of ‘gender- meanings and relations’ was developed, in order to try to conceptualise the importance of the process and creative aspects of what the women were doing. This processual conceptualisation in turn have led to development i Chapter six of an approach which attempt not to dichotomize actor and structure. It is important to point out that this perspective includes socio-cultural ‘structure’ as an important part of culture and society. My inclusion of an analytical and theoretical processual perspective does not mean that I see socio-cultural structure in relativistic terms either as equally binding/nonbinding for actors in different socio-cultural contexts nor as equally binding/nonbinding in individual contexts. I do take the perspective that socio-cultural structure, in a very general sense, might be said to determine the life courses of individuals to a larger extent in ‘traditional’ small scale societies whereas ‘modernity’ has opened up the scope for agency in terms of alternative ways of living and acting. Modernity do open up the possibilities for reflexive identities (cf. Giddens 1994, Karlsson 1997). This perspective is on a very general level though. Traditional small scale societies vary considerably in how strictly enforced certain options of life are for individuals both in relation to socio-cultural structure and in relation to individual life contexts and thus their scope for agency and choice. But also in ‘modern’ large scale societies, at the level of the individual, life choices and scope for agency might be very restricted by socio-cultural structure and individual life contexts.

Furthermore, I would like to point out that this general statement on the importance of socio-cultural structure for the scope of agency available for the individual to act should not be conflated with value judgements on individualistic ideologies or socio-cultural meanings of ‘the individual’ in ‘Western societies’ as necessarily positive or bringers of happiness and freedom.
To open up the scope for agency in relation to structural constraints of gender related power is seen as necessary though, and as an important part of feminist theory and feminist politics. Maybe a certain individualism must be part of such a feminist conceptualisation but not necessarily individualism(s) as developed in the West/North.

I have interpreted the empirical material with an ‘open’ approach to ‘structure’ in that the term has been used as a ‘searching device’ to discern cultural meaning as well as in interpreting which social relations the women relate to as ‘agents’. Furthermore, I have used the concept analytically in two different ways as mentioned above. The first is a textual semiotic analysis of discursive ‘content’ as ‘structure’ and the other is to use ‘structure’ as an analytic device to understand what the women relate to in acting on their personal situation or politically. An example of using the concept on the first semiotic level would be to interpret a certain discourse on lobola as very structural in its formulation of ‘what lobola is’. This is done in Chapter three when I interpret ‘the family related discourse on lobola’ as structural in its formulation of ‘what lobola is’ as it leaves agency out. Lobola is formulated as having a very specified meaning regardless of context or agency. On the other hand I have interpreted ‘the economic discourse on lobola’ as including agency as it include male subjects who abuse the ‘true meaning of lobola’ and treat women as objects. In this interpretation it is the meaning attributed to lobola, which is analysed semiotically in terms of agency and structure. It is thus a semiotic interpretation of how the ‘content’ of certain discourses on lobola are formulated in terms of agency and structure.

The second level of how I use the analytical concept of ‘structure’ is when I interpret the interviewed women as ‘agents’. Here ‘structure’ is interpreted from a relational point of view – which social relations are the women relating to when acting on their situation? I bring in socio-cultural and political contexts which are interpreted in relation to the women’s agency and interpreted as structurally related opportunities and constraints which the women relate to when, for example, attempting to create a space for action. This interpretation develops throughout the dissertation from a very agency-oriented approach to one which is more integrated with a structural approach which also attempts to evade the dichotomy of culture/social relations. Both levels of interpreting ‘structure’ are thus taking the interview-text as its primary starting point for interpreting ‘structure’. ‘Structure’ is not used as a theoretically derived frame to explain the women’s doing neither is this dissertation analysing socio-cultural structures. But ‘structure’

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49 See, for example, Burns et. al. (1985) and Giddens (1984) for a view on human beings as both constrained and enabled by social structure as well as producing structure in the course of their interactions. (Although I think that Giddens tend to dichotomise actor and structure and lose sight of interaction.)

50 See Chapter six for a discussion on how I have attempted to transcend the discussed dichotomies.
is perceived as a ‘context’ for interpreting the women’s doing. It is through the women’s talking about lobola that I interpret certain ‘structural’ relations, which they relate to.
Chapter 2 – Background

Introduction

This chapter will serve to contextualise the empirical analysis with respect to two dimensions. The first is a brief historical overview of women’s struggle in South Africa and women’s participation in the liberation struggle and, to some extent, in ANC-politics after the 1994 elections. This part will also comment on different discourses on gender in the ‘women’s movement’, the liberation movement and the ANC. I will specifically discuss the issue of ‘motherism’ in the liberation movement as I think this discussion is related to the one on lobola.51

In the second part of the chapter I will discuss different academic discourses on bridewealth/lobola. This part of the chapter serves to introduce the reader to some perspectives on the institution but also how these perspectives are problematic in several ways. Even though the academic discourses on lobola are problematic they may serve as sources in interpreting the meaning of lobola expressed by the women interviewed.52

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51 Women’s role as mothers played a central part in the institution of lobola. I will not analyze how these two discussions are related but I believe that the discussion of ‘motherism’ may serve as an important context for the reader to understand the interpretations made of the discussions about lobola.

Since this chapter only presents a brief historical overview of women in the liberation movement there will not be a presentation of the growing research on gender in South Africa. For overviews of gender research in and of Africa, and South Africa in particular, see Mama (1996) and Lewis (2003).

52 I have not used the academic discourses on lobola to define lobola and then interpret the women’s discourses on lobola in relation to such a definition. My analysis, on the contrary, starts out from the women’s definitions and expressed meanings, and academic discourses are only used when they seem to help in the interpretation of what the women say – when they help advancing our understanding of the interview text.
Women in the struggle for liberation

A brief historical overview

In 1913, when the Bantu Women’s League was launched within the ANC, politics was a male domain and women were confined to organise entertainment and food for the ANC-conferences. Despite this social order of gender relations, women broke into politics forcefully to protest against passlaws in the very beginning of ANC’s history. African women fought a long battle to prevent the planned expansion of the passlaws to include women. Their manifestations were successful and the government did not manage to implement passlaws for women for forty years. An argument used by both men and women to resist passes for women was *women’s role and nature as mothers and wives* which would make passes more improper for them than for men.

Already in the 1930’s several important lines of thought had been developed in the Bantu Women’s League. Women should, for example, *work side by side with men in the struggle against oppressive racial structures*. The goal was to organise as a group to deal with issues affecting women (Walker 1982:279). This emphasis on women as mothers and wives has been connected to a *scepticism of feminism*, which was dismissed with arguments like: oppression of women cannot be dealt with separately from the colonial and national oppression of which both men and women are victims. Colonialism and racism were seen as the sources of women’s oppression and it was thought that their abolition automatically would lead to women’s liberation (Driver 1992). It should be noted though, that the women in South Africa’s “foremost anti-apartheid organisation had, since the fifties, defined distinct goals and agendas for themselves (Lewis 2003)”.

The ANC-Women’s League (ANCWL) was established in 1943, the same year women were granted full membership status within the ANC. Walker (1991 (1982)) sees this as a significant event:

>The establishment of the ANCWL in 1943, was in retrospect, a significant event. A body aiming to represent the interests of the majority of South African women had been set up within the premier African political organisation – the ANC had finally come to incorporate women, one half of the people it claimed to represent, into its political frame of reference. A structure was created whereby African women could be channeled into the national liberation movement on a footing that was, at least theoretically, equal to that of men (ibid: 90).

Yvonne Muthien has criticised a view of African women as peripheral to the national liberation struggle (1993). “In her detailed study of women’s or-
ganisations and resistance from the forties to the sixties, she shows that black women, through their involvement in communal struggles and organisations, played pivotal roles in building the nation-wide anti-apartheid resistance which male leaders are usually given credit for” (Lewis 2003).

In 1954 the Federation of South African Women (FSAW) was founded within the ambit of the Congress Alliance, which was an alliance between black nationalists, trade unionists and white radicals and which came together in the early 1950’s under the leadership of the ANC. At the inaugural conference of the FSAW a ‘Women’s Charter’ was adopted which spelled out the aims of the organisation. It was an organisation which was primarily concerned with fighting against oppression by the white supremacist government; the document stated that women were oppressed, in society at large by the government but also within the liberation-movement (Walker 1991 (1982):153 ff.). One of its concluding remarks was: “freedom cannot be won for any one section of the people as a whole as long as we women are in bondage” (ibid.:157). Shortly after the inauguration of the organisation, two women who had a central role in its formation were banned and the organisation had problems to get off the ground. But the FSAW came to play a leading role in the massive women’s protests against the passlaws in the 1950’s which culminated with a major demonstration in Pretoria in 1956 in which an estimated 6 000-20 000 women participated. This was one of the largest and most successful manifestations against the government at the time.

Pass-laws were recognised by the Congress Alliance as a key structure in the apartheid state, which made women’s actions a central concern for the overall liberation movement. The ANC recognised the importance of the protests for the overall movement:

Clearly the women are in the frontrank of the battle now opening. But the struggle is not one for women alone … By themselves the women can perhaps resist the latest attacks. But their resistance would be stronger and lead more surely to victory if the menfolk fight with them… This must be a joint campaign of men and women. Whose aim is to end the pass system and the government which upholds it.53

But the ANC failed to act on the women’s campaigns and make them a broader concern in political practise (Walker 1991(1982):190). The political achievement of the FSAW was treated ambivalently by the Congress Alliance, while it enhanced the status of the FSAW within the alliance it was also met by resistance as this statement from FSAW indicates:

Many men who are politically active and progressive in outlook still follow the tradition that women should take no part in politics and a great resentment exists towards women who seek independent activities or even express independent opinions. This prejudice is so strong that even when many of those in leading positions in the ANC appear to be co-operating with the Federation, it is sometimes difficult to avoid the conclusion that they would prefer to hinder the work of the Federation and to withdraw their own womenfolk from activities.\(^54\)

Although there were ambivalent reactions to the success of the women’s political activities there was also spontaneous respect by men. An example was how the women were treated on the day of the major demonstration in Pretoria in 1956 as recorded by Helen Joseph:

> At the bus ranks there were many men waiting for transport home after the day’s work, for it was late. But when they saw the women they fell back, saying ‘Let the women go first’. It was yet another tribute.\(^55\)

The political repression in South Africa was increasing in the 1960’s after the Sharpville shootings on the 21\(^{st}\) of March 1960, when sixty nine people were shot dead after the police opened fire on unarmed demonstrators. The government declared a state of emergency and hundreds of political leaders were detained throughout the country. The ANC and PAC (Pan African Congress) were driven underground and in 1961 both ANC and PAC established military wings. An époque of peaceful demonstrations and negotiations ended.

These events were devastating for the FSAW even though the organisation was not banned. But many of its leaders were banned, which crippled the organisation and it slowly collapsed. The 1\(^{st}\) of February 1963, the day on which it became compulsory for all African women to carry reference books, can be taken perhaps as a symbolic date for the ending of the FSAW (ibid:274).

After the ANC was banned, the ANCWL stagnated as well. Political opposition in the 1970’s was dominated by the Black Consciousness Movement which emphasised solidarity across gender lines in the face of severe state repression.

1980’s and 1990’s

“It was from the start of the eighties that specific attention to gender oppression became increasingly important. Organisations like the Natal Organisa-


\(^{55}\) Cited in Walker (1991 (1982):197). Helen Joseph was a white prominent political activist in the anti-apartheid movement and a leader in the FSAW.
tion of Women, the United Women’s Congress, the Federation of Transvaal Women and other UDF-aligned women’s organisations offered structures for working women, students and activists to play a more active and outspoken roles in the anti-apartheid politics that began to succeed Black Consciousness activism and philosophy” (Lewis 2003).

From the late 1980’s and the beginning of the 1990’s, feminist issues and demands of a more gender sensitive politics gained support to an extent that was not possible before (Seideman 1993:312; Kadalie 1992:19; Bazzili 1991). The ANCWL was relaunched inside South Africa in 1990 and formulated a gender based politics already from the start. ANC-women have been successful on many issues, for example, the question of free abortion, a very controversial issue. Another victory won was the decision to have thirty percent women on the election list for parliament in the first national elections.

When the ANCWL was unbanned and held its constituting meeting, one of the returning exiles was surprised at the degree to which ordinary delegates raised feminist issues – from questions about the gender segregated labour market and the women’s double work to sexual harassment and male attitudes within the organisation (Seideman 1993:312).

There were two key events which helped to put women’s issues on the national political agenda during this time; the Malibongwe conference held in Amsterdam in 1990 and the formation of a Women’s Charter of equality in the early nineties (Lewis 2003). The Malibongwe conference united women activists from South Africa with those in exile and was organised and hosted by the ANC-women’s section and the Dutch Anti-Apartheid Movement. The conference aimed at “developing resolutions, policy-making and political structures that would shape South Africa’s transformation in the early nineties” (ibid.). The Women’s National Coalition (WNC), which was the organisation behind the ‘Women’s Charter’, was formed in 1992. It was comprised of regional coalitions as well as a large number of organisations as diverse as women’s church groups, rape crisis groups and political parties. “The primary objective of this coalition was to monitor and ensure women’s equality in the constitutional dispensation being negotiated by different parties and organisations at the time. Key to this was the drawing up of a Women’s Charter /…/ (Lewis 2003). Amanda Kemp, Noziswe Madala, Asha Moodley and Elaine Salo have described the mobilisation of such diverse organisations into the WNC as follows:

The negotiation of constitutional guidelines, the cessation of armed struggle, and the emergence of principles of representation among groups previously

56 I use the term feminist here to refer to an explicit questioning of relations of gender-related power.
57 Following a successful campaign from ANC women and others there is now a law supporting free abortion in South Africa.
identified as absolute enemies or betrayers of the liberation struggle supplied a model and a justification for the formation of a forum through which women who harboured deep animosities could also identify common concerns. In creating the WNC, all of the major women’s organizations allowed something larger and more representative to command an authority that none of them could achieve alone, making the WNC something that they could not avoid affiliating to as well as something that could not be controlled by any one organization (1995:151 cited in Lewis 2003).

“The statement of the National Executive Committee of the African National Congress on the emancipation of women in South Africa’ of 2 May 1990 has been seen as pathbreaking in regard to the advancement of women’s issues in relation to national politics (Walker 1991 (1982): xv). The oppression of women is seen here as having to be addressed in its own right: "The experience of other societies has shown that the emancipation of women is not a by-product of a struggle for democracy, national liberation or socialism. It has to be addressed in its own right within our organisation, the mass democratic movement and in the society as a whole". 58 This articulation of a gender analysis and gender justice by the ANC – as a highly influential organisation on a road towards democracy was often taken up and reflected in teaching and research (Lewis 2003).

The struggle against women’s oppression was now put on the same level as the struggle against racial oppression in official ANC-policy. In the constitutional guidelines, women’s oppression was seen as “even more ancient (than) and as pervasive as racism” (Driver 1992). This view was also expressed in the often quoted goal of the anti-apartheid movement which shifted from an earlier version, ”a non racial, democratic South Africa”, to ”a non racial, democratic, non sexist South Africa” (Seideman 1993:304).

Many of the prominent leaders in the WNC and other gender activists were absorbed into parliament after the 1994 elections. And it is within national politics that earlier gender debates and feminist leaders have come to play an important role (Lewis 2003). A national machinery for safe-guarding gender equality has been established with a Commission on Gender Equality, an Office of the status of Women in the office of the Vice President and a Parliamentary committee on the status of women. A Women’s Budget has also been produced for a number of years which focuses on the areas in which policy need to address the specific needs of women. Furthermore, regional Gender Desks have been established in some regions, as well as regional Gender Commissions (Meintjes 1997:15). There has also been attempts at mainstreaming gender justice within parliamentary politics; for example parliamentary committees comprise different political parties and both women and men, and indicate efforts to emphasize gender as cross-

cutting political concern, rather than to sideline women’s issues as the exclusive responsibility of women MP’s (Lewis 2003).\(^{59}\) Furthermore, each department and ministry “needs to address the implications of its budgets and programmes on the quality of life of women (ibid).”\(^{60}\)

The issue of ‘motherism’

The discourses on gender relations of the ANC and the ANCWL have changed since the organisation was launched in the beginning of the 20th century. Until the 1950’s and even later, women were defined and described as mothers and wives by the ANC (Walker 1992:264). Winnie Mandela has expressed this view \(^{61}\): ”women do need to meet as women” (but only) ”to meet as mothers concerned about our children” (Russel 1989:341).

Another example is Nelson Mandela words when released from prison: “I pay tribute to the mothers and wives of our nation. You are the rock and hard foundation of our struggle. Apartheid has inflicted more pain on you than on anyone else” (Russel 1989:352).

Julia Wells introduced the term ‘motherism’ in the article *The rise and fall of motherism as a force in black women’s resistance movements* in 1991. Wells discussed ‘motherism’ as a rather conservative way of uniting women and defined it as ‘a women’s politics of resistance [which] affirms obligations traditionally assigned to women and calls on the community to respect them’.\(^{62}\) In, *We now demand!* *The history of women’s resistance to pass laws in South Africa*, published 1993, she commented on what has been perceived by feminist scholars as a paradox between black women’s bold and brave protests against pass-laws and a ‘conservative’ motivation for acting:

> On the other hand, under closer scrutiny, a powerful conservative element emerges as the driving force of these movements. While the women effectively resisted oppression from a ruthless coercive state, they were at the

\(^{59}\) MP = Member of Parliament.

\(^{60}\) A study of how the Women’s budget has contributed to such an development is Debbie Budlender’s *The political economy of women’s budgets in the south* (2000)

\(^{61}\) Wells invented the term ‘motherism’ in the article *The rise and fall of motherism as a force in black women’s resistance movements* 1991.

\(^{62}\) Wells is citing Sara Ruddick ‘Maternal peace politics and women’s resistance: the example of Argentine and Chile’ in Barnard Occasional Papers on Women’s Issues, *iv*, 1 (1989). Hassim also discuss ‘motherhood’ as a disempowering political symbol in Southern Africa ‘a discourse in which motherhood is the ultimate symbol of women’s political heroism is in fact disempowering for women. Women’s legitimate concerns become their sole concerns…(1991:12 cited in Walker 1991:xxxvii)’ Walker has made a similar point in a review of an article by Gaitskell and Unterhalter, *Mothers of the nation. A comparative analysis of nation, race and motherhood in Afrikaner nationalism and the African National Congress*, in which she argues that: ‘ one of the essential components of that struggle [for women’s emancipation] is precisely to challenge the assumption that women and mother are interchangeable categories – to force recognition of other roles and identities for women (1990:47 cited in Walker 1991:xxxviii).’
same time defending the primacy of their roles as mothers and homemakers. Racial oppression was tackled while traditional gender-defined roles were reinforced.

To contemporary feminists, the failure of these movements to tackle gender oppression comes as a disappointment. In her pioneering work, Women and resistance in South Africa, Cherryl Walker tried to portray black women’s resistance as a ‘women’s movement’, with a singular history and development towards greater equality for women. While she recognised the conservative aspects of these movements, she could not reconcile them with the otherwise militant actions. This struck her as contradictory and led to her ultimate judgement of the women as having failed (1993:1, My emphasis).

Wells sees women’s resistance to pass-laws as not fitting either of these two moulds but as generated from far more complex factors. She also means that despite the ‘conservative nature’ of the uprisings she discusses, they broke new ground for women:

The cumulative experience of such movements should be seen as the building blocks in more transformative political struggles. By throwing forward women as political leaders and by creating a political culture, environment and expectation that women will be active participants, these movements have contributed to a more vital, inclusive political process. No one in South Africa can deny that women are indeed a potent political force (ibid:140).

Nevertheless, her discussion on ‘motherism’ as well as other feminist discussions on ‘motherhood’ as a political symbol in the South African context has then been criticised for being ethnocentric in not recognising the different meanings attached to ‘mother’ in Western and African cultural contexts. Driver (1992) has pointed out the tendency to describe ‘the African mother’ as a politically active, quite aggressive woman, an image, which stands in sharp contrast to ‘the mother’ in a Western Christian tradition. The women I have interviewed have varying views on ‘motherism’ in political life, which can be illustrated by the following citations of two women. Mmatshilo is quite critical to ‘the power of mothers’ within the ANC:

F- .../One thing that has been discussed before ... when we were talking about changing culture. In the ANC there has been this thing with ‘motherism’, women as mothers (phone ringing). At least before, women as mothers was like...

M- I hate motherism within the organisation.

F- Okay! (Laughter)

M- I hate it!

F- And what do you see, what is that?

M- You know what is it? – You would always be expected to mother someone. You’d always be the ones who’d have to look after the others. And not be seen as part of the others. That’s what has been happening. In some situations you’d see women being expected to prepare meals, whilst men are sitting in a conference deciding the fate of the organisation. And for me that is something that I have never encouraged. The other thing is that while you find other women ... seeing others as mothers. Look! It might be seen as our culture but sometimes this very culture tends to be exploited when it suits the others. Where you’d find then that, because you are so and so then you are called ‘mother’. I’m also a mother but I’m not called mother. Why not? And those are some of the (?) indications of inequality within the organisation. Because the minute you say ‘mother’, there is this thing of a parent-child relationship and no longer equals within an organisation. And when we engage the person then in discussions or in debates you would always be sensitive to say: ‘By the way she is mother’.

F- And do you mean that people would tell you or tell somebody: ‘She is a mother’?

M- Yeah, they’ll do that! Look – some people do it as a sign of respect like for example Ma Sisulu. I cannot say to her: ‘Albertina’. Obviously I will say Mama, and I’m saying Mama as a word of expression … within our culture you can’t just call her by her first name, and it ends up there. When we discuss, me and Ma Sisulu, we discuss as equals. And those are some of the women who are my rolemodels. She is one of the women I’ve got great respect of in the ANC. And yes she’d treat us like her children. Of course, we are. She’d always remind us, you know, what is right, what is not right, and give us advise. But when you come to serious debates I find it really unacceptable, you know, and when it comes to recognition, that one is mother and therefore is not ... And that motherism – as you’ve put – it has also tended to be abused by some who are seen as mothers. Then I certainly begin to have a problem. Where a person thinks she’s above organisation because is mother or she is above discipline because she is mother. Or she cannot be engaged, she cannot be questioned, she cannot be challenged, because she is mother. For me that becomes a problem. The organisation is there to fight injustices, the organisation is there to mobilise all of us as equals, and when you contribute one must not be seen on the basis of age. Because also ageism is a problem, because people say: ‘Who are you? You are still a child!’ You know, or: ‘I’m so and so’s wife’. The identity must not be distorted. The respect that has been bestowed on people must not be abused. The culture must not also be imposed above political principles. If the organisation stands for equality, then we are all equals, everyone must be subjected to the same discipline irrespective of she is a mother to who or she is a wife to who, we should all be subjected to it. When we enter into discussions we enter into discussions irrespective of your history – that you are twenty years more experienced than me. In discussions we should all contribute as equals. Yes, history will inform us but history must not be abused to undermine other views.
F- But it someone see herself as ‘mother’ as you said, that she might be above some principles ... Is that as a mother because she is older and think she should be seen as a mother compared to you that is younger? Or is it …

M- A status? (F- Yes.) In many instances it is used as a status. And as a defence mechanism, to avoid party discipline, to avoid being engaged. /…/ there is one thing that you cannot equate ... two things that are not equal to make them the same, ... it is not automatic that if I’m so and so’s wife then I’m like so and so. It is not a given, you must prove yourself, and also you cannot be seen as a leader because of your age. /…/ I must, if I’m a leader I must be recognised as a leader. My leadership must not be undermined because of my age. Whether young or old, however, you cannot also undermine the wisdom that is there, there can be that wisdom, either from young or from the old, but the only problem that I have is when that is abused for other ulterior motives.

F- But do you think that someone could undermine you as a leader by calling you a mother? Or?

M- No ...

F- No? I mean you ... somebody would not call you a mother to (E– To undermine me?) to restrict you somehow or ... ?

M- No?

F- What I’m thinking is like, if there are certain values that are connected ...

M- No I would hate – in a meeting situation if somebody would say: ‘Can we have that mother there ... to speak.’ I’m not in a meeting as a mother! I’m there as a person. So that is a pro ... I would hate that because .. it can be used only to reduce you, to a level of a mother and nothing more. When a person is not called father-child? /…/ Those are not principles that the organisation has on how people have to relate

F- But that happens sometimes you mean?

M- It does, it does. Where people would say: ‘Mothers will then have to do A,B,C,D and then the ANC will do ...’ As if then mothers are not part of the organisation. /…/ Like people decide on a program of the organisation. We are going to have a conference, and people will say ’Prepare, input, we will have so and so to chair, we will have so and so to speak, we will have so and so to prepare material and all that and then mothers will have to go and prepare meals’.

However, there are other ANC-women, like Likhapa, who think academics have misrepresented the meaning of ‘mother’ in African cultures; these women are more positive to how it has been used as a political mobilising tool:

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F- Someone, I don’t remember her name now, but she was talking about the ANC in the past that women were mobilised as mothers – that it was some kind of, what she called ‘motherism’ ... that you appeal to the responsibility of mothers to mobilise women into the movement. Do you think there are still differences in perceiving what the role of women should be in the movement?

L- Yeah, I’ve heard that thing been posed but you know when you say mothers in the African tradition its actually different from giving that role of, which is a gender stereotype, to say that their role is only looking after children. And by mothers actually in the African tradition you also refer to (?) – it’s women. We are calling on women. And how do you mobilise women? You use bread and butter issues. So you appeal to them on the basis of what they are faced with and I think that is a mobilising strategy. You can’t come up with issues which are not close to their hearts. Which they experience on a daily basis, you will sound very theoretical. And that’s my experience in that appeal of women as mothers. And as I say, ‘mother’ is broader than the gender stereotyping ...

F- Can you tell me a little bit more about that broader perspective of what ‘mother’ means?

L- Yes, in our African tradition when you say mother, that’s a person who is actually bringing life, who bears the major responsibility in society. Who is tasked with looking after the family. Because in most cases this notion of saying that the man is the head of the family doesn’t actually work. The women are playing a very major role in the family, they are actually the ones who in most cases know exactly what is happening and actually plan /.../ So, in appealing to mothers in that spirit of say: ‘You have a role to play’. There is no way this can be left to men only because we are the pillars of the communities, of the societies. And that’s the broader way of describing women in our society. And by saying mother its actually a way of even showing some respect. We don’t have a concept of women when we use it in our societies like ‘X‘ it doesn’t show respect, you see. But when we say ‘mothers’ ‘Y’ it shows some respect also. So it’s a broader concept than the Western one.

F- Yeah, ‘X’ what would that mean?

L- ‘X’ means women. And we don’t use it … it doesn’t show respect. When you say ‘Y’ there is some respect, it carries some weight. And that doesn’t mean that when you say ‘Y’ it only those women who are old with children etc, but also include young women.

F- So do you find that there has been misconceptions from..
L- From the Western (?) Yeah, yeah. I actually referred to that, I did some work, in one of the papers I did. Because I came across it and I said, no this is a wrong interpretation. And I think also another person who talks about it very well is Ncube who is a Roman Catholic nun. She also picks it up and say, that’s a wrong conception in our … the usage of the world./…/

F- Yeah, because that is something that I have reacted to in some analysis from some scholars in South Africa, how they use ‘mother’ … /…/

L- Yeah, because we regard it as academic because we understand what we talk about, but the person who doesn’t speak our language who doesn’t come from our culture misrepresent what exactly we mean by that concept. And it’s very easy to do it if you directly translate what (?)

In sum, Mmatshilo and Likhapha have quite different views on ‘the meaning of mother’ within the ANC. But their views may be related partly to their viewing the issue from different angles. Likhapha discusses the issue of mobilisation of women as ‘mothers’ and the ‘cultural meaning of mother’ whereas Mmatshilo concentrates on the relationship between political activists/politicians in the ANC and the ways in which ‘mother’ may be used and abused in gender-related power-relationships among women and between men and women. ‘Mother’ may be used to reduce women’s position within the organisation/party by, for example assigning care-taking tasks to ‘mothers’ and denying women an autonomous position as equals in the organisation/party. ‘Mother’ may also be used for individual purposes to gain power positions and to escape ‘party-discipline’.

Both women bring up the issue of ‘respect’ associated with the concept ‘mother’. Likhapha discusses it in purely positive terms and contrasts it to another concept which ‘only means women’ and which is not associated with ‘respect’ and which is thus not possible to use when addressing ‘women’. Mmatshilo also brings up a power-dimension of ‘respect’ in that the respect of ‘mother’ may be abused to gain power-positions and escape ‘party-discipline’. Likhapha emphasises the respect of the ‘mother’ in a cultural context in which women are seen as life-givers and the pillars of society. Her argument could be said to be directed against the ‘feminist, academic reductionist’ views of the ‘mother’ as ‘only looking after children’. She seems to want to point out that ‘mother’ is not culturally defined in a nuclear family context but as a cornerstone of community and society, which is a very different meaning and position of ‘mother’ in a Western context. The African concept used for ‘women’ is not socio-culturally meaningful when addressing women in that it does not designate respect.

Likhapha also points out that ‘bread and butter’ issues are ‘closest to the hearts of women’ and therefore used as a mobilising strategy. This may be

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66 Sister Ncube is a prominent ANC-politician.
interpreted as a ‘realistic’ strategy rather than a ‘conservative’ one. In Likhapha’s view, Wells’ and other feminist academic’s definition of a more ‘progressive’ gender politics would probably be ‘academic’ and be seen as removed from the daily experience of ‘women’. In a the context of poverty, ‘bread and butter’ issues are a question of survival and the racial oppression was a main cause to the difficult life conditions of Africans.

But what Likhapha does not mention and which Wells points out is that ‘bread and butter’ issues probably appeal to women partly because of their responsibility as ‘mothers’. To question, for example, male violence against women would have been seen as too much questioning of the gender-related power order to have been useful as a mobilising strategy. Gender-related violence is also part of many women’s daily experience but was considered too controversial to question and not useful in attracting women to the liberation movement (ANC), and this was the prime goal of women organising as a group in the ANCWL.68

There seem to be a tension in Mmatshilo’s discussion on ‘motherism’ between describing ‘the respect’ of ‘mother’ as legitimate and describing it as a power relation. Mmatshilo refers to her relationship with Ma Sisulu to illustrate a legitimate kind of respect which is also prescribed by culture as it would not be possible to address Ma Sisulu by first name. But Mmatshilo also says that Ma Sisulu treats her like ‘a child’ in that she tells her what is right and wrong and gives advice. At the same time she describes the illegitimate ‘respect’ which includes a power relation in terms of a parent-child relationship. This apparent contradiction could be interpreted in terms of Mmatshilo perceiving her relationship with Ma Sisulu to be both that of a parent-child and as of mutual respect. Mmatshilo seems to feel that Ma Sisulu would respect her as an equal in a political discussion and that the parent-child relationship, which is also there does not interfere with that basic respect for an autonomous political person. This would then contrast to the case with women who use their position as ‘mother’ to gain political power positions.

The notion of ‘respect’ have been a recurrent theme in my interviews of the women and is sometimes described as a central part in ‘African culture’. The interviews above with Mmatshilo and Likhapha illustrates the fine line between ‘respect’ and ‘power’. Mmatshilo brings up this double edge of ‘respect’ and points out how it can be used by individuals in their quest for power whereas Likhapha describes ‘respect’ in more one-dimensional terms and refers to ‘culture’ as ‘shared meaning’.

67 I here include protests against pass-laws in ‘bread and butter’ issues.
68 It may have been that it was not even discussed as a possible political issue to be considered. Male violence against women is politically recognised as a problem in South Africa today.
The views of Mmatshilo and Likhapha on the issue of ‘the meaning of mother’ could be said to illustrate the complexity of culture and gender-related power in different ways. ‘The meaning of mother’ has certainly been reductionist in feminist academic writings and maybe its potential as a political force in ‘gendered politics’ has also been underestimated. It may be to simplifying in defining a transformative gender politics in terms of an open questioning of ‘the patriarchal gender order’. There may be room for transgressive gender meanings and relations on the basis of the concept of ‘mother’ in actual practice in political uprisings and movements. This interpretation would question both feminist ‘reductionist’ definitions of ‘mother’ in political events but also Likhapa’s notion of ‘mother’ as a ‘cultural monolithic entity’ of which ‘insiders’ understand and ‘outsiders’ have difficulties in understanding. I would also suggest that even though ‘mother’ may be much more inclusive than what some feminist studies have implied, it also reduces women’s possible ways of identification. This may be illustrated by Mmatshilo’s experience of ‘mother’ as a category which may be used to reduce her as an autonomous political person and thus her identity-selection opportunities.

Academic discourses on lobola

The academic discourses are not isolated from the political contexts empirically as there have been many gender conferences bringing activists and academics together.69 70

69 Some examples of conferences on women and gender issues before and during the time of the interviews of this study: 1989 conference in Harare hosted by IDASA (Institute for a Democratic Alternative for south Africa), 1989 Women and the Constitution conference in Cape Town hosted by IDASA, 1990 Malibongwe conference in Amsterdam where approximately 350 women from South Africa and women in exile met, 1990 Women and the Constitution conference in Durban and hosted by the South African Council of Churches, 1990 Putting Women on the Agenda organised by the Lawyers for Human Rights, 1990 Gender Today and Tomorrow a commission held by the ANC’s Constitutional Committee in Cape Town, 1991 Women and Gender in Southern Africa a conference bringing activists and academics together at the University of Natal, 1992 workshop organised at the University of Natal by IDASA, 1993 workshop Ensuring Gender Equality organised by the Women’s National Commission, workshop run on behalf of the ANC Commission for Women’s Emancipation by the Gender Research Project of the Centre for Applied Legal Studies, University of Witwatersrand which focused on the Human Rights Commission, the Public Protector and the Commission for Gender Equality, 1994 The Commission for Gender Equality in the Context of National Women’s Machinery a workshop in Cape Town run by the Gender Research Project, Centre for Applied Legal Studies, University of Witwatersrand, 1995 Towards a final Constitution: a Critique of the Interim Constitution from a Gender Perspective - The Way Forward a conference organised by the Community Law Centre at the University of the Western Cape.

70 The objectivity of ‘science’ have been deconstructed and criticised by (among others) feminist scholars and is a fundamental part of feminist scholarship today (See for example: Schiebinger 1999, Stanley 1997, Hartman & Messer-Davidow 1991). This study would like to further this approach to interpret women interviewees as influenced by and as using academic
Functional discourses

Structural–functionalist\(^{71}\) approaches to bridewealth have dominated the anthropological discussion on– and descriptions of marriage payments more than any other school of thought; Comaroff (1980a:3) described its domination in 1980 in terms of its having “gained the status of received wisdom“. Furthermore, he argues that the dominant interpretative frame for bridewealth have been “the functional relationship between these prestations and (i) structural arrangements; (ii) the jural creation of statuses and alienation of rights, and (iii) the politico-economic negotiation of affinity“(ibid:15). It is my impression that a functional discourse still counts as a strong influence in discussions on bridewealth in anthropological as well as in other contexts.\(^{72}\)

Radcliffe-Brown (1950) represents such a perspective and I will present his characterization of kinship and marriage in Africa from his *Introduction* of the volume “African systems of kinship and Marriage”.

One motivation underlying Radcliffe-Brown’s is to explain “the proper meaning of marriage payments” for prejudiced colonial administrators and discourses - feminist as well as others - for their explicit political purposes as well as in their reflections on lobola in relation to different contexts (which might be interpreted as political as well although not explicitly expressed as such)

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\(^{71}\) Hammond-Tooke discusses structural functionalism and functionalism in South African anthropology: “Anthropology was introduced in South Africa in 1921, and the earlier years could perhaps be called the Golden Age of South African Ethnography, to capture the time, during the 1930’s to the 1950’s, when a small group of South African born anthropologists were household names in the wider field of international (especially British) anthropology. During this time South African-born scholars such as Isaac Schapera, Monica Wilson, Hilda Kuper, Eileen Krige and Jack Krige produced detailed studies of South African indigenous societies that became standard monographs all over the world and which were widely cited in the scientific literature. These ethnographies, in line with the state of anthropology at the time, sought to provide as full a description as possible of all aspects of the culture of the people with whom they dealt. This aim derived from the functionalist ‘revolution’ that had occurred in (especially) British anthropology in the 1920s, associated with the names of the Polish-born Bronislaw Malinowski, and the British scholar, A.R Radcliffe-Brown, who was to impart a strong sociological dimension to Malinowski’s functionalism – the so-called ‘structural functionalism’. The essence of the functionalist approach was an insistence on the organic nature of human societies and cultures, and a form of explanation that sought the ‘function’ of institutions in supporting and maintaining the whole“ (1997:2,3).

\(^{72}\) As an example, in South Africa such an influential person as Thandabantu Nhlapo who led the Law Commission on the harmonisation of customary law and common law draw directly on Radcliffe-Brown in his article "Women’s rights and the family in traditional and customary law“: "Radcliffe-Brown’s statement is as valid today as it was when he wrote it: ‘For an understanding of any aspect of the social life of an African people - economic, political or religious - it is essential to have a thorough knowledge of their system of kinship and marriage’. If that system masks inequality under the guise of group interests, women and children (lacking a say in the articulation of those interests) are certain to be disadvantaged.”(1991:114) In the article Nhlapo sets out to explain "why sex discrimination appears to be such an enduring feature of African traditional systems"(ibid: 111, italics in original text) and he means that "such explanations hinge critically on an understanding of the values underlying the African family”(ibid. italics in original text).
others who do not understand the practice in its cultural context, and who see it simply as a purchase of women. In order to do so, he uses the structural-functional comparative method, comparing African marriage with English marriage to make his points.

The first point he makes is that marriage “involves some modification or partial rupture of the relations between the bride and her immediate kin” (1950:49):

\[...\] It is most marked then as in most African societies, the woman when she marries leaves her family and goes to live with her husband and his family. Her own family suffers a loss. It would be a gross error to think of this as an economic loss. It is the loss of a person who has been a member of a group, a break of the family solidarity (ibid).

Radcliffe-Brown goes on to explain that this ‘loss’ is often given a symbolic expression such as a simulated hostility between the ‘two bodies of kin’ or such as the bride’s ‘capture’ at which “the bride herself or her kin, or both, are expected to make a show of resistance at her removal” (ibid). The author gives an example from Basutoland to illustrate this ‘symbolic’ expression of ‘loss of kin’:

In Basutoland, or at least in some parts of it, on the day fixed for the marriage the young men of the bride-groom’s group drive the cattle that are to constitute the marriage payment to the home of the bride. When they draw near, the women of the bride’s party gather in front of the entrance to the cattle kraal. As the bridegroom’s party try to drive the cattle into the kraal the women, with stick and shouts, drive them away so that they scatter over the veld and have to be collected together again and a new attempt made to drive them into the kraal. This goes on for some time until at last the cattle are successfully driven into the kraal. The women of the group make a show of resistance at the delivery of the cattle which will have as its consequence the loss of the bride. The proper interpretation of these customs in that they are symbolic expressions of the recognition of the structural change that is brought about by the marriage. When this aspect of the marriage is considered the marriage payment can be regarded as an indemnity or compensation given by the bridgroom on the bride’s kin for the loss of their daughter. This is, however, only one side of a many sided institution and in some kinship systems is of minor importance. In societies in which the marriage payment is of considerable value it is commonly used to replace the daughter by obtaining a wife for some other member of the family, usually a brother of the woman who has been lost (ibid; my emphasis).

The second point Radcliffe-Brown makes about ‘African marriage’ is the rights the husband and his kin obtain in relation to the wife and the children she bears. Even though he points out that these rights are different in different ‘systems’, he describes the rights acquired as follows:
Some of these are rights of the husband to the performance of duties by the wife (rights \textit{in personam}) and he accepts corresponding duties towards her. He has, for example, rights to the services of his wife in his household. // The marriage payment may be regarded in this aspect as a kind of ‘consideration’ by means of which the transfer is formally and ‘legally’ made [the rights in the woman is transferred from her family to her husband] (ibid).

The rights in a woman, which Radcliffe-Brown says are the most important, is the right to the children she bears: “An African marries because he wants children (ibid:51; my emphasis)”. The author refers to the paying back of marriage payments from a woman’s kin if she ‘proves to be barren’ or the replacement of her with another woman; this is the most important right which a man and his kin acquire over a woman at marriage.

The last aspect of African marriage that Radcliffe-Brown emphasizes is the creation of alliances between kin groups through the ‘giving of gifts’ – and here he refers to Marcel Mauss\(^\text{73}\)

\begin{itemize}
\item In Africa marriage is not simply a union of a man and a woman: it is an alliance between two families or bodies of kin. We must consider the marriage payments in this connexion also. In so-called primitive societies the exchange of valuables is a common method of establishing or maintaining a friendly relation between separate groups or between individuals belonging to separate groups. Where material goods are exchanged it is common to speak of gift-exchange. But the exchange may be of services particularly those of a ritual character. There are societies in which there is an exchange of women. Each group (family, lineage, or clan) providing a wife for a man of the other. The rule governing transactions of this kind is that for whatever is received a return must be made. By such exchanges, two persons or two groups are linked together in a more or less lasting alliance (ibid:51).
\end{itemize}

Adam Kuper is also an example of a functional anthropologist although his emphasis is more on symbolic structure. Kuper summarises the central theme of his book \textit{Wives for cattle: bridewealth and marriage in Southern Africa} (1982), by quoting a Southern Bantu saying, "Cattle beget children" and he describes the essence of bridewealth as "the exchange of cattle for wives". In \textit{Wives for cattle} which is based on ethnographic material published to 1940, Kuper sets out to "bring greater order to the scattered and often puzzling reports of traditional Southern Bantu marriage practices" (ibid:3). According to Kuper bridewealth institutions were of great significance in traditional Southern Bantu cultures and he argues that the ethnographic material which he bases his study on "bear witness to the cultural unity of the region throughout that time, despite profound political and eco-

\textsuperscript{73} See the anthropological ‘classic’ \textit{The Gift} by Marcel Mauss.
\textsuperscript{74} Kuper uses a classification of Southern Bantu cultures which is based upon linguistic classification. The main groups according to this classification are the Nguni (Xhosa, Zulu, Transvaal Ndebele, Swazi) Sotho-Tswana, Venda and Tsonga.
nomic changes resulting directly or indirectly from European colonial expansion”(ibid:5).75

Cattle which were previously used for lobola occupy a central role in ceremonial life. Furthermore, cattle and cattle-keeping were accorded high value. "Equally, the association of men with cattle-keeping and of women with horticulture, corn and cooking keep recurring. This is a central theme of the culture – so pervasive, indeed, as almost to defy apt illustration” (ibid:11). This association of women and agriculture and men with cattle is expressed in many ways according to Kuper. One of the ways is that the exchanges of agricultural and pastoral products express the relationship of affines: "A man will always try to offer his wives parents meat, and will expect to be offered beer and porridge by his wife’s mother” (ibid:14).

Kuper argues that the same type of exchange relationship exist in other hierarchical constellations like that between ancestors and descendants, rulers and subjects, and household heads and their dependants. These exchanges are also "bound up with marriage and bridewealth. In particular, the exchanges are the source of fertility. The superiors (ancestors, chiefs, fathers and husbands) provide cattle and fields, and make them fertile. The living, followers, children and wives give labour, meat and corn in return to the superiors” (ibid: 14,15).

Ancestors hold a very important role in many African cultures and they are seen as the guarantors of the welfare of the people. The family ancestors are seen most of all to be concerned with the health and fertility of the family and were approached by the family head or his sister. The tribal ancestors were approached by the ruler and he was also expected, through his relationship with the ancestors to ensure that the land was fruitful. In return the ruler’s subjects cultivated fields for him and offered him beer and meat (ibid: 15,16).

According to Kuper, "comparable hierarchical exchanges characterized the relationship of a homestead head and his dependants./.../ He divided up the fields he received from the ruler and the cattle he inherited from the ancestors among the ‘houses’ of his wives. As husband and father he was also specifically responsible for making his wives pregnant” (ibid:16).

Kuper contextualises bridewealth in relation to these exchanges: "cattle and fertility (rain/seminal fluid) come ultimately from the ancestors and directly from the rulers and household heads who stand between the ancestors and their dependants” (ibid). Furthermore, cattle are inherited from the an-

75 Kuper means that more radical changes "occurred with the incorporation of rural African communities in the modern political and economic system. /.../ This process accelerated during the early twentieth century, reaching a critical point with the industrialization of South Africa in the 1930s and 1940s. My analysis in concerned with the pre-industrial period”(Kuper 1982:5). Kuper’s analysis remains obscure on this point; it is not clear how he draws the line between pre-industrial and industrial societies, and what full implications this distinction has.
cestors and "a woman’s ancestor may even be said to withhold her fertility if the bridewealth is not paid in full" (ibid:17).

In addition, there are ideas about "hot and cool” phenomena in the Southern Bantu cultures which, according to Kuper, have to be taken into account to understand the bridewealth system. In this hot/cool dualistic thinking there is, on the one hand cool and white phenomena such as water, rain, semen etc. which are seen as fertilizing agencies. On the other hand, there are hot and red phenomena which are connected to death and sterility. Kuper argues that "there is a tendency for women and female sexuality to be regarded as hot and dangerous: dangerous above all to men and cattle” (ibid:18). The hot/cool opposition cannot be regarded as a direct reflection of male and female, but is used to classify states which are not static; women and men can be ‘hot’ through certain emotions such as anger, "men who have recently had sexual relations with women are regarded as hot, and women may be cool before and after their phase of sexual maturity /.../ The opposition is between healing and fertilizing agents and dangerous and sterilizing forces” (ibid:19).

Furthermore, Kuper argues that the fundamental rule of bridewealth concerns the marital rights in a woman which is transferred against the payment of cattle. And it is, above all, the rights to a woman’s children which means, for example, that if a wife remains childless either the bridewealth cattle had to be returned or her family had to provide her husband with another wife (ibid:26). In addition "the transfer of bridewealth cattle is necessary to the birth of a legitimate person. A person for whose mother no lobolo has been paid is not a full member of the community” (ibid:21,22).

The transactions of bridewealth did not only concern the immediate "wife-givers” and "wife-takers” but created a large network of relations "between a series of debtors and creditors” (ibid:27). An example would be that the person or persons raising the cattle for someone’s bridewealth would have certain claims in the first daughter, either as a future bride or in part of the bridewealth received for her (ibid). Women could also have certain claims such as among the Lovedu: "If a woman’s linked brother took the bridewealth cattle she brought in and used them to acquire a wife for himself, then he was placed in her debt. She had given him a wife” (ibid:33). Among the Cape Nguni, the function of bridewealth took a different form in this regard. The bridewealth paid for a woman was not used by her father or brother to acquire a wife. "A woman’s bridewealth went to her father, but he held it as a surety for her. Moreover he provided her house with dowry cat-

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76 One aspect of the constitution of gender through marriage and the bridewealth transaction is its relation to the construction of heterosexuality. It seems that dichotomization of gender includes a construction of heterosexuality although that is very difficult to find clues about in the above material. The notions of hot and cold seem to point to a dichotomization of sexuality but that is, unfortunately, the only information available on the meaning of sexuality.
tle. There remained no debts between brothers and sisters or fathers and daughters” (ibid:36). Among the Cape Nguni the dowry paid could be about the same amount as the bridewealth received by the woman’s family. Despite these differences Kuper means that the fundamental principle was reciprocity in that cattle were exchanged for wives and wives for cattle. He also argues that it should not be seen simply as men were exchanging women among themselves but "rather men and women exchanged certain rights in women for cattle” (ibid:40).

According to Kuper then, the Southern Bantu basically have the same type of bridewealth, and they share a common set of ideas which infuses bridewealth transactions. The differences in local organisation of bridewealth and its varying ideological and ceremonial articulation does not alter its basic similarities (ibid:162).

As we can see, both Kuper’s and Radcliffe-Brown’s account of marriage is androcentric. In Radcliffe-Brown’s depiction the ‘African’ is a man “who marries because he wants children”. And in Kuper’s account, hierarchical relationships are depicted as reciprocal ones in which power is not an issue. Men are, for instance, said to have a responsibility to make their wives pregnant and distribute fields, and women have to give their labour, meat and corn in return. But women are “sent home” if they don’t produce children for their husbands which indicates that the "responsibility” of men does not have the same serious consequences it has for women due to unequal power relations. Furthermore, actors are not present in these accounts. ‘Structure’ is the key level of discussion, and actors are only reflections of the functions they fill in the structure; as when the Radcliffe-Brown discusses marriage customs in Basutoland (see above): “The proper interpretation of these customs is that they are symbolic expressions of the recognition of the structural change that is brought about by the marriage”. Despite shortcomings Radcliffe-Brown’s account points to social structure as an important aspect of bridewealth and it recognizes that the meaning of the institution must be contextualised to be understood. Unfortunately, ‘meaning’ in the end is reduced to merely reflecting social structure. Kuper’s account has the advantage, however, of taking cultural meanings seriously for understanding social structure although they have the same limitations as to the static nature of the approaches. As has been pointed out elsewhere, these kinds of studies take ‘culture’ as its basic unit of study and thereby essentialise culture and make it static as well as depict different cultures as units clearly demarcated from each other. Their lack of analysis of power relations reinforce the cultural relativism of the approach.

A woman-centered approach

Another functionally inspired approach which focuses on economic aspects as well as women’s interests is "Marriage payments in a patrilineal society”
by Harriet Ngubane (1987). The material presented is derived both from Ngubane’s own experiences as a Zulu and from research among the Zulu and the Swazi (ibid: 173).

In the article, Ngubane argues that the payment of *lobolo* in cattle benefits women in that cattle provide women with a direct economic asset and that cattle constitutes a means to create kinship categories or units which form a security base for women and children. She sees the monetisation of lobolo as eroding "a woman’s economic position" as well as destroying "the support and legitimation that come from the *lobolo* payments in cattle" (ibid).

Of special interest for my analysis is that Ngubane makes a clear distinction between a rural setting in which lobolo is paid in cattle and settings (rural or urban) in which lobolo is paid in cash: "For the sake of clarity I shall draw a contrast between two distinct situations. one in a rural setting where the *lobolo* payments are made in cattle. and the other (usually but not invariable urban) where the payments are made in cash. There are, of course, intermediate situations where various combinations of cattle and money may be found, but I shall not discuss these” (ibid).

Ngubane makes the point that lobolo procedures in the rural setting is far from constituting a purchase but involves a number of rules of behavior:

It is understood to be against the rules to announce all the cattle reserved for lobolo at the early stages of negotiations. where, for instance, the total number is expected to be fifteen, it is polite for the visitors to mention three of five (odd numbers are preferred), giving their colour, sex and age, during the opening stages of the negotiation even if all fifteen are available and have already been set aside for the purpose. The reason given for this is that it would be insulting to the girl’s people for the groom’s group to imply that they are wealthy and therefore behaving as though purchasing goods /.../ All this is done in a manner which suggests great respect for the bridal people and much deference toward them. The bridal people, on the other hand, show no reciprocal deference, but rather treat the visitors in a manner bordering on the outright rude (ibid: 174).

In order to explain the benefits of lobolo, paid as cattle, to the bride, Ngubane takes as a starting point a woman’s position in a *patrilineal system*:

In going to examine how this lobolo procedure affects the position of women, I would point out that the question is particularly relevant in a patrilineal system, and above all for a bride. It is she, after all, who is being married into the man’s family, and once this has happened it is very difficult for her to withdraw. Her husband, however, can marry as many wives as he chooses. Thus the bride is more vulnerable than the groom, or has more to lose if problems arise (ibid: 175)

One direct economic benefit for women in this system, which Ngubane emphasizes, is the cow which a father sets aside from the lobola in benefit for
his married daughter as the newly married bride is not allowed to partake of any milk foods from her husband’s family: "This cow becomes her personal property and subsequent progeny accumulate as do her own private possessions, over which she has complete control and decision-making powers” (ibid).

In addition to this cow she will, when her own daughters get married, receive a special bride’s ‘mother’s cow’:

Even if the marriage subsequently fails, the mother’s cow is not included among the lobolo cattle which is returned. It is neither owed, nor returnable, being rather a special gift from the bridegroom’s people to the bride’s mother in appreciation of the good upbringing of her daughter, who will have retained her virginity; it might indeed be more appropriately named the ‘virginity cow’. Thus, should a girl lose her virginity before marriage, the man responsible, even if he does not intend to marry her, must pay such a cow to her mother, although he does not have to pay lobolo (ibid:175,176).

Ngubane also points out that although the father "technically” receives the lobolo for his daughter "in practice he holds them in trust for the bride’s household of origin. And it is this trusteeship which form an important basis for the security of the married woman:

When the lobolo cattle are used in turn to lobola a wife for a brother of the former bride, he is expected by custom to give protection to her when it is needed, this means that a married daughter goes on receiving protection from her parental home even after both her parents have died: that is, she always has someone from her natal family who will uphold her rights and give her asylum in case of need (ibid:176).

Furthermore, Ngubane argues that lobola provides security for a woman who is barren:

There are yet other ways in which lobolo cattle enable a married woman to strengthen her social position. If she is barren, her parents may arrange for another of their daughters to marry her husband so that she bears some of the children in the name of her barren sister; this ‘raises her house’ by providing her with children. /.../ Such a second daughter, who in siSwati is said to be inhlati to her sister, is thus married by the latter’s lobolo and the associated ritual. She strengthens the household of her sister while at the same time gaining her own household. /.../ The lobolo again are the foundation of her security: if she were to go away she would lose all rights, not only over agricultural land and in the homestead site but also over her children, as they belong to their father’s lineage. The more closely one examines the effects and implications of the institution of lobolo as entailing the use of cattle to create and affirm binding social relationships, the more it emerges as an essential cornerstone of the whole structure of kinship in a patrilineal society (ibid 177).
It is the monetisation of lobola which Ngubane sees as the cause of the problems women face today: "It follows from what has been said that converting lobolo payments from cattle into money drastically alters the meaning and character of the whole transaction" (ibid:179).

The first consequence of the monetisation of lobola that Ngubane mentions is that "the transaction becomes privatised and individuated, in the sense that participation of the larger kinship group is minimised or eliminated" (ibid). She also means that, as a result, the transaction has become the affair of men and the earlier involvement of women has been reduced.

The second consequence of the monetisation of lobola that Ngubane brings up is that:

... the lobolo transaction becomer commercialised in the sense that an actual money ‘price’ is named and the bride’s father will consider what will be an asset for her husband. Thus the whole concern in traditional marriage negotiations to avoid the conversion of the lobolo transaction into a buying and selling exercise is radically undermined. The bride becomes, in effect, a commodity, losing her value as a person and as a member of her natal family who will be missed (ibid).

The third consequence of the monetisation is that former ceremonies and rituals have been abandoned which Ngubane sees as having secularised or trivialised marriage:

One special function of ritual, by solemnising an event, is to impress its importance on those participating in it, and so to cause the obligations which arise from the new relationship to be internalised. As the word ‘solemnisation’ implies, the feeling generally inculcated is that the whole matter should not be taken lightly, least of all by the new husband and wife, in the case of marriage. The desolemnisation of marriage by reducing ritual intensity inevitably reduces commitment of the parties to the marriage and to its preservation (ibid).

Ngubane sees the consequence of privatisation of marriage as a major disadvantage to women. The obligations and relations in which the newly formed family is part of a larger kinship structure leaves the woman in the hands of her husband: "The consequence is that the husband can take his wife elsewhere without there being much to stop him; and elsewhere she will not have the same support from a structure of rights and obligations" (ibid: 179,180).

The monetisation of lobola also lessens the woman’s direct economic benefits in that she will not get the cows reserved for her in a cattle-based system. Another loss for women concerns the ritual power of women in a cattle-based system in that they had some ‘implicit’ power in the marriage arrangements. Furthermore, Ngubane attributes the loss of security from the wife’s family in a cattle-based system to the monetisation of lobola in that:
... as there is no clear connection between what has been paid for her and what any brother or equivalent male relative will have to pay to get a wife, a bride is now deprived of the continued parental home protection she would previously have enjoyed” (ibid:180).

Ngubane’s functional discourse does not recognize relations of gender-related power but makes them a ‘natural part’ of a patrilineal system. Change of social relations is described as foreign to the social structure and is depicted as a consequence of other structural forces (monetisation). In this discourse, actors disappear just as in Radcliffe-Brown’s and Kuper’s functional discourses. Current oppressive behaviour of male actors is explained by monetisation and privatisation. The advantage of Ngubane’s approach is that she focuses women’s situation and interests which contributes to an understanding of what women might gain from the ‘traditional’ system compared to their situation today. Such a description is helpful in understanding which strategies women might employ in improving their current insecure situation. Furthermore, Ngubane points to the changing socio-cultural meaning of lobola even though her model of explanation leaves significant gaps for understanding the role of agency in such a process of social change.

Materialistic discourses

Functional anthropological approaches to “culture” and lobola were criticized in the sixties by Marxist oriented scholars – principally for their view of culture and for the cultural relativism of the approach. “Functionalists had unquestioningly used culture to define their units of study; because these units were taken to be discrete social groups, societies were depicted as both static and impervious to outside influence. /.../ To postulate a pure African culture, uncontaminated by western influences, was to propagate a myth” (Bennett 1995:7).

Furthermore, functional approaches have been found inadequate by feminists and others trying to understand power relations in South Africa today - a society with a colonial history, apartheid politics as well as a patriarchal history in all social groups.

Materialistic discourses have played a significant role in the liberation movement in South Africa as well as in academic life in combatting and analysing the inequalities of the country. Studies of lobola have also been influenced by this materialistic trend.

Jeff Guy (1990) has made an analysis of women’s subordinate position in pre-capitalist societies in southern Africa in which he puts gender oppression and bridewealth at the centre of the whole dynamics of the social structure. The appropriation of women’s labour power and their reproductive capacity were of pivotal importance in these societies with relatively simple technologies. The accumulation of people was a source of wealth and thus the importance of controlling women’s reproductive capacity. Marriage and
bridewealth were the social institutions which gave men control over women. Bridewealth, in Guy’s materialistic discourse, is thus of a fundamentally different nature in a contemporary capitalist context:

By this stage the value-creating cycle at the centre of southern Africa’s pre-capitalist societies has been largely destroyed. Its social marks – bridewealth, the extreme importance of fertility, female deference to men, the expectation that women should labour outside as well as inside the home – might all continue to exist, but now they operate in a changed situation, in which cash and commodities provide a source of value independent of the women–cattle–labour power cycle. The economic and social dynamic was, therefore, different, drawing on changed, external productive forces.

The institution of bridewealth provides a good example of this. It is still widespread in southern Africa, but it no longer fulfils the same function as it did in precapitalist societies; it is only at the most superficial level that it can be seen as the perpetuation of a traditional social feature. However, one can escape conflating the social features of different eras if, through empirical analysis, one establishes the context within which bridewealth operates: whether it is predicated on productive female labour, as it was in precapitalist societies, or whether it has been effectively commoditised and become a domestic transaction which forms part of a wider system of accumulation based on wage labour (ibid:44).

Guy points out that the structural oppression of women was of a very different nature than the contemporary notion of women’s oppression which is derived from a capitalist society:

Women did have a significant degree of economic independence. On marriage they were given access to productive land, which they worked themselves. They were in control of the process of agricultural production and retained from their own use a substantial proportion of the product of that land and of their labour. Work was heavy but it took place within a community which provided substantial security. The value attached to fertility gave the possessors of that fertility social standing and social integrity. Oppression in these precapitalist societies was certainly very different from the isolation and alienation which forms of exploitation through the wage create and which provide the impressions we have today of the concept of oppression. And we have to keep such differences in mind when we attempt to understand the nature of female subordination in precapitalist society (ibid:46).

Cutrufellini who is theoretically inspired by Meillassoux seems, like Guy, to juxtapose a pre-capitalist meaning of bridewealth to what the institution has become in the context of capitalism:

It should be noted that in traditional marriage, those goods whose transfer represented the bridewealth, would primarily serve as a sanction of the social order. They had no exchange value.../ Thus the dowry or bridewealth, which originally sanctioned the marriage alliance (but also the social hierarchy since
it would be distributed only among the elders), has after the introduction of the money market, degenerated into ‘womanwealth’. And, like any other price, it depends on the fluctuation of business, demand, supply, and speculation” (Cutrufelli 1983:41,42)  

A materialistic account of lobola, which is concerned with the question of whether lobola makes women the property of men or not, is that of Sandra Burman (1984):

Under the act [The Native Affairs Administration Act], an essential feature of customary law unions is the transfer of bridewealth or lobola to the woman’s family by the husband. In reality the transfer frequently takes place over many years, the lobola of daughters born of the union sometimes being used to pay that of their mother. Among its other uses, lobola in the past acted as an insurance for the wife’s future support if the couple broke up through the husband’s fault. Should the wife leave the husband as a result of his conduct (thought ‘mild’ chastisement and adultery were not grounds for her to divorce him), he would lose both his wife and the lobola already paid. If the union terminated as a result of her misconduct (including her persistent adultery), the lobola would have to be repaid - which could result in much family pressure being exerted on the woman to behave and, if she had left, return to her husband, she represent a sizeable investment for her husband’s family, to be recouped in labour and biological reproduction. For them the lobola was both a lever to ensure that they got a suitable return on their investment, and an insurance policy against loss if they did not through some fault on the other side. The children of the union belonged to the husband’s family once lobola had been paid, at least in part, and a reduction in the amount of lobola repayable on divorce was made once the woman had born children, increasing with the number of children. Customary law unions were arranged, solemnised and dissolved entirely at the discretion of the families, as they still are, though outside intervention in the form of a judgement by an accepted court might be called on if (as frequently happened) a dispute over a lobola refund arose on the dissolution of the union. It may be argued that as a result of this practice women themselves and their offspring were placed to some extent in the position of property (or objects), transacted in exchanges between men an therefore not fully ‘subject’; but before the inroads of the capitalist economy led to the present disintegration of the self-sufficient, extended family, women in practice usually had some control over their fate and some guarantee of protection from extreme abuse and destitution.

Whether a woman is placed in the position of an object which a man may transact is mainly of importance in so far as African societies accept that an owner has the right to transact his or her property without regard to its desires, even where it is animate, such as a dog or horse. Obviously African women are not and never have been entirely in this position, but the question addressed in this paper is whether the changes taking place in urban South African society and its attitudes to property, are placing women more or less in this position of inability to control their own lives when opposing the

77 For a critique of Cutrufelli see Mohanty 1991.
wishes of the men in their families and the wider society in which they live (1984: 122,123; my emphasis).

Terms are italized which seem central to this type of materialistic/economic discourse. I don’t think that this is the only discourse present in Burman’s discussion but it seems dominant in those respects I will discuss below.

Burman conducted her research in both rural and urban areas. She focused on the urban use of cash for lobola as an explanatory factor for the changes which have taken place in the practice of paying lobola. She argues that the lobola payment still is important to legitimate what she refers to as ‘the sexual union’ but that nowadays it might be unclear why the payment has been made. Burman mentions two aspects of the problem: “it is no longer necessarily obvious to the community in which the couple live what consequences are expected to result from the payment”(ibid:125). Secondly, she mentions that it may be unclear whether a payment constitutes lobola or not since, for example, it might not have been intended as lobola for some parties involved. A third ambiguity noted by Burman is that the payment of lobola might not be necessary for securely binding the children to the husband’s family if a customary marriage is considered to have taken place.

Part of the ambiguity is created by the fact that in practice, unlike a civil law marriage, a customary union does not necessarily take place at a given moment but is concluded over a period of months or even years. Conflict between township practice and South African court rulings on the consequences of lobola payments before or after civil law marriages further complicate the situation. Ambiguities which have developed concerning marriage payment have thus left the woman in particular in a vulnerable position in borderline cases (ibid 126,127).

Burman also connects the historical change of lobola’s function to the increased use of cash for lobola: “...it has lost most of its functions for insurance and social cohesion, both inter- and intra-familial. This can be traced largely to the changed means of payment. Money is replacing cattle, and tends to be spent and vanish...”(ibid). Furthermore, she regards the use of cash as the reason why in urban areas lobola nowadays is less often claimed back upon divorce.

In Burman’s study, lobola was still referred to in terms of cattle but she states that it seem to “be a growing tendency to refer to it in monetary amounts /.../ The value of lobola beasts is unrelated to the market value of real cattle. Rather, it is determined in every case, within conventional margins, by a bargaining process between families, and ‘calves’ are sometimes said to ‘grow’, as money is given in instalments”(ibid).

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78 Cape Town, Ciskei and Transkei.
In the same vein of considering whether or not lobola is “a sale or not a sale of women” Burman concludes: “Africans have always stressed that lobola is not a sale price. Nonetheless, with the increasing absorption of Africans into the wage economy and the dwindling of the ritual, social cohesion and insurance functions of lobola, little is left of its multifaceted elements except the payment of valuables to acquire a wife” (ibid).

Burman might reach accurate conclusions about some of the very oppressive consequences of lobola for women in a market economy, but her account doesn’t say much about why women would like to continue with the practice.

She sometimes broadens the perspective on lobola, considering it not only as a materialistic discourse but as a discourse on subjective experience, for instance, when she puts the issue of women’s subjectivity in the forefront, and when to some extent she considers men as actors; something which is completely left out by Kuper, Radcliffe-Brown and Guy. But her materialistic approach seems to reduce her ability to deal with women’s subjectivity in a more nuanced way. Women’s subjectivity, or lack of subjectivity, is reduced to a question of “a sale or not a sale” of women.

Burman’s study seems to raise important questions and it does point to aspects of lobola and situations which put women in a very vulnerable position. It also points out men’s agency in that men have the possibility to use lobola in order to oppress women.

If lobola was only a question of transferring money to acquire a wife it is hard to see why it is such a persistent institution. This is a question Burman raises herself, in relation to the informants answer to the question of as to why they desire lobola to continue:

The system does not appear to be working to men’s material advantage either, whether husbands or fathers. The most frequently articulated reason for desiring it, given by even educated informants, is that it is custom and that it is very important to maintain one’s African identity - which is no doubt particularly true in the face of the collapse or change of so much else in African family life. However, this still leaves unanswered the more fundamental question of why certain institutions survive despite few apparent material benefits, because of sentimental attachment and the attribution of symbolic importance, and others fall victim to changing ways of life (ibid:135,136; my emphasis).

Burman’s materialistic approach to the problem does not give any answers to such questions. And the answers her informants give about why they would like to keep lobola cannot be incorporated theoretically by her into a meaningful discussion but only ‘dismissed’ as ‘sentimental attachment’ and ‘attribution of symbolic importance’.
An actor centered approach

Comaroff’s article (1980), “Bridewealth and the control of ambiguity in a Tswana chiefdom” represents a reaction to previous studies on bridewealth which he finds too functionalistic. It is an attempt to "re-analyse familiar marriage transactions with particular reference to their semantic and symbolic properties" (1980 b: preface). Comaroff is concerned with the dialectical relationship between sociocultural structures and manifest activities that may transform them (ibid:34).

Comaroff has studied marriage among the Tshidi and he argues that a fundamental aspect of Tshidi marriage is its inherent ambiguity:

The Tshidi do stress the formalities associated with the conjugal process in classifying and conceptualizing heterosexual relationships. /.../ Yet it is often difficult to ascertain whether a couple are in fact married – or, more generally to determine the status of their bond. Furthermore, in spite of the stated distinction between conjugality and concubinage it is impossible to tell them apart in many ordinary situations. /.../ the ambiguities surrounding the creation and categorisation of heterosexual relationships are not regarded as anomalous, unfortunate or transient departures from the former. On the contrary they are given explicit cultural recognition: the status of everyday unions is viewed, in the natural order of things, to be potentially equivocal and negotiable... (ibid:163)

Related to the individualistic ideology of the Tshidi is their strategic choice of marriage partners:

Tshidi typically choose partners expressly by virtue of the person/s to whom they may thus gain privileged access, a decision greatly influenced by the wealth, power and personality of those concerned /.../ of course these circumstances are mediated by circumstantial factors such as the network of linkages in which an individual finds himself and his envisaged goals – broadly, whether it is a bond of equality, patronage or clientage which he seeks. Whatever the logic of specific decisions the essential point here is that marriage and affinity entail acknowledged social resources which people may attempt to exploit to a particular kind of advantage: and, like most investments, they involve both risks and returns (ibid, My emphasis).

Although Comaroff switches the perspective from structure to actor, the actor is clearly male. Women are not considered as actors despite the impression that they are included in gender neutral terms such as "Tshidi", "individual", "people". But it becomes clear by the context and the terms "he", "his", "himself" etc. that they are omitted. It is men who acts strategically to gain advantageous positions, and in Comaroff’s analysis women are

79 The anthology, The meaning of marriage payments, springs out of a symposium in Manchester 1976-7 of which Comaroff is one of the participants with the aim to re-analyse marriage transactions.
reduced to objects which may be used by men to achieve their goals. In the following passage this male centered perspective becomes even more obvious:

Thus, typically, a man will enter a liaison as early as he can, promising marriage if he must, and will explore its implications: while it appears to represent an adequate prospect, potentiating a worthwhile affinal alliance and/or emotional satisfaction, he may sustain his involvement. But, as is frequently the case, where he finds it unsatisfactory or believes he can do better, he will seek to withdraw at a judicious moment and construe it as an informal liaison. In this way, an individual may enter one, two or perhaps three relationships before making a more lasting commitment (ibid:180, my emphasis).

It become clear that men are in a position to manipulate bridewealth to their advantage. The purpose of his study is to investigate men’s use of lobola to gain power and a favourable position. With a gender perspective it is clear that the ‘ambiguity’ of a union can be used by man against the interests of women. Comaroff’s study gives quite a dark picture of the position of women in these ‘games of men’. With this perspective on male actors in a patriarchal society, Comaroff points to the possibility of men being able to use bridewealth against women within the ‘union’; such as promising to pay at an early stage of the relationship but never doing it, or enforcing their position of power within the marriage institution.

Comaroff’s systematic androcentric perspective makes it impossible to gain an understanding of women’s options in relation to the bridewealth institution. My investigation brings out the agency of women with respect to lobola.
Chapter 3 – Discursive strategies

The questions guiding this chapter are; How my interviewees see lobola and its relation to women’s oppression? How do they argue for or against the institution? Could their dealing with lobola in the discussion of the issue be interpreted as discursive strategies – and if that is the case – what do the women aim to achieve by the use of these discursive strategies?

There are two lines of development constituting the base for the structure of this chapter. The first is a line consists of explicit views on lobola. The chapter starts with three women who are positive about lobola and would like to keep the institution. Then follows an interview with one woman who doesn’t take an explicit stand for or against the institution. The presentation and ends with a woman who is against lobola and would like to see an end to the practice. The second line in the structuring of the chapter is of a more analytical nature. I start exploring possible discursive strategies amongst women who are unequivocally in favour of lobola and who only discuss the issue on a quite general level. Thereafter, I deepen the exploration through an analysis of interviews with women who are more ambivalent and negative to lobola and who contextualise lobola to a greater extent than do the first two women presented. Since these women discuss lobola in relation to their own lives and since their views on lobola’s possible relation with women’s oppression become more complex through thir contextualising lobola, it is possible to deepen the analysis.

The ‘theoretical and methodological journey’ discussed in the dissertation starts with the empirical analysis in this chapter. The tension between agency/structure and culture/social relations shows up early in the analysis and my treatment of the problem in this chapter constitutes the base for how the problem will be dealt with in the following empirical chapters. I set out initially to do a meaning-centred analysis as my approach is hermeneutic. But I also have focused to a great extent on agency. How is it possible to analyse the women’s dealing with relations of gender-related power with such a theoretical and methodological starting point?

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80 See Chapter one for a discussion on the theoretical and methodological journey which constitutes a main theme in the dissertation.
To keep the true meaning of lobola.

Cholofelo and Emma, the first two women presented in this chapter, are clearly in favour of lobola and they don’t regard the institution as oppressive to women. Why do they argue in favour of lobola? Why do they describe it as non-oppressive? How do they deal with the critique of lobola as being oppressive? Could their ways of dealing with lobola in their discussion of the issue be interpreted as discursive strategies?

Good- and bad lobola

What is it that Cholofelo and Emma regards as positive about lobola, and is there anything which is negative about it?

C- /.../ Lobola is a way of tying two families together /.../ You are not selling a child; you are pulling the two families together and they get united around lobola. That’s why I married in the African custom, it’s not a marriage between the two individuals – it is the families. The families are very much involved and that is the natural support system for the new family that is starting – the man and the woman. They go to the family for counselling and conflict resolution. /.../ If the bride has a problem with her husband ... the family of the husband and … they sit down and sorted it out. /.../

F- So you think that there are basically other customs that are oppressing – like polygamy – you would say.

C- Yes, polygamy /.../ But lobola as such, to me it’s not. Unless someone chooses to abuse lobola as a principle, unless you put a very high price for your daughter, that kind of thing – you are trying to make money out of her. That is exploitation, it’s completely out /.../. But traditionally lobola was not like that. You know, there was a standard price. They paid that and even if they haven’t finished paying that even if a very small amount was available – let’s say it was a poor family – the marriage still took off. Because the bride would go. They’d say, when they get the cows or whatever they use for lobola, then they’d bring it. And until people got old there would still be an outstanding amount that they were supposed to pay. So it wasn’t really used like in a kind of business. I know that some people are abusing lobola and I’m against that. (My emphasis)

In Cholofelo’s view ”lobola as a principle” is not in any way oppressive to women. It is a means to tie families together. She stresses the importance of the families in the marriage, which is also considered as a support for the couple.

When Cholofelo speaks of the negative aspects of lobola it is the commercial abuse of lobola to which she refers. By bringing in the verb “abuse” she also introduces an actor – someone who abuses – which is a contrast to
how she speaks of the positive essence of lobola in a very general and abstract way in which there seem to be no actors, only a “principle”.

Emma is, like Cholofelo, very positive to lobola:

E – You see, lobola was meant to be an insurance for women. When you got married /.../ what was exchanged was cattle or whatever, which in times of need would form a kind of recourse for you. If, for instance, your family became destitute for one reason or another – your husband was no longer working – you would go back to your home and say: ‘may I have one or two of the cattle so that my children will get milk. I just put it as it was understood then without some of these highf luent things which have come on. So, if the children are destitute: ‘can I be given one of the cows to go and milk for my kids’ /.../ And when the woman, from time to time when she was out of some utensils in the house, like buckets for fetching water, like mats for sleeping on, like blankets, she would go home. Because, at least, there was that money – in the form of cattle. And the parents had to provide such things. So it was never really meant /.../ that once a girl is married all they see is: ‘we get so many head of cattle and then we can use it in order to pay...’ They even call it bride price which is bad, or even use it to pay for the brothers wife. That is not what it was meant to be. /.../

F- So, it wasn’t used for the brother to get married?

E - If it was used for the brother to get married then that brother knew that he had responsibility to look after his sister because he had used her cattle – her lobola cattle. That was an obligation. Just like an heir, who had inherited part of that lobola would have to look after the girl whose lobola he was now inheriting. That was what it was. So, knowing that some of our people are still not highly educated, they still believe in a lot of customs, I think that if it was maintained as it was there is nothing wrong. But it has definitely become corrupt one way or another. And I think it is because most people understand it in its changed form that they have a problem with it. But personally I don’t. (My emphasis)

In the same manner as Cholofelo, Emma refers to lobola’s "original" meaning, which she regards as good and not oppressive to women. While Cholofelo describes the positive meaning of lobola in terms of "creating relations between families" Emma focuses on what she regards as the positive meaning that lobola used to have for women as an insurance. We can see that the responsibility to provide for the married woman in times of need falls on her parents who have received lobola for her, but if the lobola has been used for her brothers marriage, he then has got the responsibility to take care of her.

When Cholofelo describes lobola today as an abuse of lobola Emma describes lobola as corrupt and altered. The terms “corrupt” and “changed” imply, as does Cholofelo’s use of the term “abuse”, that there are actors involved in contemporary negative meanings of lobola.
Many of the women interviewed, whether they want to keep lobola or not, refer to, what I call, a "golden past" in which lobola was not oppressive to women. The meaning of lobola of this golden past is described as the "traditional meaning of lobola" which is essentialised as for example "a way of tying two families together" (Cholofelo) or as an insurance for the woman (Emma).

I call this way of discussing lobola good lobola in my analysis. Good lobola is almost always referred to as something of the past and is discussed in very structural and abstract terms. Neither Cholofelo nor Emma talks of actors when they discuss good lobola, only its meaning for the married woman or for the families involved. This way of discussing lobola implies an understanding of it as an institution "the true meaning" of which people just mirror. In these descriptions of lobola; people are not depicted as actors but as automatically following the rules and regulations of the institution.

Cholofelo and Emma contrast good lobola with the abuse of lobola which they see as a contemporary distortion of the original institution and which I call bad lobola in my analysis.

Even though Emma’s emphasis on what she perceives as positive aspects of lobola is quite different from Cholofelo’s. There is a connection between the two in that they put much focus on the importance of the extended family in describing the primary meaning of lobola, and not as much on the individuals involved. Furthermore, the extended family is described in purely positive terms, a description, which, in turn, enhances the good qualities of lobola in their argument in favour of the institution.

Gendered meanings, non-gendered meanings and gender-related power

Both Cholofelo and Emma speak about the good quality of lobola and they do it in a political context in which lobola has been criticised for being oppressive to women (See Chapter four). Do they see lobola as having any oppressive aspects? And if they do – how and when do they describe lobola as oppressive to women?

F- So, for you, lobola doesn’t have to do with inequality at all?

C- No, it doesn’t have to, to me it doesn’t. Because women go to magistrates to sign papers and things like that... /.../ My grandmother was married in that way, and I have seen her happy with my grandfather. That was on my mother’s side. On my father’s side, I lost my grandmother and my grandfather – he died when my father was still young so I only saw my grandmother.

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81 The use of "many" does not in any way imply a quantitative approach to the interview material, it is merely used since the this was a recurrent theme in the interviews which made it seem significant to me and seemed worth to investigate it further.
And I have seen my aunts, my father’s sisters, they were in that situation /.../
In a traditional sense they were settled in their families and their husbands
weren’t abusing them – no, not at all. They respected them. You know, it was
only that there were certain customs apart from lobola that pushed the men
higher /.../ like polygamy /.../.

When explicitly asked about if she connects lobola to women’s oppression
Cholofelo answers that there is no relation to women’s oppression at all:
“You know, it was only that there were certain customs apart from lobola
that pushed the men higher /.../ like polygamy”.

In my analysis I investigate if the women connect lobola to women’s op-
pression in relation to different contexts – implicitly and explicitly. The ana-
lytical term I use for exploring the issue is gender-related power. The term is
used both for relations and understandings of inequalities between men and
women, which the women themselves explicitly state as unequal relations.
But the term is also used for more implicitly expressed unequal relations
which I analyse as such and which the women themselves might not recog-
nise as unequal. The analytical term gender-related power is used not to
close off a specific meaning of what is considered gender oppressive rela-
tions and meanings but to keep a flexible analytical approach in which the
term can be used to analyse differences in understandings of oppressive rela-
tionships and meanings. Cholofelo does not see lobola as having aspects of
gender-related power when asked explicitly about her view on lobola – she
does not see any relation between women’s oppression and lobola in that
context. This depiction of lobola, which I have called good lobola in my
analysis, is not related to gender at all by Cholofelo but is given the meaning
“a bond between families”. When the informants speak about issues ana-
lysed here, as not related to gender I will call it non-gendered understand-
ings. Cholofelo’s understanding of lobola as a bond between families is that
of a non-gendered understanding of the meaning of lobola.

Cholofelo explicitly brings in an element of gender-related power when
she speaks about the abuse of lobola today:

F- So you think that there are basically other customs that are oppressing –
like polygamy – you would say.

C– /...//Unless someone chooses to abuse lobola as a principle, unless you put
a very high price for your daughter, that kind of thing – you are trying to
make money out of her. That is exploitation, it’s completely out /.../. But tra-
ditionally lobola was not like that. You know, there was a standard price.
They paid that and even if they haven’t finished paying that even if a very
small amount was available – let’s say it was a poor family – the marriage
still took off. Because the bride would go. They’d say, when they get the
cows or whatever they use for lobola, then they’d bring it. And until people
got old there would still be an outstanding amount that they were supposed to
pay. So it wasn’t really used like in a kind of business. I know that some people are abusing lobola and I’m against that (my emphasis).\textsuperscript{82}

It is the "making money" from one’s daughter, which concerns her, and she compares this with the traditional way in which there was a standard price. She focuses on the commercialisation of the institution. The explicit gender-related power aspects of lobola are formulated in economic terms. The oppressive aspects of lobola are expressed as related to a market economy – women are used for making money as in “a kind of business”.

Even though Cholofelo talks about what I have called good lobola, as having an explicit non-gendered meaning – a bond between families – she brings in gender when arguing for its non-oppressive nature. Then she uses her own family as an example in which husbands have not abused the women. On the contrary she argues that the women have been treated with respect.

It is interesting to note that her female relatives "were settled in their families in a traditional sense". These statements could be interpreted as if women by staying in their traditional position avoid being abused and are treated with some degree of respect by their husbands. Cholofelo doesn’t mention what would happen with the respect shown by the husbands if their wives would not "settle in their families in a traditional sense". She speaks of lobola as non-gendered when explaining what she regards as its true essence but brings in personal experiences of gender meanings and relations when arguing for its non-oppressive nature. By doing this Cholofelo avoids discussing what lobola does or entail in relation to gender and she only speaks of what it does not do or does not entail in relation to gender. By making these distinctions of when gender is relevant and not relevant to discuss in relation to lobola she seems to strengthen her argument for lobola. But I also interpret her argument giving an implicit gendered meaning to lobola; a gendered meaning which is also related to gender-related power - women are being treated with respect when they conform to what is expected of them traditionally. This connection to gender-related power is not recognised by Cholofelo – in my interpretation however she does make a connection to gender-related power in that she has an gendered understanding of lobola which implies that lobola entails restrictions and obligations on women.

It is only when I ask Cholofelo if it’s not more difficult for women to get a divorce since their families have to pay back the lobola, that she agrees to some extent that lobola might involve some element of gender-related power other than that expressed in economic terms:

\textsuperscript{82} This passage is quoted earlier in this chapter but I choose to quote it again in order for the reader to be able to follow the new line of interpretation presented here.
F- But what do you think about if somebody wants to get a divorce ... if a girl or a woman wants to get a divorce. Is not that (lobola) in the way somehow?

C- Yes, it is difficult. Yes, it is difficult, because you have to go to /.../ the other family, you have to get /.../ a family meeting. And then give them their money. That’s it.

F- But don’t you think it is more difficult for a woman who wants to get a divorce than for a man?

C- Yes, it’s difficult for the woman. You are right. /.../ If you want to get out of this marriage and it’s terrible for you, you go back to your family. You don’t have to pay back the money; first you walk out, you go to your family, you tell them: “return the money”; then you return the money.

F- but then – if you have paid already for your son’s marriage – there might be a difficulty?

C- No, your brother – he has used your cattle, all your money to pay lobola. He will get money. He is bound to look for money to return to that family – yes it is him who is bound.

Cholofelo recognises that there is a problem if the woman wants to get a divorce but she doesn’t seem to want to make a big problem out of it. She seems to refer the matter to clear-cut rules which people automatically follow.

In Emma’s discussion lobola is definitely given a gendered meaning as she refers to the married woman’s responsibilities as a mother and wife in connection to lobola’s meaning as an insurance for the married woman. When the married woman is not able to give her children food or when she doesn’t have kitchen utensils and bedding which is connected to the wife’s and mother’s responsibilities, the person who has received her lobola or has inherited it from her parents is responsible to help her out.

Even though Emma does give lobola a gendered meaning she does not explicitly relate this to gender-related power. In my analysis, she implicitly relates this gendered meaning to gender-related power in that a woman is expected to fulfil certain duties connected to the responsibilities of a mother to be able to receive help in times of need. It is clear that lobola in this understanding functions as an insurance if the woman conforms to what is expected of her as a married woman. It is when Emma talks of bad lobola she brings in an element of gender-related power in that she is against the use of the word bride-price: "They even call it bride price which is bad". As does Cholofelo, she expresses the gender-related power aspects of lobola in economic terms and she does this by contrasting the proper economic exchange of good lobola with the abuse of lobola:
E- Even today – if a couple gets married, that is now from where I come from: First of all it is expected that the parents buy the wedding gown from those presents. That they give the girl some furniture from those presents. So that part of it is an exchange of friendship, part of it still goes back to the groom’s family by way of the furniture she brings home and other things she brings home. Some even actually – just quietly, if it is in money form – those parents, who are affluent, give it back to the girl. So in some ... it depends on people, I mean a lot of good things really get corrupted by people, yeah, it’s like that.

Us and them

Both Cholofelo and Emma make a clear distinction between what I have called good lobola, which they would like to keep and which is considered non-oppressive, and bad lobola which is given a meaning explicitly connected to gender-related power. This distinction also reflects a distinction of past and present time in which lobola of the past was good and is referred to in very structural terms. Present time lobola, on the contrary is depicted as ”corrupt” and as an abuse of the traditional institution; a depiction which brings in a third distinction between past times structural definition of lobola and present-time actor-centred definition of lobola.

How can we understand these distinctions made between good and bad lobola, between past meanings and present time meanings, between structural meanings of good lobola and actor-centred meanings of bad lobola? Could the distinctions be understood as a discursive strategy? – And if they can, what do the women aim to achieve through this strategy? Can we understand more about the distinctions made and the possibility of them are a discursive strategy if we look more into how the women bring themselves into the discussion of lobola?

When Cholofelo argues that lobola is not oppressive to women she immediately refers to herself. An example is when I ask her if lobola does not have to do with inequality and she says: "No, it doesn’t have to, to me it doesn’t.” In that way she seems to make the whole question a matter of individual interpretation. One way of understanding this individualisation of the question is that it is politically sensitive and to make it a matter of individual interpretation might be a way of avoiding to make political statements when there is no official ANC-policy on the matter. But it might also be understood in the light of Cholofelo’s view of lobola as a positive custom that should be kept. By saying that she doesn’t have a problem with it, she makes a distinction between herself and others who might have a problem with it. Since she has previously made a distinction between good lobola and bad lobola, she can put herself and her family on the good lobola – side of the distinction and place the people who have a problem with lobola on the bad lobola – side of the distinction.
Emma means that if the original meaning of lobola is maintained lobola would not be a problem. And she states that non-educated people "believe in a lot of customs" which I interpret as: since there are many non-educated people who believe in lobola it is okay as long as it is maintained in its original form. She makes non-education the reason for people's desire to keep the institution and a reason for us educated people to respect its existence. But she also takes a stand against its corrupt state today. *Good lobola* is something of the past, but something that should be respected and *bad lobola* is a result of the corrupt behaviour of people and it is this form of lobola that others have a problem with.

Thus, Emma does not have a problem with lobola since she understands its original positive function: ".../ And I think because most people now understands it (lobola) in its changed form that they have a problem with it but personally I don’t.” In the same way as Cholofelo describes the good lobola of the past and accepts it on a personal level, she describes bad lobola as something of the present which is what other people that have a problem with lobola refer to.

Both Cholofelo and Emma make a distinction between *them and us* – a distinction which reflects the other distinctions discussed above such as good and bad lobola, past and present meanings of the institution and so forth. They bring in themselves in relation to lobola when they make this last distinction of *them and us*. Does this give us any clues about if and how we could understand the distinctions as a discursive strategy? We have seen that the distinction of *them and us* places Cholofelo and Emma on the good lobola side of the distinctions made, at the same time as it makes lobola a matter of individual choice. Bad lobola is effectively separated from good lobola by the distinctions and women become free to choose the good lobola side of the distinctions.

Can one interpret the distinction-making which depicts a cleavage between good and bad lobola, the individualisation of the problem and the non-gendering of "true meaning" of lobola (by Cholofelo) – as discursive strategies which serve to legitimise lobola and promote its continued existence. Or can we interpret it as a discursive strategy to escape oppressive aspects of the institution? A discursive space seems to be constructed in which each and every woman seems to be free to adhere to and choose a good meaning of lobola to "escape" all oppressive aspects of it.

**Distinction making, individualisation and non-gendering – discursive strategies?**

Both Cholofelo and Emma argue for lobola as a positive institution, which should be maintained.
The use of distinctions leaves us with many questions regarding the gendered and gender-related power aspects of the institution. It is as if the distinctions are necessary in order to be able to keep an image of the true and good meaning of lobola, which has no gender-related power aspects.

The extended family is in Cholofelo’s and Emma’s formulations only depicted in positive terms. This positive depiction enhances the positive image of lobola as the extended family is given an important function for marriage and for lobola.

There seems to be a connection between the use of distinctions, the positive view of the extended family and the image of, what I have called good lobola. We have seen that a picture seems to be generated in which good lobola has no connection to gender-related power. If we see individualisation, distinction-making and non–gendering as discursive strategies – utilised perhaps by women who are advocating gender-equality and who are very aware of the critique that has been directed against lobola as oppressive to women. What is the aim of using such discursive strategies which creates such a positive picture of lobola? It is quite clear that the women aim at legitimising the institution but can we also interpret it as they use discursive strategies to counter oppressive aspects of lobola?

Cholofelo was married by lobola herself and describes it as unproblematic.

C - Ah...we do it in my family yes, and my father never abused my mother because he paid lobola for her. Until she died. I haven’t seen that kind of thing, but in other instances, you will find somebody - a person saying "I paid lobola for you". That is wrong. And my husband paid for me and my sisters husband paid lobola for her and my son in law is paying lobola for my daughter. So with me it’s not a negative thing. Lobola is a way of tying two families together. You are not selling a child; you are pulling the two families together and they get united around lobola. That’s why I married in the African custom, it’s not a marriage between the two individuals – it is the families. The families are very much involved and that is the natural support system for the new family that is starting – the man and the woman. They go to the family for counselling, and conflict resolution. If the bride has a problem with her husband ... the family of her husband ... they sit down and sort it out. /.../ 

F- So for you it is like ... it doesn’t have to do with inequality at all?

C- No, it doesn’t have to, to me it doesn’t. Because women go to magistrates to sign papers and things like that ... Our way of getting married was like that, my grandmother was married in that way, and I have seen her happy with my grandfather. That was on my mother’s side. On my father’s side, I lost my grandmother and my grandfather – he died when my father was still young so I only saw my grandmother. And I have seen my aunts, my father’s sisters, they were in that situation /.../ In a traditional sense they were settled in their families and their husbands weren’t abusing them – no, not at all.
They respected them. You know, it was only that there were certain customs apart from lobola that pushed the men higher /.../ like polygamy /.../. An obvious reason for not questioning the institution is the strong position it still holds in South Africa. To question it would in many instances require considerable courage and could involve high social costs.

A possible interpretation is that there are some positive aspects of lobola and the traditional extended family which Cholofelo and Emma would like to keep. And, therefore, they use the distinctions, individualisation and non-gendering as discursive strategies with the aim to legitimise and uphold a good image of the institution. To do that within a political context which promotes gender-equality they have to separate lobola from relations of gender-related power in order to keep a purely positive image of the institution. Coupled with these aspects of lobola is that a woman actually gets some relative power through the institution within a ‘traditional’ frame of reference. To be married by lobola gives a woman higher status than if she isn’t married in this way and she might receive or pay lobola when her own sons and daughters get married which, in turn, might give her some institutionally sanctioned parental influence over her children and their partners. The positive aspect of the extended family as a possible support for the couple, which Cholofelo and Emma emphasise, is also ‘traditionally’ coupled with the power of parents over their children, something they neglect to talk about and which might be a power position they wish to keep. Cholofelo is, at the time of the interview, about to receive lobola for her daughter and she is careful to point out that she is not going to use the money for “chocolate”.

We have seen that Cholofelo and Emma have both an explicit understanding of lobola as having gender-related power aspects and a more implicit understanding of the gender-related power aspects of the institution. The explicit understanding is expressed in economic terms; what I have called bad lobola. But there is also another more implicit understanding of gender-related power aspects of lobola expressed in relation to other contexts.

A possible interpretation is that Cholofelo and Emma aim at making a space for themselves – and, on a more political level, for other women – ‘within’ the institution of lobola and that they use distinctions, individualisation and non-gendering as discursive strategies for this purpose. There are at least two different understandings of gender-related power aspects of lobola which Cholofelo and Emma might want to counter through the use of discursive strategies. This aim doesn’t have to be seen as opposite to a possible aim to legitimise lobola but could co-exist.

Having a position like Cholofelo with everyone in the family married by lobola, including herself, might make it difficult to openly question the institution as having oppressive aspects. Cholofelo’s strategy might instead be to create a space, for herself and for other women, from ‘within’ the institution by using discursive strategies. By giving lobola a non-gendered meaning of
‘good lobola’ – a bond between families – and by defining patriarchy as something apart from lobola – "it is only that there were certain customs apart from the lobola part that pushed the men higher, you know things like polygamy". The aim might be to create a space for action from within a very powerful tradition without openly questioning it in terms of gender-related power; By redefining the institution of lobola and discursively rid it from gender-related power. Furthermore, by individualising the institution – each and every woman can redefine it into ‘good lobola’ – an image is created in which it seems relatively easy to escape oppressive aspects of lobola.

But it is difficult to say much about aims of Cholofelo and Emma for keeping up such a positive image of lobola since there is not much interview material in which they contextualise their rather general discussion on lobola above. Can we find any more clues on distinction making, individualisation and non-gendering as possible discursive strategies in the other interviews?

"It’s proof that he is the head of the house” - negotiating the meaning of lobola.

Sisiwe would like to keep lobola since she thinks it’s important not to forget one’s own traditions and culture. Like Cholofelo and Emma, she is unequivocally in favour of the institution but she contextualises lobola to a much greater extent than do Cholofelo and Emma as she relates it for example more to her own life and to a discussion on ‘African culture’.

Sisiwe says that, if she would get married, she would insist on lobola being paid for her: "because I might be a feminist but I still insist that if somebody wants to marry me today, he must go and pay lobola to my mother. I will not just go and do the Western thing and just go and sign in court or at the commissioner /…/ Not before he pays lobola to my parents.”

This way of contrasting Western culture and African culture could be interpreted as a reaction against Westerners interpreting lobola for Africans. This is a critique, which has been directed towards, for example, missionaries and anthropologists. But it might also be a critique of Western feminism. Prior to Sisiwe stating that she will ”not just go and do the Western thing”, she says that some feminists ”take things to the extreme”.

Even though Sisiwe is critical about some feminists, she describes herself as one at the same time as she would like to keep lobola. Her contextualisation of lobola permits a further exploration into the questions of this chapter:

83 Apartheid policy on ‘African culture’ might also be seen as a ‘Western’ interpretation of African culture in which some parts of ‘tradition’ were freezed into customary law and tradition was interpreted in ways that suited the apartheid regime (sometimes in ‘collaboration’ with male power holders, like chiefs, in the African communities who didn’t want to lose their authority and power over women and youth).

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Does Sisiwe make any connection between lobola and women’s oppression? How does she argue in favour of the institution? How does she deal with the critique of it as being oppressive? Could her ways of dealing with lobola in her discussion of the issue be seen as discursive strategies? Can we find any more clues in Sisiwe’s discussion on lobola on distinction making, individualisation and non-gendering as possible discursive strategies?

**Good and bad lobola**

When Sisiwe talks about lobola in general terms she uses the same distinction between *good lobola* and *bad lobola* as Cholofelo and Emma and she describes good lobola as "a bond between two families" and bad lobola as lobola which "came out of proportion. Initially lobola was not for taxation or exploitation like we are doing now, but it was a bond between two families. Now you find people charging up to twenty thousand, fifty thousand /…/ for their daughters". She contrasts good lobola of the past, which is described as an essence on a *structural* level, with the present commercialisation of lobola, which she sees as exploitation, by *actors*. As we can see Sisiwe makes use of distinctions, as do Cholofelo and Emma, which seem to function in a way which makes lobola as – in its essence – a good institution which is worthwhile keeping. Furthermore, good lobola is given an *explicit non-gendered* meaning while bad lobola is given a meaning with *explicit gender-related power* aspects, which are expressed in economic terms.

"In the African tradition you must respect a man”

Sisiwe relates her view on lobola to a more extensive discussion on ‘what is African culture’ than do Cholofelo and Emma, and she discusses lobola in relation to her own life. How does Sisiwe talk about lobola in relation to these different contexts?

S - I mean with us – in the African tradition you must respect a man. And that is a fact; like you respect your parents. Sometimes you find that feminists take things to the extreme. They’d say to their husband: ‘No, you can’t use my phone, you must get your own phone if you want to phone.’ And maybe if their partner comes asking for food, they’d say ‘you’ve got your own two hands. You can cook for yourself if you want to cook’. My boyfriend usually comes home late /…/ and when he comes I still have that respect for him. If he wants food I’ll wake up and warm it for him. That is just having some...smoother relationship within the household. He respects my independence. /…/ If I say ‘I’m in a meeting, I’m going to come back late’. When I get home ... I mean ... food will be ready. If he has got time he cleans the house /…/, he does the garden. We do things together, we share. Sometimes he would say ‘I will cook the meat, you just cook the pap’ or ‘you just cook the rice’. But I find that if we have to take things to the extreme, forgetting your own traditions and culture, it becomes a problem.
F- Okay, so you are saying... when you talk about your own tradition and culture, in this case, if you come home... or if he comes home late and you would be asleep...

S- And I’m not forced to do that, if he comes back at two. I’m not obliged to wake up and eat. It’s on my own will. /.../ But sometimes it just comes out of you or just out of respect or just out of courtesy, or of love that you wake up warm the food for him.

F- But what would be the difference the other way around, you mean? He wouldn’t feel that way, as much, if you would come home late?

S- Late? In my particular case, we have a record of understanding that I’m this kind of person /.../ and I’m this busy and these are the things that I do. And sometimes I have to go away for a week or so. /.../ I have to come back late. /.../ On that aspect he understood, there was an understanding. But you find some men don’t understand and that’s when they start beating their wives. Sometimes they suspect them of having other affairs outside the home and pretending to be busy and go somewhere.

When Sisiwe talks about how a woman should respect a man, she expresses it in terms of her cooking for him. And she compares it with how you should respect your parents. She does not make an explicit connection to gender-related power but talks about this gender-related "respect", that is in other terms. At first she talks about it in terms of culture and tradition but when I ask her further about it, she changes into a more individualistic vocabulary. To cook for her boyfriend becomes a matter of "free choice" that she does out of respect, courtesy and love. "Tradition" turns into individual free choice that comes out of feeling.

It seems like the respect she shows her boyfriend is connected to her statement "having some ... smoother relationship in the household". I interpret that as a more implicit connection she makes to gender-related power; if she shows her boyfriend the respect which is connected to a man’s position as the head of the household, it leaves her some room to negotiate her position as a woman. To keep a smooth relationship could be interpreted in relation to her statement that other women who try to lead independent lives get beaten by their husbands. Her statement on African culture and feminism could also be interpreted in this light. By making a distinction between “African culture” and “Western feminism” she might attempt to negotiate some degree of independence in a "smooth" way which defines what she does in terms of “African tradition” in contrast to extreme “Western feminists”. Another implicit connection she makes with gender-related power is that even though she explicitly says that she and her boyfriend share household chores, the examples she gives of this connects his contribution to "free choice”. He chooses when to cook the meat or when he has got the time to contribute – she does not seem to expect him to do it.
She expresses her busy work and travel in purely individualising terms "I’m this kind of person". She also attributes to her boyfriend the personal characteristic of "understanding" her personality whereas other men don’t and therefore, may beat their wives for being away from home.

When Sisiwe contextualises lobola in contrast to the non-gendered meaning she gives good lobola in her more general description above – "a bond between two families" – lobola is clearly related to the notion of "the man as the head of the household". A notion which she then connects closely to "[in] the African tradition you must respect a man". She connects these three notions in a very straightforward manner: "to give them [men] the respect they deserve since traditionally the husband is the head of the house, for the mere that they still pay lobola for us /.../".

Sisiwe would like to keep tradition, which could be interpreted as a strategy she uses to widen her space for action within a relationship. She describes this as a general strategy among women:

S- In general women would give men that respect. They make them feel that they are the head of the house and sometimes men misunderstand that and abuse that opportunity that they are given. /.../

In addition to speaking of the importance of keeping tradition in relation to men’s position as heads of households and to speak of women’s attempts to widen their space for action in terms of individual traits, Sisiwe also attempts to negotiate the meaning of "head of the household" in a way that would benefit women.

S- /.../ With the African tradition women are not allowed to speak. If a husband speaks, he speaks for the whole family. That is one other problem we had when we were doing voter education that when the husband said ‘I’m the head of the house I’ll vote for all of you’. We had to instil to the women’s mind that: ‘no – he is the head of the house – but he can’t vote for you. You must still go and vote for yourself’.

This negotiation of the meaning of "head of the house" seems to be closely connected to a negotiation of the meaning of lobola:

F- And you don’t think that ... it [lobola] doesn’t have to be oppressive to women.

S- No, no.

F- But at the same time you said something about like... in connection with ‘the man is the head of the household’, that he paid lobola for you and there’s a connection there.

S - Yeah (F - Yeah.), so that is proof that ...
F- No, I just wonder how you think...

S- Yeah, it’s proof that he is the head of the house, because he has paid for her. But you find that sometimes on the issue of ‘women abuse’ or ‘husbands in the families’; you find that when men pay lobola for you they think you are their object. They think you are an object that they have bought and they can use as they wish. Which are the wrong concepts. That is one thing that needs to be debated and to be instilled into the men’s minds that lobola doesn’t mean that you pay – you are buying me. But lobola is the bond the two families to become one, yeah.

Sisiwe makes a distinction between the appropriate power of a head of a household and his treating his wife like an object that he has bought and that he can use as he wishes. This is a argument similar to that of Cholofelo and Emma who are of the opinion that lobola is abused today and that it in its "true meaning", it is not oppressive to women. They all explicitly express lobola’s bad gender-related power aspects in economic terms and clearly demarcate this from good lobola. The difference between Sisiwe and Cholofelo and Emma is that Sisiwe, as she contextualises the institution, it becomes gendered in meaning – a woman has to respect her husband because he has paid lobola for her. And she clearly connects lobola to some kind of power position of a man in the household even though she believes that the position of a man "as the head of the household" does not have to be oppressive to the woman. I call this connection to gender-related power implicit as Sisiwe does not seem to make an explicit connection between the notion of "the head of the house" and gender-related power. She has a clear view of what kind of gender-related power lobola should not entail, but she doesn’t connect any explicit gender-related power aspects to the ‘proper’ meaning of a "head of the house". Paying lobola does not mean that the head of the household can use his wife as he wishes but Sisiwe does not say what it means for a man to be the head of the house with respect to gender-related power aspects.

Making a space for action through discursive strategies?
We have seen that Sisiwe makes distinctions between good and bad lobola as do Cholofelo and Emma. Good lobola is given the non-gendered meaning "a bond between families" and bad lobola is expressed as an abuse of its original meaning. It is bad lobola, which is oppressive to women, and its
gender-related power aspects are expressed in economic terms. The distinction between good and bad lobola is also enforced by distinctions between past and present time and between a structural meaning of good lobola whereas bad lobola’s meaning is expressed in actor-centred terms.

When Sisiwe contextualises good lobola it becomes *gendered*. It obtains a meaning connected to the position of the man as ‘the head of the household’ and the ‘respect’ you have to show him as his wife since he has paid lobola for you. Although good lobola is gendered when contextualised, Sisiwe maintains a strict distinction between *good* and *bad lobola* in that she makes a *distinction* between a ‘proper head of a household’ and one who abuses the institution. This distinction serves the function of referring gender-related power to bad lobola and freeing good lobola from it – in her explicit reasoning about the institution. The *distinction-making* could also be seen as a discursive strategy to counter what is expressed as economic gender-related power aspects of lobola – as a discursive strategy to counter *bad lobola*. Lobola is negotiated to mean *good lobola*, which is clearly demarcated from *bad lobola*. But what is expressed on a general level as the *non-gendered* meaning of *good lobola* becomes *gendered* when the institution is contextualised in particular situations. The gendered meaning of good lobola is still clearly demarcated from bad lobola and what is explicitly expressed as lobola’s oppressive aspects. But when good lobola is contextualised and becomes gendered it is also *implicitly* connected to gender-related power.

I interpret Sisiwe as making implicit connections between good lobola and gender-related power when she talks, for example, about the respect she shows her boyfriend in order to make the relationship in the household smoother.

Is it possible to interpret Sisiwe as using discursive strategies in relation to this implicitly expressed relations of gender-related power? She, for example travels a lot and is very busy and she seems to use strategies in order for her boyfriend to “understand” whereas other men don’t understand and may beat girlfriends and wives. Showing respect in a ‘traditional’ way seems to be a means to create a space for action. Sisiwe would like to keep tradition at the same time, as she seems to negotiate a space for action in relation to gender-related power aspects of that tradition, which are not expressed explicitly. Is it possible to interpret her discussion of tradition, respect etc in *non-gendered* terms as a discursive strategy to make a space in relation to implicitly expressed aspects and relations of *gender-related power*? And could we interpret the *individualisation* of her wishes to lead a busy life and travel a lot as a discursive strategy to widen her space of action in relation to gender-related power?

*Non-gendering, distinction making and individualisation* of the issues discussed above could be interpreted as discursive strategies to widen Sisiwe’s (and other women’s) *space of action* with respect to relations of gender-related power. By using these strategies Sisiwe seems to attempt to widen
her *space for action* in relation to her boyfriend *without openly confronting him in terms of male power*. But she also connects her own strategies in the context of the ‘respect’ she shows her boyfriend with a more general discussion on lobola and the notion of the ‘head of a household’. This might be interpreted as the use of distinctions, individualisation and non-gendering could be seen as discursive strategies to widen women’s space for action more generally in society.

Non-gendering as a strategy to make a space of action in relation to gender-related power

Mmatshilo was married by lobola but she is, unlike Sisiwe, quite ambivalent to the institution. She doesn’t take an explicit stand for or against lobola. Mmatshilo never actually tells me why she chose to marry by lobola. She only offers one positive interpretation of the institution, which applies, to her own marriage; lobola might be used as an economic means for the couple to establish a new family (See p. 89 *He cannot even say that he has bought me*).

Mmatshilo, like Sisiwe, is very aware of the ‘lobola debate’ and she has been working actively with gender issues, for example in the Federation of Transvaal Women. Mmatshilo is careful not to say anything negative about lobola but she also states that she was politically conscious when she got married. This seems to mean that she had a possibility to be conscious about negative aspects of lobola and avoid it: "I got married when I was already politically conscious and I’m married to a political activist but we both agreed that ... he will pay lobola” (My emphasis).

Mmatshilo contextualises lobola in relation to her own marriage which gives us an opportunity to explore the questions of this chapter further; Does Mmatshilo relate lobola to women’s oppression at all? How does she deal with lobola in her own marriage when she seems so ambivalent to the institution? Could we interpret her discussion of the issue as discursive strategies?

I will specifically explore *non-gendering* as a possible discursive strategy in my analysis of Mmatshilo’s discussion of the issue.

"Personally, I don’t know what is African culture”*: an ambivalent view on lobola

Mmatshilo chose to get married by lobola when she was already ‘politically conscious’ and aware of the ‘lobola debate’. But she doesn’t take an explicit

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84 The Federation of Transvaal Women had a workshop on lobola in 1984 (Russel 1989:195).
stand for or against the institution. How does she reason about her reluctance to take an explicit stand for or against lobola?

F- There have been discussions about lobola as being oppressive to women and I want to know – do you think there are African traditions that are oppressive that should be abolished?

M- Personally, I don’t know what is African culture? There is a lot of confusion. I tend to be confused when you talk about African culture because so many things have influenced it. Colonialism has also influenced our culture. It has been so diluted, so mixed, that you cannot really say ‘this is African culture’. However, there are some aspects of what is seen to be African culture that have to go. That had to go yesterday even before today. And, of course, the government has attended to the right to ownership of property, the right to land and so forth. In the past women never had that right. The right to inherit – that’s something that really did not need to exist in human life – the issue of lobola, the issue of polygamy, and so forth. I think, as I have indicated, that there is such a lot of confusion, mixture and all those things, to what is seen as culture. According to what one has heard, some of the reasons on the origin of lobola were somehow genuine. But it differs according to the source. Where I have heard that it was actually an economic means for the two, for the couple, others would say ‘no this was a token of appreciation to the other family’. Still others think ‘no a woman is being bought’. So until the time we can say exactly what we see these things actually do to a woman now – somebody must be able to define that – it is only then that you will be able to say: ‘yes it must go’ or ‘yes it cannot go’. [...] And also to avoid these things cannot be changed drastically over night. You need not alienate those who have a strong belief on some of these issues. I think those are issues that women themselves need to begin to look at honestly openly and also look at how diverse African culture is. Because it’s really a distortion and it’s not really within our African communities only. It is there within other cultures but in a different way and it is not called lobola.

The reasons Mmatshilo offers for not taking an explicit stand for or against lobola are that there is no such thing as African culture and that we don’t know what was the original function or meaning of lobola. Furthermore, she thinks that we have to define what lobola does to women before we can say anything about the institution’s future.

It could be seen as a paradox that she sees African culture as a distortion – a mixture and at the same time would like to see a definition of lobola’s meaning and implication for women. But it could also be seen as though she believes in an original meaning that has been distorted but which is possible to retain or to revitalize; it seems that she keeps the possibility open that there is some genuine meaning of lobola which could be good and retained. But she also keeps the possibility open that lobola can be found oppressive and therefore should be abandoned. In a way, she makes the same sort of distinction between good and bad lobola as the other women previously discussed in this chapter in that lobola has an essence which can be defined
as either good or bad. The difference is that Mmatshilo does not make a choice of which meaning is "the true meaning".

Another reason Mmatshilo offers for not abandoning lobola altogether is that it would alienate people because they have a strong belief in it, which would make it difficult to "change drastically over night". This could be interpreted as a rather pragmatic political statement in relation to the discussion of customary law and if some "customs" should be prohibited. But it could also be interpreted as more personal statement about her lived reality and possible options in relation to lobola.

“He cannot even say that he has bought me” – negotiating the meaning of lobola

Mmatshilo doesn’t express a definite opinion about lobola. She means that we have to know "facts" about this distorted custom before we can make any judgement about it. Does Mmatshilo relate lobola to any gender-related power aspects when she discusses the institution in relation to her own marriage and on a more general level?

M- /.../ I got married when I was already politically conscious and I’m married to a political activist but we both agreed that ... he will pay lobola. It was something that was between me, him and my parents as to how we are going to utilise the lobola. And it didn’t enrich anybody. Instead it assisted us in establishing our own base. It helped because we managed to have other things that we didn’t have.

The first meaning of lobola that she refers to when discussing her own marriage is expressed as non-gendered. She seems to negotiate the meaning of lobola as an economic means for her and her husband to establish their own base, which is one of the meanings of lobola which she refers to when discussing lobola in general terms. This negotiated meaning apparently counters the common view of today’s lobola as commercialised as she points out that lobola in her own marriage “did not enrich anybody”. But it could also be interpreted as countering what I have previously called bad lobola. The other informants have connected the meaning of bad lobola to gender-related power aspects expressed in economic terms. The meaning of bad lobola could be expressed as ‘a woman is being bought’.

Two discourses on lobola

Immediately after Mmatshilo discussed lobola as ‘an economic means for the newly established family’, she takes up the issue in quite different terms:

M- /.../ I got married when I was already politically conscious and I’m married to a political activist but we both agreed that ... he will pay lobola. It was
something that was between me, him and my parents as to how we are going
to utilise the lobola. And it didn’t enrich anybody. Instead it assisted us in es-
tablishing our own base. It helped because we managed to have other things
that we didn’t have. And today we are proud of it because it is... he cannot
even insult me that he has bought me. He didn’t buy me. We spent the money
together. I cannot even say he has bought me. I’m not his property because
we understood why we wanted that. And also to avoid ... these things cannot
be changed drastically over night. You don’t need to alienate those who have
a strong belief on some of these issues.

When Mmatshilo talks about lobola in non-gendered terms – what I will call
the first discourse on lobola – she also discusses in terms of ”we”: we both
agreed that he will pay lobola; it assisted us; we managed to have other
things; we are proud of it; etc.

Suddenly the discourse changes and she refers to gender-related power:
"And today we are proud of it because it is... he cannot even insult me that
he has bought me. He didn’t buy me. We spent the money; we spent the
money together. I cannot even say he has bought me. I’m not his property
because we understood why we wanted that.” This kind of sudden change
occurs several times in her discussion and in the following citation I will
mark those changes to a gender-related power discourse by italicising them.

F- That is also what I think is interesting; you say it (lobola) is changing and
it’s very difficult to know what is happening now. You can’t really say it is
an African – (M- Absolutely.) some origin thing. You are married by lobola,
but you have managed to do it in a way...

M- To redefine it. Exactly! And it suited all of us.

F- It seems to me, you feel it is ... you had this discussion with your husband
so you were completely aware of what you define as lobola.

M- The two of us and the families.

F- So you have never experienced either that it could be bad for you because
you already knew from the beginning what you were going to (M- Yes.)
yeah. Because that is one thing that I’m wondering about. It seems that some
of the policy that I’ve read. If you just take lobola as some thing (M-
Bluntly.) you can say it’s good or bad. But, I mean, you have done something
else with it.

M- And I mean like I’m saying; I was already in the organisation, I was al-
ready with the Federation of Transvaal Women. I knew these debates, and
really, it was left between him and me. We talked about it, we took it to our
families and partly we have educated the families because it was difficult for
them to accept it.

F - What was difficult to accept?
M- What we wanted this lobola to do and how we wanted it. Because they were feeling: what will people say; it is uncultural; within our /…/ tradition, this must happen, that must happen; he must buy jackets, coats and all those things. We managed to take them along and it was not something that was, you know, hush, hush. We had to take them along and explain to them and also to understand the economic capacity of the person. I felt that this is a mutual agreement between him and me that we want to live together want to establish a family – our family, not anybody’s family. If they can make sure then that they afford us an opportunity to describe the type the family that we want so that no one becomes a victim of this family that we are going to establish. We would want them to come and join us, not us going into their families, but them coming into this new family that we are establishing with its own values, own norms, and its own priorities ... (F - It worked?) ... It worked. We are now ten years married with no problems. No one can interfere on our... we do have our problems, we do fight, it’s tough. I still encounter serious problems. He might be a political activist, but he still has those chauvinist tendencies, so I have ... We still have to battle and I still also have my own weaknesses that he has to bare with. But at the end of the day what I’m saying is that that at no point have we fought along the issue of me being his property, not at all.

F- And the things you discussed with your families; that was mostly about how you are going to use it as...

M- ... and what we want. That we want to establish a family. We would welcome you people being part of that family. Not us, not me going to be part of his family. I’m not part of his family. His family is part of us, this new establishment that never existed. So I don’t belong to his family nor does he belong to my family, nor do I belong to my family now. I belong to this family – him our kids and myself. So the others have to fit into what we have actually put.

Up to this point in Mmatshilo’s discussion of lobola in her own marriage, the focus is on a non-gendered meaning of lobola; A new family is going to be established and lobola should contribute to that. But there are significant switches to a gender-related power discourse here and there.

After the last cited passage above, Mmatshilo slips more and more into the gender-related power discourse.

F- And did his parents also object to this?

M- Yeah, exactly, it’s not easy to accept that! It’s not easy. Because we are dealing with another generation. That has its own priorities to see a ‘X’85 – a daughter in law – that are allowed to do various things and so forth. Of course, some of those things I did, like putting on a doek as a sign of respect. I will not lose a thing because all I wanted was they to accept the fact that I’m also human. If really a thing is not going to make heaven or earth, I did

85 Mmatshilo uses an African word of which I am not sure and replace with ‘X’, which she translates into ‘a daughter in law’.
it, as a daughter in law. Their request for me was to put a scarf on my head and I’ll do it when I go to their place. It’s their territory, certainly I had to do that. But when they come to my house they would find me in my short pants and my tights and doing my own things. That’s my territory and that’s how my family accepts me – my kids and my husband. And there is no objection. If I have to visit my in-laws in Lesotho I know for certain that for me to relate with them, I cannot go in my tights and shorts, because that society is really hostile to that type of situation. So obviously I have to do something, but I’m very comfortable with it because I cannot dictate to them. Nor can they dictate to me. And when I’m with my husband I can do whatever that I want. And when they are in my house they also know that they have to do what would please me.

F- So it’s more like those symbolic things that you change when you go there? (M- Yes.) It’s not that you feel you have to change your behaviour?

M- Not at all. I don’t change my behaviour at all. If I have my hair permed or if I’ve styled my hair and I can’t put on a doek, they know I can’t put it today – sorry (F; Laughter). And that’s it. If it happens that I was driving by and had my jeans on then they’ll know: ‘Sorry I’m not coming to stay, I’m popping in, I’m on my way and I’m dressed in jeans, I’m sorry’. Because I’m not going to stay there, and it’s fine with them. And that’s it. We definitely have to accept that you have two different individuals and we are different people that you certainly can’t enforce what you want.

In these last citations, the discourses of Mmatshilo appears to have switched in emphasis. The gender-related power discourse moves centre-stage; up to this point she has mainly been discussing lobola as a means to establish a new family, now she emphasises how to be a traditional daughter in law puts restrictions on a woman and how she deals with that. I see the statement: “... all I wanted was them to accept the fact that I’m also human” as very significant as it says something about how Mmatshilo perceives the traditional role of a daughter in law as very oppressive.

But even though the emphasis is on her becoming independent from the traditional extended family structure, Mmatshilo slips into a non-gendered discourse now and then in this passage to. What she has described in gender-related power terms becomes non-gendered and of mutual interest to all parties involved: “I cannot dictate to them nor can they dictate to me. .../ And when they are in my house they also know that they have to do what would please me.” She also describes this mutual interest or obligation in individual terms: “We definitely have to accept that you have two different individuals and we are different people that you certainly can’t enforce what you want.”

How can we understand what I have interpreted as two different discourses on lobola – the non-gendered discourse and the one of gender-related power?
Non-gendering – a strategy to counter male and family power

By putting emphasis on lobola as an economic means to establish a new independent family, Mmatshilo strategises against at least two possible gender oppressive aspects of lobola that could be summarised by her statements: "He cannot even say that he has bought me" and "I’m also human". The first potentially oppressive aspect of lobola that she counters is in relation to her husband and the second in relation to her husband’s family.

She negotiates the meaning of lobola into a non-gendered meaning, an "economic means for the couple". In addition, she switches between talking about her marriage and lobola in a discourse of non-gendered terms and in a discourse of gender-related power terms.

The switches between discourses above together with the more elaborated concrete description of the negative oppressive consequences of lobola leads me to conclude that the non-gendered discourse is to a large part used by Mmatshilo as a strategy to make a space for herself in relation to oppressive aspects of lobola.

Sisiwe is not married by lobola but is positive about the institution whereas Mmatshilo is married by lobola and more ambivalent toward the institution. When I was discussing if Sisiwe was using non-gendering, individualisation and distinction-making as discursive strategies I concluded that it is a possible interpretation both in relation to explicitly and implicitly expressed aspects of gender-related power. I put some emphasis on her implicit connection between the notion of "respect" and gender-related power in that Sisiwe, for example, was showing her boyfriend respect to create a "smooth" relationship. She then connects the notion of "respect" with the notion of "head of household" and "lobola" in a way, which seem to connect lobola implicitly to gender-related power. Mmatshilo also makes an implicit connection between lobola and gender-related power but in relation to her own marriage in what I have called a gender-related power discourse. Mmatshilo seems to use a non-gendered discourse (and individualisation, on which I have not focused here) as a discursive strategy with the aim to widen her space of action in relation to her husband and "the extended family".

Mmatshilo describes how she has serious problems with her husband’s "chauvinist tendencies" even if he is a political activist. She says it is tough and that they do fight. But she points out that they never fought about her being his property and that "no one can interfere in our..." I interpret this to mean that by negotiating the meaning of lobola through this non-gendered discourse, she has been able to create a space for action within her marriage. She still shows her in-laws signs of "respect" such as putting on a doek because it is not going to "make heaven or earth". But through her non-gendered discourse, negotiating tradition, she has attempted to separate her own family from the ‘extended family’ to escape its ‘traditional’ power over her and she has attempted to prevent her husband from being able to use
lobola to exert power over her. It seems like her husband’s "chauvinist tendencies", in her view, would have been even more difficult to counter if the meaning of lobola had not been negotiated. By negotiating its meaning in a non-gendered discourse she prevents her husband from using lobola as ‘proof’ that she is his property and that she thereby establishes a space for herself.

The man without responsibility – discursive strategies for independence become constitutive of gender-related power

Mhudi is not in favour of lobola. She condemns it as an institution, since it in her view is oppressive to women. And she has chosen not to get married. Mhudi describes the man she currently has a relationship with as very traditional. She has been living in exile and says that lobola in exile was not a problem but it becomes a problem back in South Africa where tradition is stronger.

Mhudi has been advocating gender equality and has been working politically with these issues for a long time. Mhudi contextualises lobola in relation to life in exile, her views on "African culture" and her choice to stay unmarried. How does Mhudi, who is explicitly against lobola reason about the institution in relation to these different contexts? How does she argue against the institution and how does she connect it to women’s oppression? Can we interpret her discussion of the issue as discursive strategies? And can we find any more clues on distinction making, individualisation and non-gendering as possible discursive strategies?

An economic discourse and a family-related discourse?

Let us start by looking into what Mhudi gives as an immediate answer when I ask what her personal opinion is on lobola:

M- I don’t care for lobola. In the old traditional sense lobola used to make sense because it actually implied families coming together and bonding. In our tradition one of the ways of bonding are cattle – that you exchange cattle to show something – an agreement that ‘we are this’. So they are the meaning in that sense. But also in the traditional sense there was an element that was not good in lobola, in that it brought in the question of buying the reproductive power of women. Because you would find that if I could not bear children, my cattle ... my parents had to bring back the cattle and I had to go back home, which means that I could not fulfill what was required of me within the marriage institution. That was part of the problem of lobola. In another sense – if you don’t go deeply to what it meant – there was something about it. But with the break down of the traditional family and the traditional clan and unit
it began to adapt different connotations, a commercial, a value; If you are an educated woman then the lobola was more. If you are less educated – if you had children before marriage and so on. So it was a value, it was an exchange; there was a market for women and that for me is not on, in that then you are buying these women. So this marriage is about; ‘how much have I paid for you’. It still happens in the rural areas that even when the women are not educated it depends on the status of the family; so if you are marrying into a particularly highly respected family then you pay more. Or if you are marrying into a family to a chief and so on – if you are marrying into a family that has got a self concept about itself and its children then it’s going to be up. But in the urban areas it is more about finance, the commercial value, ‘how much are you?’ and people even say you put that value at a tax rate (Laughter).

So there is no way my son is going to pay lobola. There is no way that if I had a daughter I would ask for lobola from anybody. It’s a private matter. They get married and it’s their business. Because also – in these days of poverty and capitalism – you then make this young man pay so much lobola and they hardly have money to care for their family – to begin their family life.

There seem to be two different discourses in Mhudi’s reasoning about lobola, which can be connected to what I have previously called good and bad lobola respectively. The first discourse relates to what I have called bad lobola – in this discourse explicit gender-related power aspects of lobola are expressed in economic terms. I will call this an economic discourse on lobola; there shouldn’t be a market for women.

Mhudi does not consider lobola in the “old traditional sense” as exclusively positive and contrasting to its meaning today; she does not juxtapose today’s bad lobola with the past’s good lobola, but she thinks lobola was less commercial and had some good functions in the past. The good part of lobola in the past was that it helped families to come together, but there was still an economically related element in that a woman’s reproducitivity could be bought. That is, Mhudi clearly identifies the bad aspects of lobola in economic terms both historically and currently – women’s reproducitivity could be bought in the past and now there is a market for women.

Although Mhudi emphasises what I have called an economic discourse when explaining why she sees lobola as oppressive, she also relates her view on not wanting her son to pay lobola to a notion of marriage as a ”private” matter. She seems to give some credit to the extended family in her discussion of the traditional meaning of lobola as there was some positive aspect of bonding families together through lobola. But her own approach to her son’s marriage is different as she regards his possible marriage as a ”private matter”. I will call the positive connection between lobola and ”the extended family” as a family related discourse on lobola. We have seen before in this chapter how ”the extended family” is connected to the discussion on lobola as for example giving lobola the meaning of ”a bond between families” —
what I have called good lobola. The family related discourse on lobola is not applied when discussing her son and in this context the "nuclear family" and individual choice is put centre-stage.

These two discourses on lobola, the economic and the family-related, seem to come back in all of the interviews in this chapter and I will discuss them further in the final discussion of this chapter.

Even though Mhudi emphasises an economic discourse on lobola – the buying of a woman’s reproductivity – in what she describes as oppressive aspects of lobola in the past, her argument also implicates the restrictions and obligations to which a woman married by lobola was subjected. She had to bear children otherwise she did not fulfil what was required of her within the marriage institution. But this is not emphasised by Mhudi as gender-related power aspects of lobola. Instead she seems to refer gender-related power to the purchase of women and of women’s reproductivity. Furthermore, she makes a distinction between good and bad lobola in that gender-related power aspects are only expressed through an economic discourse and good lobola only in a family-related discourse. Lobola of the past is expressed as both good and bad lobola whereas lobola today is only bad. The family-related discourse is not applied to the present since she sees her own son’s marriage a private matter. Creating bonds between families does not seem to have a good and positive meaning in this current context. Could this inapplicability of the family-related discourse be interpreted as a sign that it is more problematic to separate "the extended family" from gender-related power aspects and relations with living people when applied on her own lived reality? Are there other understandings of gender-related power aspects and relations of marriage and lobola which are not expressed through the economic discourse and which Mhudi has to deal with in her own life?

Women’s independence in exile

Mhudi contextualises lobola in relation to her life in exile when discussing why lobola is such controversial issue among women themselves in the ANC. How does she connect lobola to gender-related power in this context?

M- There is no agreement in the ANC on lobola, amongst women themselves – there is no agreement at all. Because there are still, especially in the current époque ... in exile you didn’t have problems because we had relatively ... women that had experience ... having gone outside and having lived different types of life and having struggled side by side with the men and everything ... and also being de-linked more or less from the traditional culture of South Africa; these things were getting lost – in finding that you would not think about lobola. I think lastly – to a minor point – we didn’t have resources anyway to pay that lobola even if we had wanted to. And being independent, because women that were there ... there were no families to be asking for lobola /.../ But when we then, in this current era, have different types of women
with different experiences, urban and rural, traditional culture and so on – and that debate is a very hot debate...

When discussing lobola in relation to her life in exile and in relation to the reasons it is such a controversial issue, there appears a discourse on gender-related power different from the economic. Other aspects of gender-related power becomes more important. It is the experience of independence – "having struggled side by side with men" – and the absence of powerful families – "there were no families to be asking for lobola" which become the significant aspects explaining lobola’s unimportance. But it also explains the difference in perspective between exile women and those who stayed in South Africa during the apartheid years.

This is a somewhat different description of the gender-related power aspects of lobola than the one above which I have called the economic discourse. There seem to be other aspects of oppression she refers to here; for instance, women in exile had the opportunity to break with some aspects of oppression through having experiences of other more independent ways of living than women in a traditional South African setting. Is it such an understanding of lobola as restrictive of women’s independence in another sense than expressed through the economic discourse, which informs her choice not to get married?

“The first one who paid lobola decided to beat me”

Mhudi has made a choice not to get married. Does she connect that choice to gender-related power aspects and relations of marriage and lobola?

F- But you didn’t marry?

M- No, I’ve never married.

F- And why is that? That was a choice you made?

M- At some stage it was not a choice, I just didn’t find the right partner (M, F- laughter) Later on it was a choice. When I was younger I had wanted to marry, because I grew up in this poor family so I had visions of marrying and creating a nice family and so on. Unfortunately the first one who paid lobola for me one day decided to beat me and I said fine…

F- Decided what?

M- To beat me! (F, Oh) So I said fine ‘there is no way that I’m going to get married to you’. So I went home and said: ‘give him his money’.

F- How old was you?
M- I was twenty-three.

F- Okay, so you were quite young.

M- Yeah... so I said ‘no thank you, beat me once and you have done it’, and that was it, and the second one was the father of my child, we never got to it. When it was time, we were going to get married; they did one thing or the other...

F- Sorry?

M- I said, each time we had decided we were getting married they did one thing or another that just didn’t go right with me, so we finally ... But then – by the age of thirty – it was a choice. I just don’t want to belong to that institution. In exile there was a discussion about the rights of people who decided not to get married but who decide to cohabit – the right to cohabit. ... Because then in exile we didn’t have houses and so on, unless you were married then you would get a house where you could be alone. But if you are not married irrespective of your age, at some stage, you had to stay in the residence with everybody else So there was a discussion of the rights of those who want to cohabit as a matter of choice /.../ and the discrimination against unmarried people.

F- Were you cohabiting there?

M- At some stage I was cohabiting yes.

F- And that was a very controversial issue - the rights of people who chose to cohabit?

M- Yes, because people just felt that you couldn’t be allowing, all over, people to be cohabiting in the ANC. The values of the ANC would break down by this cohabitation. In their mind there were notions of: ‘I could cohabit with one for ten days and go and cohabit with another for two months and cohabit all over’. And I think there is a difference, which was discussed in exile: If there is a stable relationship, the only thing that is lacking is the marriage certificate and there are unstable relationships that have got marriage certificates, so it’s not about a certificate, it’s about the relationship. I don’t know who is going to sit and analyse what is happening in this relationship, but if those who are married have a right to certain things only because of the certificate, that’s a problem. People should have a right only because of their stability or how they see each other, how they see the relationship and so on. Not just because of the certificate because there were people that were staying as married couples and the women were being battered every day. And I had a relationship of about ten years and I had never been battered. And I was not married. But because I was not married I was not going to get the facilities of a house, because I am unmarried. People that are married and are battered and people divorcing every other year and they are married so always get the houses!
It is quite clear that Mhudi makes a connection between gender-related power, marriage and lobola – a connection, which is different from the one, expressed in the economic discourse. She brings in male violence in her discussion both in relation to lobola and to marriage. The first man who paid lobola for her decided to beat her. And when she contrasts cohabiting and marriage in exile she does it by exemplifying male violence in marriages. It is interesting that in her previous discussion about lobola and women in exile, she emphasised women’s independence in exile while in this discussion about cohabitation/marriage male violence is brought up. But male violence becomes dependent on what kind of relationship you have – it becomes a matter of individual relationships.

Mhudi also talks of her previous relationships as though the men ”did one thing or another that didn’t go right with me” which made her decide not to marry them. The first man who paid lobola beat her and a possible interpretation is that the men after him did things which Mhudi found oppressive as well and that she by not getting married aimed at staying independent. She expresses it as though not to get married was not a choice on her part but she is also explicit about not wanting to marry those men because they did ”one thing or the other” including beating her. She talks of her choice later in life as an explicit choice coming from ”not wanting to belong to that institution”. This could be contrasted to her earlier choices where she puts a direct link to the behaviour of the man involved and at least once to the gender-related power aspects of his behaviour. A possible interpretation of ”not wanting to belong to that institution” could be that it, also later in life, is a choice she takes to make a space for herself in relation to gender-related power aspects and relations of marriage and lobola although she is not as explicit about it. She might have wanted to avoid marriage and lobola to decrease men’s ability to exert gender-related power over her.

We have seen that Mhudi links lobola and marriage to other gender-related power aspects and relations different from those expressed previously in the economic discourse.

”I just don’t want to be tied down by that institution”

Let’s see how Mhudi talks about her current relationship with a ”traditional man” and her choice not to marry him, which, in this context, would entail lobola as lobola is expected as part of marriage. Does she connect this choice to gender-related power aspects and relations of lobola and marriage?

M- Part of my problem now ... I could have married in exile, but here inside the country it comes with the tradition of the institution and it puts certain

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86 Mhudi makes this explicit connection marriage and lobola, in this context, when she jokes with her partner’s parents that they haven’t paid lobola for her and they therefore have less to say about her behaviour.
pressures on you. It’s very difficult to behave a particular way within a society or a small community. And if you are like me, a political being that has got to lead, you can’t lead in some instances by running in front and leaving people behind. So if you arrive in a traditional context and you want to behave in a particular way – if you are married there are certain things that you can’t do. The partner that I have for instance is very traditional. And there are the activities with slaughter – we do all sorts of things – and if I go to the rural areas with him, I just can’t go like this. I have to put on these things, you know, this thing called the doek. At the moment I can still go like this because I am not married to him. I’ve got no obligations whatsoever to the family and in his house I can go around in my jeans and everything. But otherwise, if I married him, tomorrow that would change. Not because he would make me change but his own family and clan. And because I love him I don’t want to make him uncomfortable. And because he also has got his own belief systems he would be uncomfortable where ... he is going to a family meeting that’s coming to discuss his wife and her behaviour. He can easily say ‘No, leave my wife alone’. But again, it is this discomfort in that he has already been called. Now I arrive and say ‘Hi, it’s very nice because I’m not even married so, where am I supposed to sit? I can see the men are sitting this side and the women... so what happens to the ones who are not married?’ And everybody laughs, it’s acceptable now that they know this one is the odd person. Because I will cross – the wives are not supposed to cross to this side – but I will cross and say ‘Oh I know, but I wanted to say one, two, three and then I go that side’. I’m enjoying it in that way, that there are no obligations I do what I’d feel comfortable with. When I get to his house, I do these things that they expect, when there are other people. I put on this doek when there are other people. And if there is a traditional occasion where they are all there, I will be with the wives in the kitchen and I will cook and I will work my part off. And they will keep on looking at me because that’s not me. But if they arrive on a Sunday morning and I’m relaxing and I’m wearing my tights – tough! Because I would see them looking at me and I would also say ‘I know you are uncomfortable but fortunately you have not even paid lobola so you’ve got nothing to...’ So it suits me! In this particular relationship, but I don’t know if I had another relation... generally I just don’t want to be tied down by that institution and feel that one buys into something that one didn’t ... buys baggage as part of it. You get into a marriage and marry in-laws and all those.

Mhudi states that she doesn’t want to become "tied down" by the marriage institution, which makes it quite clear that she perceives it as restrictive and oppressive. There are several other statements which implicitly expresses her view of lobola and marriage as oppressive to women. In this context oppression is expressed in terms of restrictions on her individual freedom but they are connected to gender expectations and restrictions within the marriage institution; there are certain things you must do or, alternatively, cannot do if you are a married woman. She conforms to some of these expectations like putting on a doek and cooking with the wives in the kitchen at certain occasions. If Mhudi would marry her partner, she states that he might run the risk of a family meeting which would bring up his wife’s behaviour – this
would be the consequence of her unwillingness to conform to what is expected of a traditional wife. By not marrying she has a greater freedom of choice than if she were to marry her partner. Examples of this freedom that she offers is that she is able to wear jeans in her partner’s house and she can speak with the men at social occasions.

It seems quite possible to interpret Mhudi’s choice not to marry her partner as a way to make space for herself in relation to gender-related power. This interpretation is in line with the previous interpretation on why she has stayed out of marriage earlier. When she discusses her choice to avoid marriage in previous relationships she is more explicit about connecting her choice to the men’s behaviour and to gender-related power aspects of marriage and lobola. When discussing her choice of avoiding marriage in later relationships and her current one, her explicit explanation shifts focus away from the men involved to the marriage institution. Even though Mhudi emphasises the institution and implicitly the gender-related power aspect of it, as ‘the problem’, she does say that she might have considered marriage if she was in another relationship “So it suits me! [Not getting married] In this particular relationship, but I don’t know if I had another relation...” There seems to be a tension between describing the marriage institution as a problem and connecting her choice of avoiding marriage to the men involved. This tension seems related to the connecting of individual men’s choice of behaviour to gender-related power. It might be easier to make men of the past responsible for their behaviour than to make her current partner a responsible actor in relation to the gender-related power aspects of his choices.

Does Mhudi use non-gendering, individualisation and distinction-making as discursive strategies in order to create a space of action for herself in relation to her partner and the gender-related power aspects of marriage and lobola?

Non-gendering and individualisation as discursive strategies?

It is not because she is a woman and her partner is a man in a patriarchal society which makes the marriage institution a problem in her explicit reasoning. Her reservations about marriage are expressed in non-gendered and individualising terms. The expectations within the marriage institution, which she avoids by not getting married, are expressed in the non-gendered term “tradition”. It is tradition and not gender-related power which Mhudi pushes forward in her explicit reasoning about the restrictions she would face if marrying; “... it comes with the tradition of the institution (marriage) and it puts certain pressures on you.”

When I ask her if it will be a problem in the long run to stay unmarried in this relationship she says:
M- Yeah, it will be because they are beginning to say to the man that: “You need a wife in this house”. And he himself, and I agree with him ... I look at that place of his, the way they run things, and how he is running this family institution and I say: ”You need a wife”

F-...You say?

M- Yeah, yeah I say it that he needs a wife.

F- Why?

M- Because his belief system is that of tradition and he wants to do things in that traditional way. He stays in the township and people always come there because he is their senior and ... he is really traditional. He has mixed the tradition and the modern within himself. They like to come to him for advice for whatever problem. And even within a township context his house is always full of elderly people and so on. Now in that context he needs a partner that is going to be there when these elderly arrive and to serve them tea so that ... they can get comfortable. And I’m not that type. And we work...he also works, he’s a trade unionist, and when he is not at home there is nobody to care for these family needs. All sorts of people coming to seek this advice and to want him to do this and that. If there were a wife, really, the wife would be able to keep the home-fires burning, literally, in terms of those things that they expect of him. He has had a wife before and that was a traditional type of wife who stayed at home , who looked after the children, who cooked, who cleaned the house and did all these nice things. He still needs that and I couldn’t be that.

F- And how do you think you will solve that?

M- I think with time he probably would leave me – or I will leave him – and then find a person who could be a wife. Or with time he probably would have to then do without and his family values would ... traditional values would be ... eaten away. I don’t know /.../

F- But have you been staying together long? Already

M- No, we are not staying together, he stays in his house ... it’s three years. (F- Yeah okay) Part of the advantage is that I have my own house, which is a disadvantage again in terms of the relationship…

F- And you chose a traditional man?! (Laughter)

M- Well, when I met him I didn’t know (F (Laughter) – Okay.) but then when I was already inside I knew.

She describes her partner as a traditional man who needs a wife. In this context tradition becomes gendered. But the gendered relation between a traditional man and a wife is not explicitly connected to gender-related power. It
is as if Mhudi omits gender-related power aspects of marriage and lobola, gender-related power aspects, which she relates to by not getting married. It seems like what I have previously interpreted as non-gendered rather could be understood as a discourse on tradition which could be gendered but in which gender-related power aspects of lobola and marriage are not explicitly expressed. Furthermore, it seems like what I have previously called a family related discourse on lobola, in which there is a positive connection between the extended family and lobola and marriage, could be related to what I have here called a discourse on tradition. Mhudi does talk of the positive aspects of families bonding when she discusses the "traditional" meaning of lobola of past times. But when she discusses present time and her own life, the positive family-related discourse on lobola is not coupled with the traditional discourse on lobola. In this context the extended family is depicted as a threat to her independence and not as playing a positive part in relation to marriage and lobola at all. There seems to be a recurrent thought complex in which an essentialised structural meaning of lobola is coupled with a discourse of tradition and a family-related discourse on lobola (compare with Cholofelo, Emma and Sisiwe). In this thought complex the meaning of lobola is situated in past times, and its meaning is not related to actors. As a consequence, good lobola of this thought complex does not seem to be applicable on present time.

Mhudi seems to use a discourse on tradition in order to make a space for herself in relation to gender-related power. But when Mhudi uses this discourse which lacks explicit associations with gender-related power, she also disguises the gender-related power aspects and relations she strategises against.

In addition, Mhudi individualises her choice not to get married and the restrictions marriage would entail for her as a woman: She is a political being that has got to lead; as a wife you can’t do certain things. She does not want to make him uncomfortable because she loves him. The other women look at her when she cooks because that’s not like her. But this individualisation also seems to contain certain values and meanings connected to what it means to be a political leader and what kind of behaviour love should entail. Does she use a discourse on "what it means to be a political activist and leader" and a discourse on "what kind of behaviour love should entail" to legitimise her choice stay unmarried and to strategise against gender-related power aspects of lobola and marriage? In addition to individualising her choice, she appears to use two different discourses, one on political leadership and one on love. There seems to be a similar switch between "tradition" and "love" in Mhudi’s and Sisiwe’s discussion of their relationships. In the analysis of Sisiwe’s use of the term "respect" I noted that she glides from discussing it in terms of tradition to discuss it in terms of love whenever she individualises the issue.
If we interpret Mhudi as using a discourse on political activism/leadership and a discourse on love, it seems the first one might be non-gendered and the second one might be gendered. But both seem to make no explicit connection to gender-related power, and they both are possible to use in order to individualise her choices in relation to lobola and marriage.

The individualisation of choices together with the use of a discourse on love and a discourse on political activism/leadership could be interpreted as a discursive strategy in order to create a space of action without openly challenge her partner in terms of gender-related power. This discursive strategy therefore simultaneously disguises relations of gender-related power.

Individualising and essentialising identity and distinction-making as discursive strategies?

Does Mhudi use distinction-making as a discursive strategy in order to create a space for herself in relation to her partner?

How does Mhudi describe her partner in relation to tradition? Even though Mhudi says, "he has mixed the traditional and the modern within himself" the way she describes him in relation to marriage is only in terms of tradition. First she states that her partner is very traditional, then she relates how she as an unmarried woman still has a freedom of choice whereas "if I married him, tomorrow that would change". Her view is that it would not be because he would make her change but because his family and clan would. But even if she means it is his family that would pressure her to change, she has also already referred to him as traditional which is why marrying him would entail certain obligations and restrictions on her freedom. Mhudi glides from describing her partner as traditional – which at first is indirectly coupled to her choice not to get married – to giving his family the whole responsibility for the oppressive aspects of the marriage institution. We have seen how there is a similar shift in emphasis as regards the location of responsibility, from describing previous partners more as responsible actors, to describing her current partner in terms of tradition. She didn't marry her previous partners because "they did one thing or another" and she doesn’t marry her current partner because he is very traditional and she doesn’t want to be "tied down by that institution". But there is a tension in her description of her current partner in that she also mentions that she might have considered marriage if she had another relationship, this can be interpreted as his behaviour and choices having an influence on her choice not to marry him. Simultaneously, she describes him as having no room for acting against tradition – she says he could easily tell his family to leave his wife alone but she also states that this would make him too uncomfortable for her to expect him to do so. She does not want to put him in such a situation and I thus
interpret her as not considering it easy to tell his family to leave her alone. The consequence of this reasoning is in my interpretation, that he becomes only a reflection of tradition with no responsibility or room for action (see *The man without responsibility*). Mhudi’s partner’s actions are explained through the assigned essentialised identity of a "traditional man".

Furthermore, Mhudi’s partner requires a wife who conforms to tradition and who therefore also is described as a reflection of traditional cultural structures. Mhudi refers to herself in essentialising terms too; "If you are like me a political being that has got to lead, you can’t..." and when she talks about her partner’s need for a wife she says; "He needs that and I couldn’t be that". Mhudi makes the chores performed by a traditional wife into an identity "the traditional wife", and her own choice not to get married made into the identity of "a political being". She makes a clear distinction between these identities and they become essentially different. By assigning herself the identity of "a political being" she makes a distinction between her own identity and that of her partner’s which is that of a "traditional man". This discourse on identity seems both to essentialise identity and to individualise it.

When I ask Mhudi what will happen with their relationship since it is not accepted to stay unmarried in the long run, she answers: "I think with time he probably would leave me, or I will leave him, and then find a person who could be a wife. Or with time he probably would have to then do without and his family values would … traditional values would be … eaten away.”

She doesn’t describe it as a possible and active choice on his part to change his traditional ways of thinking and live a life with her in which she could remain independent – his traditional values might only be "eaten away". His choice is related to choosing a wife who can fit his traditional way of life. He is tradition and can only choose tradition in this logic. Through assigning him the identity of a "traditional man” his behaviour, his feeling uncomfortable and his actions seems directly linked to his identity and is explained through it.

By making this distinction between identities she is also able to explain her own choice, not to get married, through a self-ascribed identity of a "political being". Her choice seems to spring directly from her identity and not from her questioning aspects of gender-related power in relation to her partner and the institution of marriage and lobola. Through her distinction-making between different identities and her essentialising and individualising identity, she manages to stay out of marriage without openly questioning gender-related power but she simultaneously ascribes her partner an identity which disguises aspects and relations of gender-related power.

87 See *Chapter six*, p. 193, for a complementary interpretation.
The man without responsibility

The oppressive aspects of lobola, which Mhudi takes an explicit stand against, is expressed in an economic discourse. But Mhudi seems to have other understandings of gender-related power relations and aspects of lobola and marriage which she expresses in other contexts – the restrictions and obligations of marriage and lobola for women such as, for instance, the services expected from a traditional wife. Furthermore, she relates oppressive aspects and relations to the *behaviour* of men – sometimes gender-related power aspects and relations are connected to a possibility for the individual man to choose his actions. Gender-related power seems to be connected both to the institution of marriage and lobola and to a responsible male “actor” in different contexts. But when Mhudi describes her current relationship, her partner as a responsible actor seems to disappear.88

How does Mhudi describe herself and her partner and their relationship? – How is gendered meanings and relations of gender-related power constituted?

There are aspects of her discussion, which makes her partner “a man without responsibility”:

– As mentioned above, Mhudi first refers her choice not to get married to her partner – he is a traditional man – but then shifts the focus of her explanation from him to the institution of marriage and to his family. Her partner’s behaviour is removed from her reasoning, and his responsibility for choosing a traditional life becomes irrelevant for her explanation.

– It is the family and the community who pressures Mhudi and her partner. Power is coupled with the extended family and the community, not with her partner: “At the moment I can still go like this because I am not married to him. /.../ But otherwise, if I married him, tomorrow that would change. Not because he would make me change but his own family and clan would.” and “I just don’t want to be tied down by that institution and feel that one buys into something that one didn’t ... buys baggage as part of it. You get into a marriage and marries in-laws and all those ...” When Mhudi explains why her partner needs a wife, she refers to community expectations: “All sorts of people coming to seek his advice and to want him to do this and that. If there was a wife, really, the wife would be able to keep the home-fires burning, literally, in terms of those things that they expect of him.”

– Mhudi employs an understanding of identities as essences and makes distinctions between different identities. This discourse on identity explains her partner’s behaviour through his identity of “a traditional man”. Gender-related power aspects of his choices becomes disguised and explained through his *being* a traditional man. Behaviour and the possibility and re-

88 See Chapter six, p. 193 ff, for a complementary interpretation.
responsibility of choosing one’s behaviour are removed in this discourse on identity.

– Feelings connected with a sense of responsibility such as love is only attributed to her – not to him: ”And because I love him I don’t want to make him uncomfortable. And because he also [as well as his family] has got his own belief systems he would be uncomfortable where ... he is going to a family meeting that’s coming to discuss his wife’s behaviour.” She says that he could easily tell his family to leave his wife alone, but that would make him feel uncomfortable, since he shares the same ”belief system”. These statements may seem quite contradictory, but I interpret them in the sense that Mhudi does not expect her partner to tell his family to leave his wife alone out of love and concern for her if they would get married because he holds these expectations of a married woman himself. She removes responsibility from him through explaining her own behaviour through a discourse on love.

Finally, I have managed perhaps to identify the discursive strategies Mhudi employs: through individualisation and distinction-making together with discourses which do not make explicit the gender-related power aspects and relations she seems to strategize against. And, simultaneously, she recreates relations of gender-related power by making her partner a man without responsibility.

Final discussion

In the introduction to this chapter, I put some questions on how the five women interviewed understand the issue of lobola. Do they see lobola as having any relation to women’s oppression? How do they argue for or against the institution? Could their dealing with lobola be interpreted as discursive strategies – and if that is the case – what do the women aim to achieve by the use of these strategies? I also put the question of how it is possible to analyse relations of gender-related power when starting out with a hermeneutic and agency-centred approach.

It seems that all the women in this chapter express explicit oppressive aspects of lobola in economic terms,⁹⁰ – “There shouldn’t be a market for women”, “you shouldn’t be able to buy a woman or her reproductivity”. I first called this understanding of lobola as ‘bad lobola’ and then begun to analyse it as an economic discourse on lobola. It is the commercialisation of the institution which is understood as bad and oppressive to women and which is expressed in this discourse.

⁹⁰ Even though some of the women express oppression as an abuse of lobola.
The first two women, Cholofelo and Emma seem to strategize against ‘bad lobola’ through creating a ‘true and good meaning’ of lobola in the past, which should be maintained. I first called this understanding of lobola ‘good lobola’ but have later analysed it as related to a ‘traditional discourse on lobola’ and ‘a family-related discourse on lobola’.

There seem to be a recurrent thought complex in which a traditional discourse and a family-related discourse on lobola is combined with an understanding of lobola’s meaning as structurally defined. The meaning of ‘good lobola’ is expressed through this thought complex it seems dependent on being situated in the past. The good image is not confronted with living actors. Actors and gender-related power aspects and relations are discursively kept apart from the good image of lobola created through this complex.

Mmatshilo, who is married by lobola, very consciously strategizes against ‘bad lobola’ which I have interpreted as an attempt to make space for herself in relation to her husband and his family. By negotiating the meaning of lobola she reduces her husband’s and his family’s possibilities to control her. But she also strategizes against other aspects of gender-related power by negotiating the meaning of the institution.

Even though the women express the gender-related power aspects of lobola, which they take an explicit stand against it in an economic discourse on lobola, they also express other understandings of oppressive aspects of the institution in relation to other contexts. The gender-related aspects expressed in relation to these other contexts have more to do with the restrictions and obligations of marriage and lobola – both in relation to the institution and in relation to husbands/partners and their families. The possible choices of individual actors to break with or follow relations of gender-related power are considered by the women. In my interpretation the women use discursive strategies in order to make space for themselves in relation to these gender-related power aspects and relations as well. Distinction-making seems to be widely used discursive strategy by the women regardless of whether or not the women strategize against ‘bad lobola’ or in relation to other understandings gender-related power aspects and relations of lobola and marriage. Distinction-making often seem to take the form of, or come close to dichotomization – the making of opposite exclusive entities. Furthermore, distinction making and dichotomization seem to be combined with the discursive strategy of individualisation.

The third discursive strategy which I started to explore in this chapter, non-gendering, I have abandoned as an analytical category. It seems more fruitful to interpret distinction-making and individualisation as discursive strategies which the women combine with different discourses – such as a discourse on love, a discourse on the traditional meaning of lobola, a discourse on political leadership, a discourse on identity and so forth – in order to make space for themselves in relation to aspects and relationships of gender-related power. These meanings and relations of gender-related power
could both be institutionalised meanings and rules and relations to partners and families whose possibilities as actors to break with or follow these meanings and rules are considered. These actors, who the women strategize in relation to, however, seem to be considered as most probably keeping their institutionally sanctioned power positions; the women strategize in relation to these actors with the premise that these actors will not change their behaviour if confronted directly in terms of gender-related power.

The strategies, sometimes used separately and sometimes together simultaneously disguise the relations and aspects of gender-related power, which the women strategize against.

In addition to disguising relations of gender-related power, I have analysed the strategies as constituting relations of gender-related power. In my analysis, Mhudi creates ‘a man without responsibility’ through using discursive strategies in her effort to establish an independent life.

In terms of the ‘theoretical and methodological journey’; this chapter constitutes the starting point of an attempt to transcend the dichotomy of actor/structure and culture/social relations. I start with a hermeneutic meaning-centred analysis in an attempt to analyse the meanings attributed to lobola by women of different opinions about the institution. I also intended to see women as actors who did not just reflect ‘discourses’ or ‘systems of meaning’. I thus concentrated on what the women were doing. Discursive meaning became discursive strategies, as it seemed that the women had intentions in the ways they were discussed the institution and its relation to gender-related power. The first problem, which I encountered between a hermeneutic understanding and my focusing on the actor as intentional and involved in social power relations, was how to interpret discursive strategies. I started to interpret them as discursive strategies on a discursive level. I interpreted the women as attempting to create a discursive space. It was difficult for me to break with interpreting agency as only situated on a discursive level. In order to do that I felt the need to interpret the women as acting on something in ‘real life’. But as someone hermeneutically schooled I did not feel I could say anything about ‘real life’ relations through interpreting a text. I may have been able to say something about how a woman was interpreting ‘the meaning of’ her relations in ‘real life’. Now I shifted focus from ‘discerning meaning’ to interpreting the woman as situated in real life situations which she coped with and acted upon and which the interview could say something about. My interpretation became that she was attempting to create a cognitive and relational space for actions in relation to concrete others. The interview could be used to discern such relations, which were not expressed in explicit discourses but rather implicitly. It is thus a relational space for action which is my interpretation of the women’s doing and which departs from (my earlier) hermeneutic approach in which meaning is interpreted in relation to ‘systems of meaning’. Thus, my approach is still meaning-centred.
but has expanded a ‘cultural hermeunetic’ approach to include social (power) relations.
Chapter 4 — A political discourse on lobola?

Lobola is a controversial issue academically as well as politically. When I started to analyse the interviews in Chapter three one point of departure was the political discussion of whether lobola is oppressive to women or not. One of the first threads of interpretation was to compare the reasoning of women who held different views on lobola. As discussed earlier, this line of interpretation was dropped quite soon, as there didn’t seem to be a simple dividing line between women for or against lobola. Rather there seemed to be a defining discourse on lobola and more implicitly expressed understandings of the institution. The women made a division between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ lobola on an explicit level of reasoning which I have called a family-related/traditional – and an economic discourse on lobola. This division of discourses on lobola also included a separation of good lobola from relations of gender related power which was included only in bad lobola. But the interpretation was also made that there were other more implicitly expressed relations of gender-related power connected to the institution. In this chapter I will pursue the exploration of the explicit discourses on lobola and the next chapter will deal with the more implicit understandings.

In the previous chapter the explicit discourses on lobola were interpreted as part of discursive strategies to gain a space for action. In this chapter I will interpret the same discourses from another angle. Could explicit discourses on lobola be interpreted as political discourses on lobola? If that is the case: what political contexts could be relevant to understand political discourses on lobola?

In this part of the dissertation ‘the theoretical and methodological journey’ could be said to focus on the problem of combining a meaning-centred analysis of discourse with an analysis of agency and on particular ‘political realities’. Is it possible to interpret ‘the content of a discourse’ with both a focus on cultural meanings as well as on conditions of agency and social relations?

A political contextualisation of the women’s discourses

Several of the women interviewed have an academic background. Ellen is an example of an ANC-woman in a very high political position that is also an academic. Her discussion on lobola may serve to illustrate how political
contexts, of which academic discourses seems to be part, appears to be central for an understanding of how the women reason about lobola’s possible oppressive character:

F- Can you remember when you first started to become aware of gender-inequalities, do you remember instances or ... how did you start to reflect on the gender-equality issues?

E- I lived it, you know. I live in a patriarchal society and so experienced gender-based discrimination. But, I must say that the UN sponsored campaign for gender equality such as programmes of the Nairobi Women’s Conference helped to raise awareness about the need to struggle for equality. Experience has taught us South African women to collectively fight for equality. I cannot quite remember when I first became conscious about the need to struggle for equality. In any event my husband did not pay lobola for me and that was in 1972 when we got married!

F- Oh, you weren’t.

E- No, because I refused.

F- Oh, did you!

E- There is a debate in my country of whether the “payment”\textsuperscript{91} of lobola is demeaning. The debate in fact is also whether the custom of lobola is payment for the transfer of a woman to her husband’s home. It is a difficult debate. On my part I believe it is payment and of basis of this, refused that my husband “lobola” me. I may have been wrong, I don’t know.

F- How come you started to think in those terms... was it something you discussed with your friends or...?

E- No ... it was my observation, but it’s something I expressed during that time. I’m a woman and I’m independent in my own right. I believed that I had a right to choose how to organise my life.

F- Mm ... and you connected with lobola also that...?

E- Yes.

F- That with lobola you wouldn’t be?

E- Yes, but I wasn’t an exception, I think these debates are very old. In fact people don’t realise that in South Africa the question of women’s emancipation has been there for some time. I’ve just discovered this when talking to older women.

\textsuperscript{91} Ellen edited the transcription of the interview and has added quotation marks on “payment”.

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F- You think that…

E- It’s not something that starts now.

F- No, no … so you had friends who refused to or was it just you?

E- It was just my decision – well it was my private decision, but known to my close friends. As I said, these debates have been there. Together with my contemporaries at school, we spoke about our life experiences which included gender.

F- But when you did this, were you in the student movement at that time?

E- Mm.

F- Okay, ... so how did your family and husband react to that?

E- In my culture lobola goes to an uncle, it’s the time for an uncle to boast. He was not amused, you know, and said that my kids will be regarded as illegitimate in his eyes. He forgave me before he passed away last year.

F- It took until last year?

E- I’m just saying that he mentioned it for the first time last year.

F- Okay...Your other family – did they regard your children as illegitimate?

E- No, no.

F- So it didn’t have any implications for...

E- Not even with my in-laws. Anyway, we were not there! We got married, we got harassed, and we left the country for exile in 1978.

F- But now, when you said to me, people say its Eurocentric to have this...

E- There are debates around lobola, yes, some African people are beginning to say that people are interpreting lobola for us, lobola means something different, it doesn’t mean women’s oppression. And they say well, let’s enter the discourse, let’s discuss! African people are right, you know they have to be the ones who lead in the interpretation of their culture.

F- And do you think that it is possible to re-interpret it otherwise?

E- I don’t know. I don’t know. That must come out of facts. I belong to the school of thought that says that lobola is a degrading practice. And I’m saying that I might be wrong. I’m being honest with you.
F- Okay, ... then you went into exile, and was it more common among the ANC-women in exile to have this view that lobola is wrong?

E- We were primarily concerned with matters of life and death and thus lobola was not an issue and in reality no one paid lobola for marriage in exile. At the same time ANC vigorously opposed sexual harassment and rape. It also addressed the question of equality in the camps and attempts to uphold this ideal were made. When we developed the gender policy in 1990, we were mindful of experiences of other women from a struggle mode, that in times of war gender discrimination is minimal and the situation changes when it’s back to normality. We drew examples from Algeria etc. That is why we developed the policy we did on our return back to South Africa.

F- So it wasn’t even a question … that people that married in exile wasn’t even a question about...?

E- Anyway, where would you get lobola because all you had was cheese from Finland and second hand clothes from Sweden, you know. So all you had was just a good party.

We see how Ellen describes the political context as influencing her view on lobola: Ellen starts with her refusal to accept lobola as an example of her beginning to become aware of gender inequalities. She describes it as though she belongs to “a school of thought” which sees lobola as degrading. Although I first got the impression it was a decision she made quite independently of any “school of thought”. Then she went on to question her own point of view as a result of Africans having started to question lobola’s interpretation by ‘others’. At the same time she implies that women have been discussing these issues for a long time. And she ends up being quite irritated with me for asking such ignorant questions about lobola in exile where “it was a question of life and death” and “Anyway, where would you get lobola because all you have is cheese from Finland and second hand clothes from Sweden”.

How can we understand Ellen’s modifying her opinion on lobola? When Ellen is asked above how she started to reflect on gender inequalities she offers as an example that she was never lobolad. Then she modifies her opinion about lobola and says that she might be wrong. Could her modification be seen as a switch from a personal view on lobola to a political discourse? What political contexts could be relevant for understanding the seemingly contradictory views Ellen expresses? Can we find more clues on a possible political discourse on lobola by looking into how some other women with central political positions in the ANC and the parliamentary structures reason about lobola?

The chapter will begin with an analysis of three women who all have, or have had, very central positions in the ANC as regards gender issues. Could their discussion shed some light on it if the explicit discourses on lobola also
could be interpreted as political discourses on lobola? The last part of the chapter will deal with political contexts, which seem relevant for interpreting the meaning of the same discourses.

The personal is not political?

In this part of the chapter I will explore how three of the women interviewed, who are all prominent advocates for gender equality in the ANC and who hold very high political positions within the party and in parliamentary structures discuss their personal and political view of lobola. Do they make similar switches/distinctions between personal and ‘general/political’ contexts as Ellen does? I will start with Thokozile who was married by lobola and does not think it has to be oppressive to women. Thokozile has worked with gender issues for many years. How does she discuss lobola? In the interview the discussion starts with an account of instances when black women in the liberation movement have challenged the argument that their views and actions are not ‘tradition’:

T- Yes, like I was saying, during the early days you would have women coming up to say: "Look, we don’t want to organise women separately." In my view those women were mouthpieces of the men. It was men really who were saying that and were convincing these women that it was counter productive to ... women organising themselves separately. So we were saying that customs and traditions change and we’ve had various situations where we have challenged the thinking and argument that says: "This isn’t our tradition, this isn’t our culture, it shouldn’t change.” Especially I think with black people. We have these traditions entrenched in law, in customary law. You look at history you find that this wasn’t always tradition. /…/ (End of tape)

F- ...colonialism. Since it has now changed, what do you think about those discussion that lobola is now oppressive to women, or if it is not?

T- You see, the thing is with change, I think it’s important to work on the basis that it’s a process. Where we are now was itself a process. You also need to undergo the same process, sort of to reverse – it’s not the same process but you need another process to reverse the what had come ... If you take for example, apartheid, we’ve done away with apartheid, in terms of the legal system. We are still in the process of undoing a lot of the legislation that we had on apartheid. But it’s going to take us a while to actually... and we need programs in place to get rid of the effects of apartheid. So in as far as the customs and traditions are concerned we also need a process of undoing the oppression that has become imbedded into the fabric of our society, into the thinking.

F- But do you think it is functioning oppressive today? Like lobola – for women…
T- You specifically asked about lobola. We’ve had these discussions too and I think what we’ve come to is that the institution of lobola itself is not necessarily oppressive, but it’s how it has been interpreted and how it has been manipulated over the years. If a man says: “I worked so many years to be able to pay lobola for you and I paid so much lobola for you so you are my property. I can do with you what I want to do. When I come in I want my meal ready, I want my clothes pressed, I want this house cleaned and I can kick you around” – then there is something absolutely wrong with that institution. But in the past as we understand it, the pure form of the tradition was not intended as an oppressive institution, and in fact it served to bring the families together. Of the female and the male. But, of course, it has been manipulated, it has been spoilt.

F- Would you like it in your own family?

T- And I think it also should be a question of choice. I wouldn’t like that people feel that they have to do something, which they disagree with. In my own situation when I got married I was already, I think, a (?) feminist and I agreed to have lobola paid for me. But I didn’t feel that it was oppressive or exploitative. And my husband was happy to do it and it actually – we were coming from different cultural backgrounds, and it served to bring our two families together.

F- So the parents wanted and you agreed to it?

T- It played a positive role in my situation. I don’t have a situation when my partner then says; look you are my property. So what I’m saying in our discussions I think we’ve come to a position where we say, it doesn’t help to say, let’s do away with the institution. What we need to do away with is patriarchy and male domination. Also when it comes to polygamy I have reserved my own position about it. I personally don’t like it. I don’t like polygamy, but I feel I can’t go and say: “Let’s do away with polygamy.” When rural women say: “Let’s do away with polygamy,” I say: “Fine I’ll help you. Like recently the rural women’s movement met and I believe one of the resolutions they took was, we don’t want polygamy. And I will help them to do what we can to scrap it, to get rid of it. It is the same with customary law. I think it’s important that it should come directly from those people who experience the hardship arising out of that law. When they say: “We want it to go” – the legislatures should not have a choice, they should do what those people say must be done. But you know that there are countries where they actually went and scrapped polygamy. There are countries where they went and did away with custom. But because they did not put in place a system to untangle, to break down the inequalities that had already been formed – as a result it didn’t help. So what you do must go hand in hand with breaking down those inequalities. Somebody was asking me yesterday exactly the question about polygamy and I said: “For me the important thing is to have equality to do away with inequalities, to make it possible for people to choose.” If people can choose and it’s a free choice then I don’t think it matters what they choose. As long as it’s within the constitution. Of course I’m taking responsibility as well, I mean choice goes with a responsibility. And
we have a constitution and a Bill of Rights, their choice should not (?) so that it impinges on somebody else’s rights.

If we compare Thokozile’s reasoning with that of the women in Chapter three we recognise her argument: Lobola is in itself not necessarily oppressive but it has a true and pure meaning ‘to bring families together’. This meaning is separated from relations of gender-related power, which she confines, to ‘patriarchy’ and to men ‘manipulating’ the institution into ownership of women. But if we look at her discussion on her personal choice to agree to lobola there appears a different strand of reasoning: She emphasises that she was already a feminist when she agreed to lobola and that her husband does not use it to say that he owns her. By labelling herself a feminist in this context she implicitly indicates that there are structural inequalities which she could evade by her feminist awareness. And she also indicates that the non-oppressive character of the institution in her case is dependent on having a partner who doesn’t use it against her. There might also be a consideration of their parents’ wishes in her choice to agree to lobola being paid for her. Although she doesn’t answer that question directly her choice of wording seems to indicate that. Thokozile suggests that she is able to handle the institution in her own case and make it into ‘a bond between families’. She might have negotiated its meaning in a similar way to Mmatshilo in the previous chapter. And in a similar way to Mmatshilo she both mentions that she has a feminist awareness and a partner who does not use the institution against her.

The implicit meanings of gender-related power which she indicates that she relates to (and which she personally seems to be able to counter) by telling me that she was already a feminist when she got married are not present in her reasoning about how the institution should be dealt with politically. She suggests political programs to change the racist thinking stemming from the apartheid system but she does not discuss a possible political program to change the meaning of lobola – only patriarchal thinking in general. The political solution to lobola is ‘individual free choice’ and the institution is defined as having its own meaning free from gender-related power. She mentions that it still has to be within the constitution and the Bill of Rights. At the same time she describes lobola today as manipulated so that men own women. Could a possible political defining discourse on lobola, which is free from gender-related power, be interpreted in this light? If gender-related power, which is present in her personal reasoning about the institution and in her discussion of ‘bad lobola’ today, would be present in a defining discourse on lobola – it would be more difficult to argue for its compatibility with the constitution and Bill of Rights. In that case, why is it argued that lobola is not necessarily including relations of gender-related power and is compatible with the constitution?
Can we find a similar division between personal and political as regards gender-related power and lobola in the discussion of Lilian?

F- It has been discussed a lot if lobola and other customs are oppressive to women or not. What is your opinion on that question?

L- One can’t have a straight answer, cut and dry, because people’s lives are much more complex than that. One can have an approach that says at a cerebral level, this thing is not good because it’s like you are buying a person. But you are actually looking at it out of context from when it was operational or when it started, it’s origins. And then the question is from family to family, what happens when in fact the issue of lobola comes up? What about the fact that whereas I can say lobola does not apply to my daughters, I don’t want it to apply, right. But my daughter says "Listen, don’t complicate life for me, you know. In terms of where my partner comes from, in terms of his own thinking – if he does not pay lobola it creates a problem for our relationship. There is some uneasiness on his part whereby he feels there is something he has not done that he should have done. There is something incomplete of this relationship and this marriage” – and one can’t wish that away. It’s a reality. It’s a cultural thing. If he comes from a family that believes like us that this is not a practice to be encouraged, well and good. Then it doesn’t complicate life. But if he just happens to come from a family that believes it and it becomes an issue one has to be guided by that reality. It’s like the whole question of ... polygamy. One can’t with one sweep legislate polygamy out of existence. Because, in fact one must also think, if you say polygamy is against the law, what happens to the millions of women who are already in polygamous unions. Are we saying that the women who have been taken according to customary law must now be dumped? What happens to those women and children? It’s a whole ripple effect and complex set of issues that you have to think about before you say here is a cut and dry route to the resolution of this issue.

Lilian makes a distinction between what you think on a "cerebral" level about the institution and how the institution must be seen in different contexts. On the first level it might be seen as a person is bought, but on the second level when you bring in the context of the origin of lobola and of the family in which somebody is getting married, it becomes more complicated.

When Lilian is talking about the complexity of lobola and puts it in a family context she does not talk about it in terms of male power but in terms of a cultural reality that one has to relate to. A cultural reality in which the daughter’s boyfriend might feel that something is missing if he doesn’t pay lobola - that there is something incomplete about the relationship. And her daughter might feel that she interfere and complicate the relationship if she refuses to accept lobola. Lilian talks about the different views in neutral terms - like they are just different views of the institution, which are of equal value. Gender-related power seems absent and the issue is discussed in terms of ‘culture’. But later on in the interview when I ask her again about her
personal view of lobola she is much more explicit about the gender-related power aspects of lobola, which would have consequences for her daughter.

F- I think also there is a difference ... you can realise that it’s no way you can just in laws (?) on those things they’re so strong and people believe in it. But I was wondering also about your own approach to it? How you...

L- Lobola? I don’t encourage lobola. But I’d be wary of actually legislating against it overnight.

F- You wouldn’t like it in your family.

L- I wouldn’t like it, for instance, for my daughters. I wouldn’t like to ask for lobola when my daughters get married. But I’m saying I also know that I’m not the only determining factor here. The question of my daughter’s views, the question of the views of the partner is something that has to come on board and be looked at. And the final answer to the whole thing will be determined by all of us communicating with one another. Trying to persuade one another. Human relations are not black and white or straight up and down matters. They are complex.

F- But why wouldn’t you want to... if the situation were that, for example your daughter’s partner it’s also against lobola? What’s your reason for being against it or for not wanting to ask for it?

L- No, for me, lobola belongs to a certain period in the evolution of our culture. It belongs to a certain part of our history and made a lot of sense then. To say today, under the circumstances that people live in, the realities of how people try to survive, that someone must pay lobola for my daughter is really, in my view, to create unnecessary complications. Because, number one: as much as I might say that a young man must pop up money because I’ve done such and such in bringing up my daughter, the same happened in bringing him up; his parents also spent a lot in bringing him up, right. Secondly: In my view, it might be complicating the situation whereby he should always regard my daughter as somebody he paid for instead of a partner on equal terms with whom he is beginning to build a family. But thirdly: I would also not want to encourage a situation where my daughter is married into … kind of swallowed up by another family. In my view, my own approach to a union between two people is that two people are starting a family. Of course they do that in a social context. There are two families that are actually in the process building a friendship within the context of the community. And I would like to rather encourage an equal relationship and a new family starting between two equals, not between people who are in the unequal situation where one paid for the other. That is my own approach to it.

F- It would make it more difficult to create this equal relationship?

L- I think so, because this man would always say I paid for you, I paid lobola for you. Instead of regarding her as an equal.
Lilian sees a direct relationship between the payment of lobola and the difficulty for her daughter to be equal to the daughter’s husband. Lobola could always be used against her. It is the potential use of it by the husband, which Lilian sees as unavoidable. But she also relates the inequality of her daughter to being “swallowed up” by another family. Furthermore, she is against lobola on the grounds that both the parents of the girl and of the boy have spent money and resources on their children’s upbringing and there is no reason why only the girl’s parents should be compensated for that. And lastly it is an expensive custom in times of financial problems.

It seems that she is making a distinction between past times and contemporary times in differing ways. At first she referred to the origin of lobola as a context that had to be considered before making any judgement of the institution. *I interpret this as a political statement as she changes views when she discusses lobola in more personal contexts. When she talks about her personal view, the historical context becomes irrelevant since she says that lobola made sense in a historical context but not now.*

She is very clear about her opinion of lobola as oppressive for women on a personal level but doesn’t make a general/political statement of lobola as oppressive. Gender-related power disappears on the general level of discourse and the institution is discussed in terms of past times and culture.

Lilian is considering the political context as well as the personal one when formulating her opinion about the institution. It is clear that she perceives lobola to be too significant a part of people’s lives – their culture – for it to be possible to change politically. Furthermore, political change is only discussed in terms of legislation and its possible ripple effects. She does not mention any alternative possible political action. *Is it the political ‘reality’ in which lobola is perceived as impossible to ban by legislation which impacts on a possible political discourse in which lobola is freed from gender-related power?*

Both Lilian and Thokozile switch discourses on lobola between personal and general/political contexts and seem to define lobola as free from gender-related power on a general level of discussion. Is this also true in Likhapa’s case? How does Likhapa discuss a possible political ‘solution’ to the issue of lobola?

F- I know there have been very hot debates within the ANC about whether lobola and polygamy are oppressive to women or not. What do you think about those discussions?

L- I think we had those debates and the conclusion we’ve reached is that there is no way you can generalise on those issues. And the best way, actually, to deal with them is not to say they must be done away with. Because lobola can be positive – it can protect women if it’s applied correctly as it used to happen in the past. And perhaps that’s what we must go back to, because there’s no way you can ban a people’s tradition and culture. But if we
let it continue, you can be able to regulate it by law, by whatever. In that way you are able to protect the most vulnerable – which are women. Because if you don’t do that you take the root, which has failed in most countries of banning these things. It doesn’t work. Polygamy is the same thing. I don’t think it must be banned, but it must be regulated. And if you go back to what polygamy is all about – it’s about a man marrying the second or the third wife – which happens with the permission of the wives who are already there. It doesn’t just happen. You have to consult with those women. And if they say yes, that’s when you can go ahead. Because the way it’s practised these days, there is no consultation. The men make those decisions, And if you ban it will also be problematic. It will go underground, and who is going to suffer? It’s the women, it’s the children. Because the men will continue to marry their first, second, third wife and they’ll have the latitude to dump the women, to dump the children and they’ll remain unprotected. So I think by allowing those to happen, you are able to regulate and give the women the choice and to take action whenever there is a problem.

F- But would you personally like in your own family – would you be against it in your personal life?

L- In my personal life – I’ve been married and I didn’t want lobola. And, of course, I don’t go for polygamy – and that’s the choice I’m talking about. That women have to have the right to choose whether they want to have lobola to be paid for them or not. It mustn’t be forced down their throats, and the same thing with polygamy. If a man wants to marry another woman, or girlfriend and children, you must have a choice what to do, you mustn’t be forced to such a situation.

F- And what is the reason for not wanting lobola for you?

L- For me? Because I don’t think it’s necessary. I didn’t think it’s necessary.

F- And it’s not necessary because you think it could be connected to some notions of how marriage should...

L- Not necessarily, not necessarily. Because that one I think you can determine, when you build a relationship even before marriage. And if you have built an equal relationship (end of tape) ... change that situation or make it worse, so I think it depends on that relationship which you’ve built and you want to be involved in.

F- And what do you think is the difference between people who would like to keep... why is it necessary for some people to keep – compared to you?

L- I think some people feel protected with the lobola. It won’t be easy for a man to walk away. He had to go through a process... because lobola what it does – it cements the relationship between the two of you and the families. So you don’t only enter into a contract between yourself and the man you are marrying, but also it’s sort of a contract between the two families. Because it is the families who actually bring that lobola, negotiate the lobola and in that
way they cement that relationship. And it actually differs in some cultures. In some cultures you can pay lobola but you still have to go through some rituals like the slaughtering of goats, giving presents to various relatives and that completes the cementing of that relationship. And once that is done, even when the marriage is a problem, then the family gets involved. They play a mediating role, and in that way they are able to help you solve the problems. So, in a way, it does give protection and help to maintain the family you have just established. So that’s the positive part of it.

F- And do you think it is – on the part of the women – they feel that it gives some protection from the men.

L- Yeah, definitely. And also the men – I think on their part, there are some men who feel that they ought to show some appreciation to the family and the relationship to be cemented through some rituals. And lobola, the slaughtering, the giving of presents become one of those things.

F- But for the men it might not be the protection part that is more...

L- Yeah, but it will be a show, a sign of appreciation and of cementing, as I said the cementing of the relationship. The men will feel that: “I have not just taken this woman, but I have accepted the woman and I’ve been accepted also in the family and part and parcel of her family too.”

Likhapha does seem to make the same distinction as Lilian between a personal view on lobola – she doesn’t think ‘it is necessary’ – and lobola on a general level when she argues for it’s possible positive aspects for women. Furthermore, a political strategy of keeping lobola and polygamy because banning them has proven unworkable in other countries appears to be combined with a discourse on tradition. On one level she argues that to ban it has proved impossible, therefore, to protect women you should keep it and try to regulate it. We can see that this is the same approach as Lilian and Likhapha in that they all perceive lobola to be impossible to ban through legal means, as it is so much a part of people’s culture. It is my impression that the political pragmatism in Likhapha’s argument above merges with the discussion about whether lobola and polygamy is oppressive to women or not. My reason for this interpretation is that she begins by saying that the best way to deal with the issue is not to ban customs like lobola. And in the same sentence she says that lobola can be positive in that it can protect women. The reasoning clearly begins with political strategy and ends up with a traditional discourse on lobola’s “nature”. The starting point for the discussion seems to be that it is impossible to act politically against these customs, the next best thing to do would be to protect women as much as possible.

When I ask her about her own life she answers: ”of course I don’t go for polygamy” which I take to mean that she wouldn’t feel that to be an equal relationship. But when it comes to lobola her wording is not as strong and
she describes her view as "I don’t think it’s necessary". When I ask her if that means that there are certain notions connected to lobola that would have an impact on the marriage. She says no, and argues that you can build an equal relationship before you get married. I interpret that answer as indicating that there might be relations of gender-related power which might make it more difficult to have an equal relationship. You really need to have one before in order to counteract negative aspects of lobola. This answer can be compared with Thokozile’s and Mmatshilo’s who both indicated that lobola might be oppressive by mentioning that they were already feminists when they got married and so didn’t feel oppressed by the institution. Likhapha’s view that lobola was not necessary in her own case could also be related to her answer on the question why others think it is necessary. She believes that it might offer some protection for the woman in that it is more difficult for the man to walk out of the marriage and that the families are involved in mediating when there are conflicts between husband and wife. In this line of reasoning relations of gender-related power seem more present in that women might need protection in a patriarchal context. She thinks this is not necessary in her own case – maybe because she is independent in many ways, economically and otherwise. But women who live other lives and whose lives are more deeply set in a patriarchal context – for them it might offer some protection.

All three women make distinctions between personal and political contexts in their reasoning about lobola. They also put forward a view on lobola as not necessarily oppressive to women when discussing the matter on a general level whereas relations of gender-related power is present in the personal accounts of the institution. It also seems that political considerations of whether or not lobola could or should be banned seem to influence the general level of discussion on lobola’s ‘nature’.

A political discourse on lobola?

There seems to be a political discourse on lobola among the three women interviewed above which parallels the analysis of lobola as a family-related/traditional and an economic discourse in the previous chapter. The content of the political discourse on good lobola varies but has in common that there is a definition of the institution as possibly good for women and as free from relations of gender-related power. This meaning is referred to as the ‘true meaning’ and is sometimes depicted as possible to return to in practice.

The analysis of the discussion of the three women above also parallels the analysis in Chapter three in that ‘good lobola’ is defined in an extremely reductional discourse compared to the implicit meanings expressed in relation to personal contexts. In Chapter three ‘bad lobola’, which was interpreted as defined through an economic discourse, is here rather seen as a
non-defining discourse on lobola. It seems like the separating of men’s manipulation of the institution and its commercial character today from the ‘good and true meaning of lobola’ could rather be understood as a way of keeping the definition of lobola free from relations of gender-related power.

The reductional character of the defining discourse on ‘good lobola’ also becomes evident when comparing it with academic discourses on lobola. Even functional discourses, which are not explicitly discussing relations of power, do clearly relate lobola to gender-related power. Even though the academic discourses on lobola have shortcomings, which are discussed in Chapter two, it is evident that what has been discussed here as a defining discourse on ‘good lobola’, is a reduction of the scope of the institution. This reductional character contributes to a possible interpretation of it as constituting a political discourse. Statements like Thokozile’s that “I think we have come to …” also indicates that there is some political agreement on the issue although it is by no means unitary. Mhudi argues that there is no agreement within the ANC about lobola and she relates the disagreement to women coming from very different backgrounds; urban and rural, some having lived in exile where lobola was not an issue and so forth.92 But it seems, nevertheless, that women on central political positions who oppose lobola on a personal level, to some extent adhere to a political discourse in which lobola is not defined as oppressive.

But why do those women who do see lobola as oppressive to women when contextualising the institution switch to a political discourse in which lobola is freed from gender-related power when talking on a general/political level? Is it possible to relate the political discourse on good lobola to political pragmatism?

The political discourse on lobola in the context of political pragmatism

There seems to be a pragmatic line of reasoning influencing the women’s political discourse on lobola. Lobola is perceived as so much entrenched in people’s lives and thinking that it would be futile to try to ban it. This is also in line with the experience of other countries that have tried to do so and have failed. This may be an important context for interpreting a political discourse on lobola as well as the fact that women within the ANC have different views on the issue coming from very different backgrounds. If the assessment is made politically that lobola should not or could not be touched politically it may not be possible to include relations of gender-related power in a defining discourse on lobola. If it would be defined as oppressive it would be difficult to argue against political action against the institution. Thokozile argues that lobola does not have to be against the constitution and

92 See Women’s independence in exile.
the Equal Rights Clause at the same time as she depicts today’s lobola as one where men manipulate the institution so as to own their wives. But there are other women who think lobola is not compatible with the constitution. One of these women, Nosithe, is in a very high political position on the national level. What is her definition of lobola and how does she think it has to be dealt with politically?

F- And what do you think... because I also know within the ANC it has been discussed, the issue of lobola and polygamy? If it is oppressive to women or not. What is your...

N- I think it is. For many women, particularly in rural communities, people who marry according to customary law, I think women because of lobola can be treated and are treated very badly. But I think it is a kind of institution that’s very difficult to alter because it’s so much a part of some people, not all. And really what you need to look at is how do you infuse these practices with a democratic ethos or how do... or do you get rid of them. Those are discussions you must have with communities. You can’t do it from here, because you can’t monitor the change on the ground yourself so need to engage in a process of changing a behaviour and practice. But young people are more and more resistant of lobola. It’s become a... to a great degree abused in it’s modern interpretation. And yes, have become very, very oppressive. It has become so costly, families become hostile towards women. People who pay this lobola they believe they bought you therefore you... then you belong to the family even if you are divorced. So it’s got very unpleasant connotations and I think needs to be looked at. I don’t see why we still do it, why people still do it, but I’m a modern person talking in a town.

F- But why do you think... because I suppose it is also... it has been much debated among women politicians, what do you think are the reasons for it being so hot as an issue?

N- Oh... it affects the very essence for some people. They say it’s their cultural practice. Some, but there is resistance towards it both from males and from females, young people. And older people are finding it a burden so it has engendered a lot of discussion.

F- A burden?

N- Yes.

F- Because they have to...

93 Bennett (1995:118,119) argues in Human Rights and African Customary Law that bridewealth is not necessarily against the Constitution and discriminating against women. It seems like his argumentation does not put lobola into a socio-cultural context of relations of gender-related power though. He also argues in relation to the ‘cultural’ dimension in that people are attached to the institution: Any prohibition on bridewealth would, in any case, be highly inadvisable. Surveys indicate that, whatever its drawbacks, people remain deeply attached to the institution” (ibid).
N- Because they have to pay. So there is, I think, a great deal of discussion within the country about whether this is the best way to engage in marriage, in traditional communities. I think that process of education, of changing behaviour needs to happen. /.../ So those are some of the issues that I think confront us in terms of traditional practices that are very oppressive to women and that have not yet been responsive to our constitution. /.../ Or we have a clause on enforced labour and slavery, lobola - you know sometimes women are made to just work for the family in order to pay off this money. But when you are dealing with communities and their practices you can’t just come along with a broom and expect to sweep clean. There has to be a process, engage with communities to alter behaviour fundamentally.

F- But since lobola has been so abused and has changed so much do you think it is possible to change it and make it more democratic?

N- I think that if you have a national campaign I’m sure you can even get rid of it. I’m sure it would be a relief for some communities. But without engaging the traditional leaders, without engaging parents, women especially and you know parents. And young women – just the society, it will go on. Certain people will change the middle class, but for the rural communities, the working class it will remain the practice. But if you go out on a national education drive and a national campaign I believe you could do it. It has to be done as a huge effort.

F- And you think the traditional leaders would go along with something like that?

N- I don’t know, that have to be … well initially it will be persuasion after that you look at enforcement...

It seems like Nosithe includes ‘bad lobola’ in a defining discourse on ‘what lobola is’. Even if she calls it an abuse of lobola it is not excluded from how she defines lobola and what should be done with it. The inclusion of ‘bad lobola’ in her defining discourse leads to her to define lobola as not compatible with the constitution and she proposes a national campaign to get rid of it. Nosithe does mean that it is an institution, which relates to the ‘very essence’ of how people perceive themselves. But gender-related power is not excluded from her definition of ‘culture’ in that ‘bad lobola’ is present in the discussion of ‘what lobola is’. Even though she thinks some people feel strongly about lobola’s continued existence, she still thinks it’s possible to alter or get rid of the institution. But Nosithe is also not sure if traditional leaders would engage in such a campaign – which she thinks would be necessary in any attempt to eliminate it. She talks also about a possible enforcement.

If ANC- women politicians who oppose lobola on a personal level would take Nosithe’s a political view on the institution, it would not be possible to argue for ‘women’s free choice’ as a political solution to the problem as
Thokozile and Likhapha do. There are just two other women in my interview material, who discuss lobola as open to political change. One is Henrietta, who is in favour of the institution but thinks it needs to be more democratic. She argues that the traditional leaders should lead in such a campaign. The other woman is Sindiwe, who is explicitly against lobola and compares it with slavery:

S- I think it’s in the tradition of bride price...the manner in which it’s been used today. That if you marry and your husband and his family pay the bride-price and therefore you then become some kind of a slave when you get there. You are expected to wake up at four o’clock in the morning and start cleaning and /.../ while everyone else is sleeping because they have paid the bride price for you. I think that is very humiliating, and I think it’s very oppressive to women. That’s one thing I cannot agree to. /.../ sometimes a woman gets there and she is expected to have children, the minute she doesn’t have children it is said: “How come you can’t have children? I’m going to look for another wife who is going to be able to have children, because I paid for you.” Those are the things that I’m entirely against, I cannot agree to those things.

In the same way as Nosithe above she includes ‘bad lobola’ in her definition of the institution. We can see that if ‘bad lobola’ is included in the definition of the institution it is more difficult to argue for ‘free choice’ as a political solution and it would also probably be necessary to argue for political action to do something about its detrimental effects. But it seems to be only Nosithe and Henrietta among the interviewees who argues that a political solution to changing it or to eliminating it is possible. This may be a strong reason as to why women who oppose lobola on a personal level but perceive it as impossible to change politically need to adhere to a political discourse on ‘the true meaning of lobola’ which leaves relations of gender-related power out. But it also may explain why women who would like to keep the institution need to make a division of good and bad lobola and argue for good lobola to be the ‘true meaning of lobola’. A political defining discourse on ‘good lobola’ serves the interests both of women who oppose lobola on a personal level but perceives it as impossible to change politically and those women who would like to maintain the institution.

But women who oppose lobola on a personal level also refer to other reasons as to why lobola should not be judged as oppressive to women. In the beginning of this chapter Ellen mentioned that ’African people are beginning to say that other people have interpreted lobola for us’. Who are she referring to and what political contexts are relevant for understanding her statement?
Political contexts

Missionaries, anthropologists and colonial administrators.

Marriage payments have been intensely discussed and debated since the early years of the twentieth century (Currie 1994:152). Missionaries and colonial administrators have seen the institution as oppressive. Early colonial administrators held the view that African women were oppressed and they understood lobola, polygyny and forced marriages as the cause of women’s subordinate position (Bennett 1995:81). Anthropologists challenged this view of bridewealth and have sought ”the proper labelling and meaning of such payments”(1994:152).

Radcliffe-Brown is one who clearly saw himself as having ‘put things right’:

Some people regard payments of this kind as being a ‘purchase’ of a wife in the sense in which England to-day a man may purchase a horse or a motor-car. In South Africa it was at one time held officially that a marriage by native custom with the payment of cattle (lobola) was ‘an immoral transaction’ and not a valid marriage. /.../ The idea that an African buys a wife in the way that an English farmer buys cattle is the result of ignorance, which may once have been excusable but is no longer, or of blind prejudice, which is never excusable in those responsible for governing an African people (1950:46,47).

The anthropologist Isaac Schapera gives his view of the impact of “Western civilisation’ and ‘Christianity’ on Tswana marriage laws:

There have been several changes in marriage laws owing mainly to contact with Western civilisation and Christianity, /.../ More important, perhaps, was the abolition of bogadi [bridewealth] among the Ngwato and Tawana towards the end of the last century, and its abandonment by many Christians in other tribes. The giving of bogadi is accordingly no longer a universal condition of marriage. Greater stress is laid nowadays upon the consent of both family-groups, which must still be obtained before the tribal courts will regard a marriage as valid (1950:150).

Anthropologist Hugh Ashton makes his assessment of the views of the French mission and that of the Basuto themselves on bohali (bridewealth).

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94 The first government ruled by the Nationalists in South Africa came into power in 1948 which gives something of a relieve to Radcliffe-Brown’s and Ford’s statement which was published in 1950. The Nationalists started the apartheid politics of the country but it was process and not a ready-made political program implemented from the start.

95 Bohali is the Basotho term for bridewealth. Lobola is the Zulu term and is that one used generally when talking about bridewealth.
From the very first, the French mission has objected to the custom and has forbidden its adherents to observe it. The main objection is that the woman is sold to her husband, and not only is this derogatory to the dignity of women, but is also the cause of their inferior status. It has been frequently pointed out that this view is based on a misunderstanding of native ideas and of the true function of the cattle. The Basuto have themselves always objected to their custom being called a sale. They point out that there is no pricing of the woman, no selling to the highest bidder; that she cannot be given or sold by her husband to another man, and that she is treated quite differently from a commodity that is bought and sold; that, in short, she is “married”. /.../ The Basuto offer many reasons for retaining the custom. They point out that the cattle strengthen the bond of marriage between the two families and make the couple, especially the woman, realise that marriage is a serious contract which cannot lightly be set aside without bringing disgrace to the family. They admit, however that women married without cattle are probably no less or no more reluctant to abandon their husbands than those married with cattle. They further claim that the cattle compensate the woman’s parents for the costs of her upbringing and the loss of domestic services, whereas men are not lost on marriage and continue to serve their parents. To some extent, they also compensate the bride’s people for the cost of the wedding feast, clothes, transport and trousseau. Quite apart from these rationalisations, the ordinary Mosuto clings to the custom “because it is the custom” and because without it marriage is not marriage, and women do not feel “married”(1953:73).

Currie criticised Ashton’s account as showing little interest in what Ashton considers “irrational” motives of keeping bohali, for being paternalistic and for not giving people their own voice on the issue but “translating” their views into the language of Western jurisprudence (1994:156,157). The problem of anthropological narrative is a familiar one. But Currie is probably making too much of a dichotomy between “the people themselves” and “the anthropologist”, as “people themselves” are exposed to Western jurisprudence. They might use a discourse of “rationalisation” on lobola both to counter the critique and to understand the institution in a context of which “Western jurisprudence” is a part. What is of interest for my purpose in Currie’s discussion of Ashton’s work is that he points to the multiple discourses on lobola, which is part of a political context. Discourses on lobola are invested with different interests – the anthropologist’s, the missionaries’ as well as the interests of the people who practice it.

The long history of the critique of lobola as a sale of women and as a cause of women’s oppression, as well as anthropological discourses on the ‘proper’ meaning of the institution might be relevant as a framework for

96 For a discussion on anthropological narratives see Clifford and Marcus, Writing culture. The poetics and politics of ethnography (1986).
97 A discourse which had very concrete consequences such as the prohibition of lobola by some missions
understanding why women like Ellen who were previously against lobola now reconsider their position.

‘Culture’ - a political minefield

Some anthropologists, such as Radcliffe-Brown, saw themselves as ‘detached’ scientists who could provide the ‘colonial administrators’ with facts about ‘African culture’, knowledge which they hoped would make ‘colonial administration’ more effective and based less on prejudice:

For an understanding of any aspect of the social life of an African people – economic, political, or religious – it is essential to have a thorough knowledge of their system of kinship and marriage. This is so obvious to any field anthropologist that it hardly needs to be stated. But it is often ignored by those who concern themselves with problems relating to economic, health, nutrition, law, or administration amongst the peoples of Africa, and it is hoped that this book will not only be read by anthropologists but by some of those who are responsible for formulating or carrying out policies of colonial government in the African continent (1950:1).

And:

The process of change is inevitable. To a very limited extent it can be controlled by the colonial administration, and it is obvious that the effectiveness of any action taken by an administration is dependent on the knowledge they have at their disposal about the native society, its structure and its institutions, and what is happening to it at the present time. A wise anthropologist will not try to tell an administrator what he ought to do; it is his special task to provide the scientifically collected and analysed knowledge that the administrator can use if he likes (ibid: 85)

The positivist view of the detached, enlightened anthropologist whose mission is to provide solid facts ignores the political and social contexts of which the anthropologist is part. Radcliffe-Brown engages a political context, not the least when in his pedagogical vein he compares African marriage and English marriage throughout the introduction of “African systems of kinship and marriage”. He emphasises the differences between the two and at the same time points out similarities between discussions on marriage law in England with a discussion of marriage law in South Africa, thus ignoring the racist political context of the latter.

Functional anthropology in South Africa has been criticised for having helped in legitimising a racist political system (Hammond-Tooke 1997:7ff). But functional anthropology was also developed as a critique of earlier racist evolutionist theories (ibid:2).

98 See A political contextualisation of the women’s discourses.
Exponents of apartheid created cultural differences as well as stressed difference in their quest for racial separation and white domination (Bennett 1995:7). A systematic politics was developed to separate different ‘ethnic’ groups, which were constructed to be “naturally” divided into pre-ordained cultures. To make people believe that they belonged to these clearly separated ethnic groups provided the basis and the justification for dividing the country into ethnic ‘homelands’ (ibid). There was a field of anthropology – ‘Volkekunde’ – which was closely involved in the political process of ‘ethnic separation’ and apartheid policy of the regime (Hammond-Tooke 1997).

In the 60’s and 70’s ‘critical’ anthropology in South Africa was turning to analysis with an aim to serve the political interests of the oppressed. Functional anthropology with its emphasis on the importance of rigorous fieldwork and the concept of ‘culture’ were looked upon with suspicion from these quarters. Hammond-Tooke put it in the following words (See also Nhlapo: 1992):

Living in South Africa rapidly moving into a revolutionary stage of its history, and appalled by the injustices and enormities of the apartheid system, these scholars understandably desired a discipline that would give insights into the future and, equally importantly, could be used to alleviate the poverty, disease and unrelieved distress of the majority of South Africans. ‘Classic’ anthropology had signally failed to provide a plausible theory of social change /.../the determinist theories of structural Marxism, in particular, seemed to provide both a theory of change and a way into understanding the dynamics of social systems (typically in terms of class analysis). Certain lecturers went so far as to inform their students that ‘traditional’ anthropology was dead. It is no wonder that in some teaching departments a generation of students grew up with only the slightest knowledge of (or interest in) the basic facts of South African indigenous cultures - or of theoretical developments in European and American anthropology. The terms ‘tradition’, and even ‘culture’ became embargoed. Ethnicity as an area of study was assiduously avoided (mainly, perhaps, for fear of appearing to support government ideological preoccupations with ethnic groups), but also because of a rejection of the facile explanations of ‘primordialism’ – the idea that phenomena can be explained by reference to ‘ultimate’ causes, typically ‘race’ and ‘culture’ (1997:4,5).

This scepticism of the concept of ‘culture’ can also be seen among some of the women interviewed. There is a tension between not wanting to recognise the concept of ‘culture’ and clearly referring to ‘cultural’ phenomena in the following citation from Mmatshilo:

F- There have been discussions about lobola as being oppressive to women and I want to know – do you think there are African traditions that are oppressive that should be abolished?
Personally, I don’t know what is African culture? There is a lot of confusion. I tend to be confused when you talk about African culture because so many things have influenced it. Colonialism has also influenced our culture. It has been so diluted, so mixed, that you cannot really say ‘this is African culture’. However, there are some aspects of what is seen to be African culture that have to go. That had to go yesterday even before today. And, of course, the government has attended to the right to ownership of property, the right to land and so forth. /.../

But it is not only the conservative white political forces in South Africa that have used ‘tradition’ as a political argument. Both the ANC and the Inkatha (The Zulu national cultural movement/party) also have a history of appealing to ‘tradition’ for political purposes. The two parties have also competed about how the past should be represented in correct ‘traditional terms’ of which the following is an example:

Indeed, both the ANC and Zulu national cultural movement, Inkatha, constantly use appeals to ‘tradition’ to attempt to mobilise support for their different political programmes. Moreover, the differences which separate these organisations are also reflected in their respective and competing struggles to establish a commanding representation of the past. This contest is evident in the pages of the ANC’s official organ, Sechaba, which has repeatedly attacked the way in which ‘tradition’ is represented by the leader of Inkatha and chief minister of KwaZulu, Gatsha Buthelezi. On occasions such as the recently created Shaka’s Day, Buthelezi adorns himself in leopard-skins and rehearses his genealogical links to both Cetshwayo, the last independent Zulu king, and to Cetshwayo’s prime minister. Sechaba’s response has been to attack his use of ‘traditional’ regalia arguing that Buthulezi’s political antics contradict the heritage of Shaka as a brave warrior (editorial, Nov. 1985). It contends that Buthelezi, despite his ‘traditional’ status as chief, has long turned his back on the strong and proud ‘tradition’ of all Africans – including the Zulu, whose loyalty and support he falsely claims. It is, thus, under the heading ‘The Tradition Betrayed’ that Sechaba berates Buthelezi’s participation in the homeland system and, by extension, his support for apartheid. (Sep. 1984:4-5). Clearly, Sechaba’s editorial writers feel it is important to wrest from Buthelezi his assumption of the right to decide what constitutes ‘the traditional’, so that it can be appropriated as a resource by the ANC (Spiegel & Boonzaier 1988:55).

The ethnic discourse, which has been used to create white supremacy and to divide and rule, has taken a somewhat different route under the dismantling of apartheid and in the negotiations for a new constitution. In 1990, Brigitte Mabandla an ANC-politician and academic, noted:

From the concept of ethnicity flows yet another argument that S.A. is made up of different cultures and different racial groups. In this context whites are said to be in the minority. Most constitutional researchers have been conditioned to regard ethnicism as a characteristic of the South African society. The concept of ethnic minority should not be viewed outside concrete reali-
ties of the South African situation. Therefore, regard should be given to the fact that this concept was developed and nurtured over decades by successive S.A. governments through policies of apartheid. /.../ Most of the proponents of the protection of minority rights or group rights in essence seek the protection of privilege. /.../ The ANC is against the protection of group rights if such implies protection of group privilege or encourages ethnicity. The ANC, however, concedes that there are cultural diversities in our society. Consequently such rights as linguistic, cultural and religious shall be recognised (1990).

It is not clear how it would be possible to recognise ‘culture’ and at the same time discourage ‘ethnicity’ as these concepts are closely interrelated. In the above passage they are both based on a conceptualisation of ‘culture’ as a bounded entity which should be protected (and possibly promoted).

After elections in 1994 there has been emerging discourses on ‘African Renaissance’ and the rights of groups to ‘practice their culture’. Suzanne Leclerc-Madlala argues that such discourses have paved “the way for ‘virginity testers’ to promote their activities as ‘cultural practice’” (2003:17).

The problem of ‘cultural relativism’ was clearly demonstrated in the discussion of the future status of ‘customary law’ in South Africa.

Customary law

‘African culture’ has been, at the same time, encouraged and constructed for political purposes to divide and subdue Africans, ‘African customs’ have been considered and treated as of less value than white. This is exemplified by the legal system, which was divided into customary law and Roman Dutch law. In the current democratisation of South Africa customary law is of critical importance. And it is mainly in relation to the future of customary law which lobola has been discussed politically (and academically).

In 1995, in a discussion about the relationship between human rights and customary law, Bennett described the injustice of the application of customary law:

A uniform approach to the recognition of customary law in South Africa was imposed in 1927, with the passing of the Native Administration Act. Certain courts were given discretion to apply customary law in legal suits between Africans. In 1988 this discretion was extended to all courts of the land. In general, recognition of the laws indigenous to South Africa was governed by

99 There has been a virginity-testing movement growing concurrently with the HIV/ AIDS epidemic in South Africa. “…while the extent to which routine testing of girls can be considered ‘traditional’ or ‘culturally appropriate’ in these societies [patrilineal] may be open to debate, there seems to be little doubt that in patrilineal societies /…/ a high social value was placed on virginity’ (Leclerc-Madlala 2003:17,18). There are researchers who claim ‘virginity testing’ was part of ‘traditional’ life, like Mcetywa who has studied Mpondo culture and who argues that virginity testing was part of ‘traditional life’ before the impact of Christianity (1998:37).
ad hoc responses to particular social and political problems. Application was confined to special courts and subject to a repugnancy proviso that the relevant rules were not contrary to public policy or natural justice. The serious injustice therefore still exists that customary marriages do not enjoy full recognition on a par with civil/Christian marriages (Bennett 1995:19).

Practice as cultural process was formalised in a written text. The official version of customary law is a ‘translation’ of African cultural practice into a western legal language. Chanock (1985) has described problem in relation to African marriage in which subtle and fluctuating obligations have been ‘translated’ into rights and duties of western legal discourse (Bennett 1995:62). Another problem with the official version of customary law is how information for its creation was collected from local rulers and patriarchal elders who told the administrators what they thought appropriate behaviour ought to be (ibid: 63).

Furthermore, customary law, as a codified system has been criticised for being ‘invented’ – “this epithet is meant to warn us that customary rules owe less to ancient practice than to the interests of European writers and officials” (Bennett 1995:63).

Important in this context of discussing lobola is that customary marriages were not fully recognised on a par with civil/Christian marriages in South Africa (ibid: 19). This is, of course, a serious degradation of “African culture”. Professor Thandabantu Nhlapo, who was heading the Law Commission which made a proposal for the harmonisation of customary law and common law (see below), expressed the point of departure for the Commission’s work as follows: “It was always an insult to my parents to be told they were just cohabiting because the old colonial-based legal system did not recognise their marriage. Our starting point is that non-recognition of customary marriages is totally unacceptable under the present Constitution” (1996. Oct 4. Weekly Mail and Guardian.)

There are many aspects of customary law, which the interviewed women did not seem to regard as politically problematic to formulate as clearly oppressive to women. Women did not have the right to property, they could not inherit, they were considered minors under the guardianship of their fathers, husbands and sometimes-eldest son, and women did not have locus standi in court (See, for example, Bennett 1995). To reform these aspects of customary law has not been as controversial as have lobola and polygamy. Lobola and polygamy have not been considered as clear cases of oppressive aspects of customary law. On the contrary – there are opposing views on these insti-

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100 There was a difference in how customary law was applied in lower and higher courts in that the lower courts seem to have retained more of a flexibility whereas the higher courts applied it by the book (Bennett 1995).

101 The notion of ‘invented tradition’ was introduced to the study of customary law by Chanock in Law, Custom and Social Order (1985)(See Bennet 1995:63).
tutions and the ANC had not, at the time of the interviews, given any official
statements on the issue.

The ANC has, overall, been very silent on the question of customary
law. One of my informants in parliament thought the reason for this is that
“the ANC wants to keep everybody happy”. In the constitutional negotia-
tions the question of the future status of customary law caused a conflict
between women participating in the negotiations and the traditional lead-
ners. The traditional leaders attempted to exempt customary law from the
equal rights clause of the constitution, which the women opposed. The prob-
lem of women’s oppression in relation to customary law in this context was
often framed by women political activists in a Human Rights discourse –
which was, of course, the best political strategy work against women’s op-
pression in this case. An example is a Memorandum from Brigitte Mabandla,
at the time ANC-activist and academic, to the “Constitutional committee:
women’s emancipation desk; negotiations committee” in 1993. Mabandla
discusses South Africa in comparison with other African countries:

The challenge facing governments in the 1990’s such as Namibia, Zimbabwe
and the present Zambian government is not only to establish democratic rule
but also to establish norms of governance premised on human rights. Of
particular importance is the fact that the rights of children and women occupy
a central place in contemporary human rights. Most African countries are
faced with a challenge of finding a balance between traditional practices and
contemporary human rights.

/.../ In the ANC policy document of gender published in 1990, the ANC ac-
knowledges that South Africa is a patriarchal society. It recognises that ine-
quality between the sexes is a phenomenon common to all South Africans
and in its striving for justice it commits the ANC to fight for, inter alia,
equality between the sexes. Accordingly in subsequent documents of the
ANC the Movement upholds the principle of non-discrimination on the basis
of sex and race. The principle of non-discrimination is in fact (?) Interna-
tional law and in fact embraces the core of our ideal in the struggle against

102 As an example, Professor van Wyk noted, at a national conference in March 8, 1993
Women and a charter of fundamental rights, after having looked at various proposals by
different parties and organizations that: “the ANC was silent on the issue of customary law”
(Biehl 1993).
103 Interview with Elizabeth 1998.
104 “In December 1993, after two years of intensive negotiations, the South African Parliament
ended white political domination by enacting an interim Constitution. Opening the door to the
first non-racial government in South Africa, this Constitution enshrines the principles of
liberal democracy and constitutionalism by establishing universal suffrage, an elected Parlia-
ment, a regionally based Senate, a strong central government with nine regional
governments, an independent judiciary and a justiciable Bill of Rights” (Albertyn 1994). The
final constitution was adopted in 1996 after it had been reviewed by the constitutional com-
mittee - now democratically elected representants of people which was not the case with the
interim constitution as the first democratic election was held in April 1994.
105 The text of the copy is unreadable.
apartheid. At the heart of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women is the abolition of discrimination against women. The Convention requires any state that accedes to it to take the following steps to eliminate discrimination against women: /.../ (f) to take all appropriate measures including legislation to modify or abolish laws, regulations, customs and practices which constitute discriminatory acts against women. The ANC has committed itself to ratifying all human rights conventions and it is therefore bound in principle by the provisions of CEDAW. Following the background information given above the following recommendations are being made:

- that the Bill of Rights should override customary law
- that it should be sufficiently permissive so as to allow for appropriate measures, legislation to modify and regulate customary law and render it consistent with human rights practices

The women participating in the constitutional negotiations managed to make customary law subject to the Equal Rights Clause, which was a major political victory.\textsuperscript{106} It is not until 1998 that finally the issue of customary marriage has been dealt with legally. The Recognition of Customary Marriages Act (1998) had as a main objective to “extend full legal recognition to marriages entered into in accordance with customary law or traditional rites. The act also seeks to improve the position of women and children within these marriages by introducing measures that bring customary law in line with the provisions of the Constitution and South Africa’s international obligations” (Samuel 1999:26,27).\textsuperscript{107} There are significant improvements for women such as the right to own property, \textit{locus standi} in court, the requirement of both spouses’ consent for a marriage to be valid and so forth. The customary rule that children ‘belong’ to the father upon divorce has been modified “and a provision for courts to award custody to the mother when it is in the best interests of the child to do so and when the father is not a fit and proper person (ibid:29)”. Furthermore, the Act makes bridewealth an optional element in marriage:

An important consideration of the Commission (1998) in its research on bridewealth was the difficulty of enforcing laws that seek to ban bridewealth or to restrict the amount payable. Thus it concluded that it should have a purely social function as a mark of the cultural attributes of a marriage; that it amounts to an optional element in marriage. In the Act, bridewealth is not a

\textsuperscript{106} And outside the Multi Party Negotiations the Women’s National Coalition and the Rural Women’s Movement were active in lobbying against letting customary law override the Equal Rights Clause (Bennett 1995:22).

\textsuperscript{107} One of the important international obligations referred to is CEDAW (the international Convention on Elimination of All forms of Discrimination of Women) which South Africa signed in early1993.
requirement for a valid marriage and the non-payment will have no effect on the rights of spouses towards one another or their children (Samuel 1999:27)

There have been cases, however, which seem to confirm that discriminatory customary law despite the Equal Rights Clause of the constitution still legally binds women. The Supreme Court of appeal dealt with a case in 2000 in which a widow did not obtain the right to inherit her husband’s property as customary law states that inheritance follows the male line:

The appellant in the appeal court case, a widowed black woman from Vosloorus who had married under African customary law, had brought an appeal against her late husband’s father, who challenged that, by virtue of the operation of the customary rule of succession, all property of the deceased should devolve to him. /.../ The appellant argued that the rule of “primogeniture”, together with a 1987 regulation for “the Administration and Distribution of the Estates of Deceased Blacks” was unconstitutional because it violated her right to gender equality. /.../ The respondent, the woman’s father-in-law, countered that no customary union in fact existed because his family had only paid a part instalment towards her lobola. On the basis of this the appellant’s daughter was declared “illegitimate” by the court. (2000. June 15. Weekly Mail and Guardian; My emphasis)

The ‘imperialism’ of Western feminism

In the beginning of this chapter, Ellen was reconsidering her position on lobola as oppressive to women and one reason was that ‘African people are beginning to say that others have interpreted lobola for us’. She was also quite irritated with me asking about views on lobola in exile as she meant this was not a relevant question at all since life in exile was a matter of life and death. It may be an ignorant question to ask. But could her irritation and reconsideration of her position on lobola also be interpreted in relation to a critique of Western/white feminists as being ‘out of touch’ with ‘African realities’ and as imposing their views on African women. This discussion is also related to a debate on ‘activist women’ and ‘academic feminism’.

Leading ANC–women like Brigitte Mabandla (who is also an academic) can illuminate such views 108:

Most women’s organisations in developing countries are mass based. Membership is drawn from all classes of society. Such organisations often undertake concrete projects such as campaigns for the change of laws that are oppressive to women. /.../ They therefore look to the UN Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women for guidance. A distinction should be drawn between such women’s organisations and the feminist school in general. The latter is made up of divergent groups. Some femi-

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108 At the time of the fieldwork Mabandla was the Deputy Minister of Arts, Culture and Language, Science and Technology.
nlist groups align themselves with mass-based organisations and are therefore involved in the programmes of the women’s groups whilst other feminist groups, especially those that draw a largely intellectual following do not align themselves with mass-based women’s organisations. This category of feminist grouping is often involved in debates that are mostly broached in academic circles. /.../ There is a school of thought which identifies customary marriage as the most oppressive of the two matrimonial regimes. Such persons argue either for reform in matrimonial law or recommend that African women should opt for the civil marriage. Unfortunately, some of these academics regard customary practices as central to women’s oppression. This argument is inaccurate, as factors contributing to the oppression of African women are much more complex than presented by these academics. In our society, oppression of African women is linked to the race and class factors...”(1990).

In my experience, it is not an uncommon view among many black ‘activists/politicians’ that academic feminists (who are mostly white and sometimes from other (Western/Northern) countries) do not understand the problems of the black oppressed women of South Africa. This includes the idea that their research cannot be used to improve the lives of black poor women. The issue here is not whether this is a relevant critique or not but that this is a view that should be considered in relation to the interviews.109

A similar underlying view might also be the reason why Thandabantu Nhlapo puts the issue of lobola in the following terms. “/.../participants at even the most high-powered gender conferences and workshops have sometimes been surprised at the inhospitable reaction of African women to the suggestion that lobola is the cause of their problems.” (1992:10) Nhlapo discusses this in terms of the inability to understand the deeper levels of culture of which he considers lobola to be a part.

In an article ANC-activist Gertrude Fester puts a question-mark on what she calls the ‘colonialism’ of white academics:

Many black women have voiced their anger at being ‘research objects’ and ask if it means that white and middle-class women are not oppressed in view of the fact that they are always writing about black women’s oppression. I see this as academic colonialism. /.../ It is also important for white women to write about their contradictory status: as oppressed women and as oppressors as members of the white community. Black women feel strongly about this because it is when data on white women are incorporated that we will have a complete picture of the oppression of women in South Africa. At the moment there is a wealth of data on black women and very little about white women (1998:227).

109 See also my discussion on methodology and my position as a white researcher from Sweden.
This kind of critique of academic feminists is not unique to South Africa but it is probably more accentuated because of the country’s racist past in which almost all academics were and still are white.  

In a broader African context there has developed a critique of Western feminism as well. This critique is both about what is perceived as the imperialistic past and present of Western feminism, the inability of using Western concepts in relation to African realities and the need for African women to define their own experiences. As an example, suggestions have been made for creating an African womanism, which would take into account the double oppression (racial and colonialist as well as gender) of black women as well as the need to put the importance of motherhood centre-stage when developing gender concepts suitable for the African context.  

A discourse on lobola related to political contexts

In Chapter three I suggested that the family-related/traditional and economic discourses on lobola could be interpreted as part of a discursive strategy which my interviewees used to counter aspects of the gender-related power of the institution. Furthermore, I suggested that one motivation for presenting lobola in a positive light might be that there are indeed some aspects of the institution, which the women would like to maintain. The similarities between Ngubane’s (1987) views on lobola and the family-related/traditional and economic accounts expressed by my interviewees suggest that there are benefits to women such as its possible function as an insurance for them.

In this chapter we see that the traditional/family related discourses as well as functional anthropological discourses are essentialist in their depiction of ‘culture’. We have also seen that an essentialist view of culture can be found in ANC-politics as well. Is there an essentialising politics on ‘African identity’ within the ANC, in relation to which the discourses on lobola could be understood?

110 In 1997 there was a conference ‘Gender and Colonialism Conference’ hosted by the University of Western Cape which has been described as marking a shift in South African gender studies towards mainstreaming gender as an important aspect of any field of study instead of viewing gender as a separate field of study (Lewis 2003).

111 The critique is much more complex and varying than what is discussed here as I only bring up pertinent themes which seems relevant for interpreting the discourse on lobola discussed in this chapter. Womanism was a term coined by the African- American author Alice Walker and has been appropriated by African researchers and activists. See Arnfred (2002), for a discussion on Amadiume’s (1987, 1974) and Oyewumi’s (1997, 2002) conceptualisation of African ‘female’ gender as centred in motherhood. See also Mohanty (1991) for a discussion on how Western feminist theory has made third world women into ‘the other’. Lewis (2003) argues that Africanist studies from the late eighties have been less reductionist and have focused more on locally grounded work to bring out the complexities and women’s agency as well as to develop multi-disciplinary explorations.

112 See Chapter two, A woman-centred approach.
In Chapter two we saw that Burman (1984) pointed out the possibility of viewing the strong support of lobola among Africans as a question of ‘African identity’, but she concluded that this was not a ‘sufficient explanation’ of the persistence of the institution. Furthermore, her approach was that ‘it is understandable’ that it is important to keep one’s ‘African identity’ when so much else in African family life has collapsed or changed. ‘African identity’ becomes essentialised and only analysed from an empiricist point of view. African identity could also be analysed in a political context, at the same time interrelated to socio-cultural and economic circumstances. Mayer (1971) has studied African manhood rituals in East London and argues that Xhosa initiation is ‘to be ranked with lobola as a major customary complex which has survived the transition from country to town, as well as the impacts of christianisation and school education’ (1971:8). His answer to the question as to why people continue to practice initiation rituals was that it contributed to the development of young males which Western schooling did not serve adequately, that it reinforced group identity and that it also served as a powerful symbol of African Nationalism. Even though Xhosa initiation may not have been seen as universally African, it was still African as distinct from European (1971:15). If we transfer this reasoning to lobola, lobola does indeed fill the qualities for serving as an uniting symbol around African Nationalism since it is a ‘pan-African’ institution in South Africa. The reductionist character of what I have interpreted as a political discourse on lobola can also be understood in the light of it serving as an uniting symbol for Africans who ‘traditionally’ have varying ways of practising the institution.

We have also seen that there is a long history in which lobola has been described as the purchase of women. In this context of power politics the family-related/traditional and economic discourse on lobola could be interpreted as ‘counter-discourses’ on lobola and as part of identity politics. As Ellen expressed it in the beginning of this chapter, there may be a need for Africans to formulate their culture and identity themselves after a history of oppression:

F- But now, when you said to me, people say it’s Eurocentric to have this...

E- There are debates around lobola, yes, some African people are beginning to say that people are interpreting lobola for us, lobola means something different, it doesn’t mean women’s oppression. And they say well, let’s enter the discourse. Let’s discuss! African people are right, you know they have to be the ones who lead in the interpretation of their culture.

113 I don’t see the question of identity only on the level of political discourse but as ‘essential’ parts of people’s lives. I will only discuss it as a discourse in a political context in this part of the dissertation.

114 See Spiegel and Boonzaier (1988:53) for an interesting discussion on Mayer’s work.
F- And do you think that it is possible to re-interpret it otherwise?

E- I don’t know. I don’t know. That must come out of facts. I belong to the school of thought that says that lobola is a degrading practice. And I’m saying that I might be wrong. I’m being honest with you.

Sisiwe also made this distinction between ‘African culture’ and ‘other people’ in the previous chapter when discussing the advantages of lobola. Sisiwe says that if she would get married she would insist on lobola being paid for her: ”because I might be a feminist but I still insist that if somebody wants to marry me today, he must go and pay lobola to my mother. I will not just go and do the Western thing and just go and sign in court or at the commissioner and say you are husband and wife. Not before he pays lobola to my parents.” She also contrasts ‘African tradition’ with the behaviour of ‘Western feminists’:

S- I mean with us – in the African tradition you must respect a man. And that is a fact; like you respect your parents. Sometimes you find that feminists take things to the extreme. They’d say to their husband: ‘No, you can’t use my phone, you must get your own phone if you want to phone.’ /.../

I have suggested that Sisiwe’s contrast of ‘African culture’ and ‘feminism’ could be interpreted as a strategy to counter gender-related power and at the same time without making relations of gender-related power explicit. Could this interpretation be made on a more general political level? Can politics on ‘African identity’ serve women’s interests in multiple ways – both in the process of countering racially related power through ‘African identity politics’ and in countering relations of gender-related power through not making these later relations explicit? By aligning oneself with men in the politics of African identity and explicitly distancing the politics of gender from ‘Western feminism’ women might attempt to create a space of action to counter relations of gender-related power. But could this use of a discourse on ‘African identity’ also be seen as silencing women with ‘other colours’ or ‘cultures’ as well as African women who have divergent views on lobola? Earlier in this chapter, when I asked Ellen when she first started to reflect on gender inequalities, the first thing she mentioned was that she refused lobola to be paid for her. At that stage of the interview she seemed to reflect on this refusal in a positive light while, in the citation above she questions her own point of view. The interviews with Lilian and Likhapha in The personal is not political? could also be interpreted in this light. They have a personal view on lobola as oppressive to women whereas they promote another political line on the matter. They have both spent a long time in exile just as Ellen has. Mhudi mentions life in exile as being an experience which may have an impact on how women view lobola in that one was not dependent on families in exile, and had the possibil-
Sindiwe also spent time in exile and she is very explicit about lobola as oppressive to women but she argues that she respects her culture:

I have great respect for my culture and great respect for my background. And I feel that in order for me to know who I am I have to always value my cultural background, my cultural roots. But at the same time I strongly believe that those cultural values and beliefs are not static as society develops. There are certain things that change and therefore I strongly believe that within our culture too some of things have to change, because they no longer fit in the situation. I can just make a little example. You know in the Zulu tradition when a woman is greeting elderly people – it does not say when you are greeting males you have to greet and bring your knee down a little bit – it means any elderly person that you come across. You have to shake your hand and kneel, you don’t kneel down but you just go down a little bit. For me… for some people they feel it is humiliating for women. Because in the main it is women who normally do that, you know. But I don’t think so because even with the males there is a way... that is something they also have to do when they are greeting elderly people. Whatever it is that is something that they have to do. Either like when they have a hat on they have to remove their hat. Some of them also do the same thing like shake the hand and go down a little bit and that’s part of a culture. It is an old tradition, it’s a tradition that shows respect, so I don’t really don’t like it when somebody comes to me and start telling me: Ah! I thought that you were such a feminist I thought that you don’t want women to be humiliated, I can’t believe that you are still doing something like that! I don’t regard that as humiliation, for me it’s just part of our culture of showing respect to the next person. Same thing applies to some of our traditions,

Sindiwe does not see this traditional practice as oppressive whereas she regard the behavioural change married women have to show their parents in law as oppressive. She defines African identity differently than Sisiwe and others promoting lobola as part of African identity politics.

The discourse on African culture in the interest of identity politics could be related to an essentialised view of culture, which has been rigourously enforced under South African apartheid politics. ANC-politics in regard to ‘culture’ seem quite ambivalent and contradictory. Essentialised and politi-cised views about what culture ‘consists of ‘ are hard to separate from the politics of ethnicity. Viewed in this light a promotion of lobola, as part of an identity politics of ‘African culture’ is quite problematic.

Final discussion

The empirical material in this chapter consists mainly of three interviews with women who all hold/or have held very central positions in the ANC as regards gender-issues. The three women reason differently about lobola in
politically explicit discourses than they do when relating lobola to personal life. In the explicit discourse lobola is defined as not necessarily embodying relations of gender-related power whereas the women relate lobola to gender-related power when discussing the institution on a personal level. That the political discourse on lobola is disassociated from relations of gender-related power can be connected to a political context in which lobola has primarily been discussed in terms of its abolition or not. There seem to be a general understanding among the women interviewed, whether they are against lobola or not on a personal level, that it is not possible to ban the institution. As this discussion must be related to the new constitution, it is not possible to define the institution as oppressive at the same time as arguing for its continued existence for political pragmatic reasons. This seems to be a contributing factor shaping the political discourse on lobola as one free from relations of gender-related power. But a political discourse on lobola can also be related to other political contexts such as a colonial past in which lobola has been defined as oppressive by ‘others’. Thus, a political discourse on lobola may be interpreted as a counter-discourse in the interest of African identity politics. But it is also possible to interpret the political discourse on lobola as an attempt by women in the face of Western/Northern hegemonic discourses on lobola, to formulate another meaning of lobola which gives credit to aspects of the institution which are regarded as positive. These aspects may be experience-based in that they are connected to the practice of lobola and may not be very well formulated by academic or other discourses on ‘what lobola is’. The women may attempt to create a discursive space in which such experience-based positive aspects of lobola may be given the opportunity to continue to exist.

In terms of ‘the methodological and theoretical journey’ discussed in Chapter one, the analysis has now taken a turn towards interpreting the interviews more directly in relation to ‘the world out there’. In Chapter three the analysis stayed close to the interview-text whereas the text is now interpreted in relation to political contexts as a constraint and as formative for women’s possible actions. The tension in this chapter between agency and social relations on the one hand, and a meaning-centred analysis in this chapter is clear. I first started to interpret a possible political discourse in relation to political and academic contexts in order to interpret the meaning of the discourse. The analysis of the colonial political context is an example of this type of analysis – the women are interpreted as reacting to a colonial (or feminist) definition of ‘who Africans are’ and a political discourse is created in which the meaning of lobola is defined and understood differently. But as in Chapter three my insistence on keeping a focus on ‘what the women do?’ steered the analysis away from ‘only discerning meaning’ to an analysis of the women in relation to concrete political realities. The analysis, again, uses the interview not only as ‘text’ but also as a tool to discern the ‘reality’ the women deal with and relate to. There are concrete political constraints in
dealing with lobola, such as the assessed importance the institution have for many Africans, which the women take into account and shape their political discourse accordingly.
Chapter 5 – Lobola in a socio-cultural context of gender-meanings and relations

We have seen that gender and power-related aspects of lobola are explicitly expressed in an economic discourse among the women interviewed in Chapter three. But the women also seem to relate to other, more implicitly expressed, gender and power-related aspects of lobola. This chapter will focus on such aspects and attempt to make them more explicit by placing them in a context of socio-cultural gender-meanings and relations. The political contexts discussed previously seem to have had an impact on some of the discourses on lobola and ‘culture’. This chapter will focus on what might be considered (generally speaking) less explicit levels of discussion. Whereas previous chapters have focused on discourses on lobola, this chapter is more concerned with the actual practice of lobola.

The main questions guiding the chapter are: How can we understand the women’s dealing with lobola in a context of gender-meanings and relations? Are there gender-meanings and relations connected to lobola that could be understood as oppressive to women? How do these implicitly expressed gender-meanings and relations affect the women interviewed?

The aim of the chapter is twofold:
– I will try to identify gender-meanings and relations which could be interpreted as ‘structurally’ related to lobola
– I will problematise these structural aspects of gender-meanings and relations and explore if we can understand them as active strategies in the women’s (men’s) social contexts

Theoretically, this part of the dissertation focuses more on the stability of socio-cultural meanings and relations than previous chapters. The tension between actor and structure, which has been present in the empirical analysis throughout the dissertation, is now moving in a slightly different direction. Socio-cultural structure as a constraint on women’s agency was taken up in Chapter three in order to understand better the context to which the women were relating when creating a space for action. But, structural relations were only peripheral to the analysis. In this chapter I approach structural relations more directly even though I was not clear, at the time of the analysis, on how

115 This does not mean that I see them as historically static and established in a ‘distant past.’ Ethnographic material may shed some light on these relations, however, since there is a historical dimension to ‘structure’. 

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to do it without reducing women’s agency to a ‘reflection of structure/systems of meaning’. The theoretical and methodological questions taken up in this chapter are: How is it possible to analyse socio-cultural ‘structure’ in an empirical material consisting of women with such diverse backgrounds? How may one use the interview material in order to ‘detect structural relations’ without reducing the individual woman to mere structure including ‘systems of meaning’? How is it possible to analyse structure without making it an a-historical static entity?

Dealing with socio-cultural contexts in the process of interpretation

There is a tension in anthropological discussions, as well as in those of some of the women interviewed, between discussing lobola and ‘African culture’ in terms of ‘sameness’ – that is, there is a true meaning or function of lobola shared among the different African peoples in South Africa – and at the same time as an institution which differs among the different ethnic groups in the country.116

Functional anthropology has been criticised for emphasising sameness, for being a-historic and for depicting culture as a static entity (Comaroff 1980 a, Bennett 1995, Boonzaier and Sharp 1988). Later anthropological studies have emphasised agency and difference to a greater extent (Abu-Lughod 1993, Comaroff 1980 b, Crapanzano 1980, Moore 1994). Nevertheless, a common problem in much anthropological work whether structural-functional or agency-centred, is its basic unit of study. Even though an anthropologist like Comaroff (1980 a) criticises the structural-functional approach he still studies ‘the Tshidi’ as a distinct socio-cultural group.117 In a meaning-centred analysis such as this one, which concentrates on women with different social, economic and cultural backgrounds, the above anthropological conceptualisations of culture are difficult to apply. Much anthropological work on bridewealth is premised on the division between cultural and social groups (Comaroff 1980 b, Ngubane1987, Radcliffe-Brown 1950, Schapera 1940). In my material marriages are ‘mixed’, many women have been living in exile for years, they have different religious faiths, they come from both urban and rural settings etc.

In more materialistic studies on lobola ‘culture’ is treated as of minor importance (Burman 1984, Guy 1990, Cutrufelli 1984). This kind of approach to lobola can also be found among the informants – what I have called an economic discourse on lobola. The academic materialistic approach to lobola

116 I here refer to African peoples and ethnic groups as what anthropologists and the women themselves define as different ethnic groups or peoples.

117 See Chapter two for a discussion on Comaroff’s study of bridewealth among the Tshidi.
is also difficult to apply directly in the process of interpreting the more implicitly expressed gender-meanings and relations in the interviews. A study such as Sandra Burman’s (1984) is too general and concerned with causal explanation to help in the interpretation of gender-meanings and relations in the interview-material.\textsuperscript{118} Colin Murray (1981) leaves more room for culture but is mostly concerned with explaining uses of lobola in a rural setting as a rational response to social change and as a means for survival.

Adding to the ‘problem’ relating to cultural ‘sameness’ and ‘difference’, socio-cultural stability and change are the views that are presented by the women themselves. Among the women interviewed, there is a strong discourse on African culture as ‘sameness’, which is not surprising in a political context in which the liberation movement was trying to unite the oppressed people and in the process emphasised sameness.\textsuperscript{119} But the women also sometimes emphasise cultural difference when discussing marriage and lobola. An example is when Bertha, who is ‘coloured’ but grew up in Transkei among Xhosa-speakers, describes her husband: “In his custom - my husband was a black person and he was a Zulu from Natal. In his culture a woman must obey.”

The women also have different views on what lobola entails in practise, which is probably in part due to their different socio-cultural backgrounds. There are, for example different answers as to who should receive lobola when a woman marries or different answers as to whether or not lobola should be returned upon divorce. The women themselves do not generally refer to this as differences in practices between different cultures or social groups, but describe their version as the practice of lobola.

How am I as a researcher going to deal with interpreting gender-meanings and relations with respect to lobola with the above mentioned empirical and theoretical problems of ‘sameness’ and ‘difference’, cultural essentialism, materialistic explanations, and social change? The women interviewed have different socio-cultural backgrounds – but they interact, discuss and practice lobola. And there is some level of intersubjectivity when discussing the issue among each other. The interviews have to be contextualised in order to interpret gender-meanings and relations, but which are the relevant contexts?

My solution to this difficult problem has been to keep as close to the interview-text as possible. I use interview-texts which seem to resonate with what is said in other interviews as well as with ethnographic materials and other studies – this seems to help to make the meanings and relations discussed more explicit or elaborated.\textsuperscript{120} Methodologically, the interviews and other material in this chapter are used as socio-cultural means to contextualise the interview-material as a whole as regards gender-meanings and

\textsuperscript{118} See Chapter two for a discussion on Burman’s approach to bridewealth.
\textsuperscript{119} See, for example, John Sharp’s (1988-94) discussion on African Nationalism.
\textsuperscript{120} This method is in line with a hermeneutic approach as discussed in Chapter one.
relations. But it also used, as in previous chapters, to discern individual responses to specific contexts.

Lobola and the dichotomization of gender-meanings and relations

Tandeka is very antagonistic to lobola and thinks it undermines women’s position. She is, at the time of the interview, in the process of separating from her husband. How does she describe her relationship with him and how does she relate her choice to divorce him to lobola and gender-meanings and relations?

F- One thing that has been discussed within the ANC and also in other forums – that some people say that lobola is unequal for women. That it’s discrimination. What is your opinion about those and other traditional ...(end of tape)

T- ... Traditional things that we should not do away with like respect. I think it’s basic. We should not do away with it. But there are things that I think are undermining women. Lobola – you are taken as a commodity because it looks as if a man buys you. Previously lobola was used for creating relationships between the two families. But now it’s a different way. Society has changed – back then families had a lot of cows a lot of cattle, now they don’t have that. Firstly, the standard of living is too high to pay lobola. Secondly, you are taken as a commodity. And thirdly – previously, it was used to create more relationships. But it is taken negatively. A man doesn’t want you to say anything because he has paid lobola. You are his commodity; you don’t have say. I take lobola as nothing nowadays because culturally if you got married you also have to by furniture and furniture is expensive, you know. I got furniture in 1994 /.../ when I got married and I’m still paying for that furniture. And it is not equal to the lobola that was paid by my husband. So it is unfair. And another thing: men say you must get a lot of children because they pay lobola. Why? And I’m not a manufacturer, children’s factory. I’m also a worker; I contribute towards the income at home. I do everything. I bought the house when my husband was still at school, I paid for him at school, – life has changed, the society has changed.

F- But when you got married when was that? In 1994?

T- Yes, I’m afraid.

F- Okay (Laughter), on the right date?

T- On the tenth of April.
F- Okay, you had a lot of celebrations that month.¹²¹

T- Yes

F- But ... he paid lobola?

T- Yes, he paid lobola. My parents wanted lobola. I didn’t want them to accept it.

F- You did not want them to accept it?

T- But they said no /.../.

F- So you had to accept it? And then you paid for furniture were that also according to what you felt were expected of you?

T- Yes.

F- As traditionally?

T- Yes.

F- Because you should?

T- We are expected to buy furniture.

F- As a woman?

T- Yes.

F- And a house?

T- No.

F- No not the house.

T- I got the house because I’m the breadwinner.

F- And do you feel that it has affected your relationship, that lobola was paid?

T- Yes it has. We don’t stay together even now.

F- What do you mean?

T- With my husband.

¹²¹ The first democratic elections in South Africa was held in April 1994.
F- Oh you separated?

T- We are on separation.

F- Because you felt...

T- Because he doesn’t want me to be part of decisions that is taken in the house. Secondly – I did not have a child until very late – he once said to me: ”When are you going to have a child?” Things like that. And he thinks he must have girlfriends. And I feel that if you are married you should respect one another. I wouldn’t allow my husband to have a girlfriend. Because – I don’t want a boyfriend so it’s unfair for him do that. And when I say something, he says I’m talking like that because I’m the breadwinner. It contributed a lot. Yes.

F- And you think that has a lot to do with lobola?

T- Yes, I think so because he always says: ”I paid lobola.” He always said, “I paid lobola” when we were fighting.

F- But did you two discuss this before you married? You didn’t want lobola but your parents did.

T- He wanted to pay lobola and my parents did want lobola. His parents wanted to pay on his behalf.

F- And what happened when you separated with these issues? Lobola and things like that?

T- We left everything like that. He will have to pay back my money. I took him to school. I looked after him. He will have to pay my money back. If he wants his lobola.

F- Ja, okay. But then you were in one way... in a good position because you were ... (Laughter)

T- Because...

F- Because if you hadn’t paid for his living, like another woman?

T- Was I going to pay back the lobola?

F- Yes.

T- No, no. I wasn’t going to pay back. Staying with a man consumes a lot of your time. You cook for this person; he doesn’t want to cook. So why should I pay him back? You do his washing, you do his ironing, and why should you pay back?
F- If you would like to get married again some time later. Would you refuse lobola to be paid for you?

T- Yes.

Tandeka makes a distinction between past- and present-time lobola. Previously, lobola was used to "create relationships" but now "you are his commodity" because "it looks as if a man buys you". Tandeka refers to lobola's previous meaning in, what I have called, a family-related discourse, which essentialises the meaning of lobola into "creating relationships between families". She depicts today's meaning in terms of men misinterpreting the previous meaning of lobola in order to enforce their will in marriage and that they are able to do that since "it looks as if a man buys you".

Men as actors become important in Tandeka's discussion of today's meaning of lobola. She brings the husband's interpretation and use of lobola centre-stage. And she expresses aspects of gender-related power in an economic discourse; "it looks as if a man buys you."

Tandeka seems to counter aspects of gender-related power, expressed in an economic discourse, as well as other gender-meanings and relations and relations of gender-related power by combining a discourse on social change and an economic discourse: As when Tandeka argues against current interpretations of lobola: the furniture that the woman has to provide when marrying are more expensive than the value of lobola; people don't have cattle any more; and the standard of living is too high for lobola. Furthermore, she argues that society has changed in that women work and contributes to the income of the family. When Tandeka mentions this change of women's position in society it is in relation to men's demands that their wives should have a lot of children.

When Tandeka challenges the view that she should bear children, Tandeka might mean that women's main responsibility in the past was to bear and rear children. But since women have expanded their role in society it is wrong for their husbands to still expect women to have a lot of children: "I'm not a manufacturer, a children's factory. I'm also a worker, I contribute towards the income at home, I do everything."

Finally, Tandeka seems to bring in a discourse on equality to challenge relations of gender-related power: "He doesn’t want me to be part of decisions that are taken in the house. Secondly – I didn’t have a child until very late – he once said to me: "When are you going to have a child?" Things like that. And he thinks he must have girlfriends. And I feel that if you are married you should respect one another. I wouldn’t allow my husband to have a girlfriend. Because – I don’t want a boyfriend so it’s unfair for him to do that. It is unfair in Tandeka’s view and contrary to her view of ‘respect’, which
she expects to be mutual. Later in the interview when we discuss men’s sexuality she says: "Why does he have to have girlfriends? If we are equal we are equal in all spheres”.

It seems like Tandeka challenges views about men as "heads of households” who have the right to make decisions, their sexuality and their being ‘given’ children by their wives.

Tandeka does seem, to some extent, to accept that women have a responsibility to have children. But she argues against this responsibility in terms of the numbers of children a woman is expected to have.

Even though Tandeka questions her husband’s authority and his interpretation of the meaning of lobola, she seems (previously) to have accepted that lobola is connected to her duties as a wife in doing household chores. When I ask what will happen with the lobola when they separate, she clearly relates lobola to what she has done, as expected from a wife: “Staying with a man consumes a lot of your time. You cook for this person; he doesn’t want to cook. So why should I pay him back? You do his washing, you do his ironing, and why should I pay him back?”

It seems like Tandeka challenges socio-cultural gender-meanings and relations of gender-related power. The gender-meanings and relations include women’s responsibility to bear children for their husbands, men’s position as the head of the household, men’s rights to have many sexual relationships and women’s responsibility to perform household-duties. At the same time she challenges them, she seems to accept them to some extent.

These gender-meanings and relations are normative. In this sense lobola dichotomises gender in that there are different and mutually exclusive normative meanings associated with men and women in relation to the lobola payment, and these gender-meanings seem connected to gender-related power. Both directly, as the man is assigned the position of ‘the head of the household’ through the payment of lobola, and indirectly as dichotomous gender-meanings and relations limit women’s space of action. Marriage and lobola could be seen as a socio-cultural institution, which constructs men

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122 These seem to be basic features of marriage, which are general throughout the region and which anthropologists agree upon. See for example Radcliffe-Bown (1950:148 ff), Hilda Kuper (1950:88 ff), Adam Kuper (1982:11 ff), and Isaac Schapera (1940:150ff). Thandabantu Nhlapo discusses marriage in a more recent context:

“African women are expected to become wives at some state in their lives and as wives they are required to be, first and foremost, mothers. /.../ It can be said that as wives African women do not enjoy a great deal of freedom of choice. Their lives, particularly in terms of personal independence and equality of decision making, are subjected to the needs of the family. Family ties serve to subordinate the interests of women as persons to the interests of the wider group. /.../ The role of women as mother, too has a great impact on their lives. African marriage has its most telling consequences on women as mothers, mother-to-be or potential mothers. /.../ The motherhood role makes possible the paradox of women in African society: revered for their fertility and restricted because of it (1991:118,119).”

123 See Lundgren (1993) for a discussion on normative gender-meanings and the dichotomization of gender.
and women as two different (and heterosexual) kinds of people, in a hierarchi-
cal and complementary relationship to each other. It is important to note, 
however, that this dichotomization of gender has a history of construction in 
relation to the larger kinship-group and not only within a nuclear family 
context.  

Violence and the dichotomization of sexuality  

Dirty women and potent men  
Tandeka mentions that her former husband "thinks he must have girl-
friends". She counters his view on the issue and discusses it in terms of mu-
tual respect and equality: "I feel that if you are married you should respect 
one another. /.../ I don’t want a boyfriend so it’s unfair for him to do that. 
And when I say something he says I’m talking about that because I’m the 
breadwinner." It seems like Tandeka explicitly connects her former hus-
band’s having girlfriends to relations of gender-related power and to cultural 
notions of men’s sexuality which she opposes and thinks are unfair to 
women.  

Tandeka makes a more elaborate account on her view on men’s sexuality 
later in the interview:

F- Let’s say that you were not married - you were just having a relationship. 
That is one thing I’m wondering about: it seems like the women I have talked 
to expect their husbands and boyfriends - as African men or black men –they 
expect them have other girlfriends. 

T- Yes, that is what they do. 

F- And is the expectation different if you are a man? 

T- Oh! You have a boyfriend – you can even get killed. You are taken as a 
dirty woman. You are taken as shit. That is what I’ve been saying about our 
culture: There are some things that I would like us to do away with – because 
it’s discriminating. A man can have more than five girlfriends but a woman is 
not supposed to have any relationships. And I’m saying that if a woman is 
not supposed to have relationships, why a man? Why does he have to have 
girlfriends? If we are equal we must be equal in all spheres. 

F- So if you have a boyfriend and he finds out that you have another boy-
friend... 

124 See Oyewumi (1997, 2002) for a discussion of the inadequatness of using Western gender 
concepts as based in a nuclear family unit in an African context.
T- You can die! He can kill you!

F- And people would not support you?

T- Yes! They would definitely run away from you because you have worked against their morals.

Tandeka is very explicit about how dangerous it is for a woman to have more than one sexual relationship: "You can die!" She also relates this to notions of morality. A woman is considered a dirty woman if she has more than one boyfriend. There seems to be strong normative gender-meanings connected to a woman’s sexual behaviour; normative gender-meanings which are very different from those related to a man’s sexual behaviour.

In Chapter three Sisiwe made a connection between men’s violent behaviour and their expectations that their wives have extramarital affairs when the wife is away from home: "But you find some men don’t understand and that’s when they start beating their wives. Sometimes they suspect them of having other affairs outside the home and pretending to be busy and go somewhere.” How does Sisiwe discuss the issue of women’s and men’s sexuality? Does she as Tandeka refer to notions of morality regarding women’s sexuality and to men’s right to have many girlfriends?

In the interview with Sisiwe the discussion about different sexuality norms for women and men starts when I ask Sisiwe, who is positive about lobola, if it is not more difficult for a woman to get a divorce if lobola has been paid than if it’s not been paid:

S- ... a divorce. It’s not, because traditionally – in olden times divorces were very few – but if there was a divorce you didn’t get a situation whereby the men or the family of the man demands their lobola back. It has never been that way.

F- But do you think there would be some kind of emotional pressure? Lobola has been paid and if you break that – as a woman it would be more difficult to divorce?

S- That attributes to ignorance /.../ It’s more to do with morale. That you think it would be also bad that for your family, that lobola was paid for you. But as I said in the olden days – it still happens though – what usually happens is that instead of divorcing you the husband will actually marry another woman and maybe will concentrate on the other woman and not on you. So you would still be the wife: what we call polygamy. So sometimes it was done to avoid a divorce. In some instances they say they do it because they have got the rights as men in that. And it has always been the culture that the African must have more than one wife. They also refer to the ratio.

F- The ratio?
S- The ratio yes. Because at present the population of women is 54% of the country’s population.

F- Do you believe that?

S- No, that’s exactly what they say. They say: “I think it’s better if I have two women with me and they know that they have a person to take care of them instead of me going around and messing around with other women. /.../ If I’m not at the one house she will know that I’m in the other house.

F- But what do you think ... polygamy do you think that is ... should that stay to or is it...

S- I know there is a fight that polygamy must go. But it is there and it still happens, even in the civilised societies that we live in you find that men have mistresses. They have mistresses that are accepted by the wives. That is polygamy in itself, in another form. But it is there.

F- But do you think it is oppressive or do you think...?

S-... To some extent but not fully, but to some extent. In some cases it is oppressive, in some you find that the two will accept it. They feel better, you know, they feel much better. I was listening to some interview on the radio where married women accepting that it’s better that my husband brings his mistress home. I know this person /.../ If anything happens to him or if I don’t know where he is I can contact this other person and know that at least he is safe. Unlike him going around with a woman I don’t know and if anything happens or if ... I wouldn’t know where to contact him. That is the present talk …

F- But you wouldn’t…

S- I’m very jealous (F- Laughter) and possessive. But I don’t rule out the fact that my boyfriend can have other affairs. I don’t rule it out and I don’t expect him to have just me.

F- You don’t do that?

S- As much as I’m jealous but ... one thing that usually women do is that you ... what you need is the respect. You might know that your husband or your boyfriend or your partner has another affair, but as long as he respects you, as long as he just don’t bring a woman to the house and say you must get off the bed and things like that. As long as he respects you – he knows that you are his wife and if he has an extramarital affair he does it very far from you.

F- But is it respect to have that extramarital affair?

S- It’s not respect ... But say that’s happening. It is happening, single men do it, married men do it, and you see it in your own circles. You even see your
boyfriend’s or your husband’s friends with other girlfriends, with other women and then you ask yourself why is mine... Do you think mine is a saint? Is he not doing the same thing ... if all his friends are? I’m not saying all men are like that, but most men have extramarital relationships. And what usually women need is the respect. If he does have an extramarital affair he should have it – but very far from home. I must never see it.

F- But you wouldn’t like to have extramarital affairs – as a woman, you wouldn’t think that it’s right for you to have other men too, or?

S- Yes, I don’t think it’s right (F; Laughter) It’s immoral for a woman. I mean it happens also. I think the process is reciprocal, it happens also with women, who are married, and who have their husband. You find them having extramarital relationships. It is there, you are living with it and I don’t know how we’ll address it but it happens. Sometimes women do it because ... for instance you’ll find that you don’t get some financial support from your husband – and they do it to keep their homes alive. At least you have something for the tummies of the kids. Then they go and have those kinds of relationships to be able to get money to feed the family. Sometimes it’s not on their own accord that they do it. Even prostitutes themselves – if you talk to some of the women they will tell you: "I didn’t want to be a prostitute and I have no alternative. I can’t find a job, my kids are hungry, the furniture I bought when I had a job is going to /.../ the only survival mechanism I can do is to become a prostitute”.

F- But it sounds to me like women having extramarital affairs – if they would just do it as you expect men to do it – it would in some sense be worse?

S- Yes.

F- You expect men…

S- …not women.

F- Is there any other of those cultural traditional ways that you think are good for women that you want to keep in your…?

S- One thing that I know is lobola, it’s the respect for elderly and the ... partners and husband – it has more to do with mutual understanding ... to be able also to be respected by the women. Because, as a woman, if you do wrong moral things, it’s a bad reflection on you. Say, for instance: if Rich – Rich is my boyfriend –if Rich goes out with another woman, they say he is a man. But if I do it, they see me with another man, /.../ that is an insult, it damages my image. It’s just a bad reflection on me as a woman, you see. Some of the things I would prefer to be able to rise above, but not compete. Because if you say you are going to compete with men because you are equal – equality doesn’t mean that that if men have five extra marital relationships you can also have five – that as a woman damages your image and I think it destroys you as a woman.
Different expectations about men’s and women’s sexual behaviour are revealed when I ask Sisiwe if lobola doesn’t make it difficult for a woman to divorce. She makes an association to polygamy and that a man “in the olden days” took another wife when he was tired of the first one. And she goes on to discuss it in terms of what men think they have a right to: “sometimes they do it because they say they have the right as men in that” and that “it has always been the culture that the African must have more than one wife.” She also mentions that men refer to the “ratio” as an explanation for polygamy. Here, Sisiwe focuses on how men argue for polygamy and she refers to men saying that it is better for the women if they know where their husband is than if men “mess around” without their wives knowing where they are. When I ask her if she thinks polygamy is oppressive to women she is ambivalent. She refers to an interview with a woman on the radio who argues along the same line as what Sisiwe referred to as the argument of men; “It is better that my husband brings his mistress home. // If anything happens I know where he is and I can contact this other person and know that at least he is safe”. But Sisiwe also distances herself to this argument by saying: “That is the present talk”. When I ask her if she would accept polygamy, she takes a stand against it on a personal level and refers her standpoint on the issue to her being jealous and possessive. But she expects her boyfriend to have affairs as ‘all men’ have affairs with other women. Her solution on a personal level seems to be to reduce her expectations and expecting him keeping his affairs out of sight from her. She would prefer him not to have other affairs but she doesn’t seem to consider that as a realistic option. These statements which appears as contradictory in Sisiwe’s account could be interpreted as Sisiwe both accepting and resisting relations of gender-related power in regard to men’s sexuality. When she questions the notion of men’s right to have many sexual relationships, she does it in her personal life, in terms of an individualised discourse on emotions: “I’m very jealous and possessive”.\(^{125}\) This individualised discourse disguises the relations of gender-related power, which Sisiwe seems to question. But she also distances herself from ‘the arguments of men’ such as their historical right to have more than one wife. At the same time as Sisiwe resists notions of men’s sexuality, she accepts them to a certain extent.

When I ask her what her view is on women having extramarital affairs, she says it is immoral for a woman; and then she discusses it in terms of prostitution and economical survival. She agrees with the view that it is bad for a woman’s moral image to have extramarital affairs. She discusses it as a question of what is expected of you as a woman: “If I go out with another man, that is an insult, it’s just a bad reflection on me as a woman. //Equality doesn’t mean that if men have five other extramarital relation-

\(^{125}\) See Chapter three four an analysis on individualisation as a discursive strategy for gaining a space of action.
ships, you can also have five. That, as a woman, damages your image, and I think it destroys you as a woman.” A premise for her discussion on sexuality seems to be place responsibility on women for sexual behaviour. This could be interpreted as a socio-culturally grounded view of women’s sexuality.

Another premise for the discussion on polygamy as well as on the expectations she has of her own relationship seems to be that “men have sexual relationships with many women”; and that this is not possible to change: men are not capable of changing their sexual behaviour and/or they are not expected to do so. This could be interpreted as a socio-culturally grounded view of men’s sexuality.

Sisiwe expresses what seems to be a cultural dichotomization on sexual meanings and relations. Sisiwe also expresses what seems to be a socio-cultural acceptance of men’s use of violence whenever they suspect their partners to be unfaithful. The dichotomous division of responsibility for one’s sexuality seem to be another expression of gender-related power intertwined with sexual meanings and relations. These dichotomous sexual meanings and relations can be interpreted as intertwined with a dichotomization of gender – a man having many girlfriends is said, “to be a man” whereas a woman with many boyfriends would be “destroyed as a woman”.

When Tandeka discusses equality in terms of men showing respect by having no other girlfriends and expects them to change their behaviour, Sisiwe discusses equality as undesirable as women should not behave like men – women should not have extramarital affairs but men are expected to have extramarital affairs. Sisiwe seems to have internalised normative sexual gender-meanings into a gender-identity to a greater extent than Tandeka who questions these gender-meanings and relations through her making relations of gender-related power more explicit than does Sisiwe.

While Tandeka questions her husband’s behaviour with the argument that he should respect her, Sisiwe accepts that her boyfriend has other girlfriends and defines respect differently from Tandeka. But Sisiwe questions relations of gender-related power through an individualised discourse on emotions and through ambivalently distancing herself from ‘the arguments of men’.

Is it possible to interpret a greater internalisation, (which is not a complete internalisation) of relations of gender-related power into a subordinated gender identity as a strategy to cope with relations of gender-related power? Instead of seeing Sisiwe as an actor only reflecting a patriarchal socio-cultural structure and in some instances resisting it, we could also interpret the ‘not complete reflection of socio-cultural structure’ as an active strategy to cope with other (male) actor’s use of socio-culturally entrenched relations of gender-related power. She could be interpreted as partly internalising notions of women’s sexuality but that this internalisation still provides room for resistance. By submitting to a certain extent to relations of gender-related power – in her particular relationship – she may create some room for resis-
tance. As will be seen, women/girls may face male/parental violence by questioning relations of gender-related power too overtly.

**Violence against girls and women**

We have seen that the dichotomization of sexuality, gender-relations, gender-meanings and their associations with gender-related power; which seem to be expressed in the lobola payment, is not confined to marriage but related to a wider socio-cultural context. Can we find the dichotomous gender-meanings and relations discussed above reflected in Tandeka’s discussion of her childhood?

F- Were there values, some things that your mother thought was important for you as children – I think of if there were gender values that you grew up with?

T- Like what?

F- Well, some religious values say that girls should behave in this or that way.

T- Respect!

F- Yes.

T- Yes, but I don’t think that is a religious value, I think it’s part of our culture... as blacks. Blacks believe that a young person should respect (?) there is even a saying that one has to respect younger people and older people. It’s respect. And my mother did not want us to have boyfriends. She even used to inspect us.

F- To inspect you?

T- Yes.

F- Oh really!

T- I remember one day she came from work in the morning. She was cross. I don’t know why, and she called me and my sister. She asked us to go to bed. And I said to her: “No! I have to go and wash first”. And then she said: “What do you know about washing yourself first? I want to check you.”

F- So she checked physically if you had been with a man? Really?!
T- I’m not sure whether she did know what to check. I’m sure, even now; she didn’t know what to look for. She ended up doing that when my sister was back at college.

F- She stopped doing it?

T- When she was in college.

F- How did you feel about that? Did you know what was going on?

T- It helped to control us. Because one did not see the need of seeing a boyfriend. Because in our times when you had a boyfriend you had to go and sleep with him. So the sleeping part was the bitter part. I once had a boyfriend and we fought! He wanted me to go. And you have sex with him. Because I knew my mother would check me and see that I had done it (Laughter).

F- So you felt that ... I mean that it was such a control that it would help you to...

T- Yes, it helped me. Because most of young women around my area had children. And their mothers would say, “these children behave very well”. But they didn’t know that my mother was checking us. We were even used as examples in our area.

F- By the community?

T- By the neighbourhood, because we didn’t have children.

F- Yeah, but you were quite scared that your mother would...

T- Yes! (Laughter) Very! Very much!

/.../

T- And there were a lot of tricks that my mother used to control us. /.../

F- And was it different for your brothers than for you as women?

T- Yes! A very big difference! She spoils them even now. She was very tough on us.

F- The girls?

T- Yes, she was very tough.

F- And the boys... they didn’t have to help and all this?
T- They did! They did washing, they cleaned the house, and they cooked.
Yes, she taught them everything and she made sure that we all shared the duties.

F- Yes. But what was the difference in...

T- She did not really spank them and when they ran away she did not, you know.

F- So there was a lot of spanking for you as women?

T- Yes, she did not punish them. We could not run because she would punish us. The boys could run and come back later. And she would do nothing - when you had expected her to punish them.

F- Did you think about that when you were a child, that there was a difference? You took it for granted?

T- Yes, that she had the right to do whatever she did. And another thing that she did - we were supposed to play within the yard. And it’s a very small yard! /.../ When we go to the shop you are given a time limit - and the boys are not given time limit. And you know they started very late to clean. I had to go to boarding school and my sister went to teach. That is when they started cleaning. At first they used to demand their shirts from us: “Where is my shirt? Where is my trousers?” As we were working for them. And my mother started being straight with them when there was no one at home.

F- The very strict manner... that you had to play in the yard and all these things - did that apply to the other girls in the neighbourhood?

T- No! I used to envy them. I remember one girl saying: “Ei, you look like tied goats!” /.../

F- Did she tell you why she did this? Did she give any reasons for it?

T- She feels very proud, even now. That she was strict. That is why we were able to go to school. That is why, when we had problems politically and had to go and hide – we did not come back with babies. Because when other people went into hiding they came back pregnant. I could attend meetings - go for days and did not come with a baby. She was proud of it.

Tandeka was taught by harsh means to behave like a girl should. She learned to perform household duties and to serve her brothers. Her space of movement was restricted and when she went to the shop she was given a time limit to which her brothers were not subjected too. And the control was enforced by violence.

There also seems to have been a clear dichotomization of sexual meanings and relations as an expectation from men of girlfriends to have intercourse
with them. But also there were expectations from parents/mothers that women should take responsibility for not becoming pregnant, whereas boys appears not to have been subjected to the same expectations and control. Tandeka’s statement that she fought with her boyfriend might indicate that he used physical force and maybe was violent in order to make her have intercourse with him.

Although Tandeka describes her mother as subjecting her daughters to extreme control, and her mother therefore could be seen as an exception, the girls were held up as good examples by the neighbours. Neighbours seem to have shared the same values on women’s responsibility not to become pregnant.

Lilian has a similar experience as Tandeka as a girl:

F- If you could tell me a little about your background, your family and the gender relations in your family?

L- Well. I grew up in a family where, I think like most people in my generation ... our parents related in a particular way - reflecting how society positioned women in relation to men - in terms of role and place in everyday life. My mother generally played the role of manager of the household and (?) life of the family although she was also part of bread winning because she was a nurse and she worked quite hard, with long hours and so on. But she tended to focus on the reproductive, in terms of food and all that sort of thing. I also was brought up in a way that made me very sharply aware that the way girls are treated in society is different and is quite unequal to boys.

F- You thought about it...

L- I thought about that when I was a child because we would go and play and now and again we would be late, we come back late, and I would be the one that’s beaten up and my brother wouldn’t.

F-Oh was it?

L- Yes. I would actually be beaten up and he wouldn’t be touched. Secondly, although I had an older brother, I would be the one - I’m the second in a family of eight, the eldest of the girls - of five girls and three boys. Although I had an elder brother I would be the one who had to wake up earlier than anybody else, make the coffee, get the pots going for breakfast, wake everybody else up, make sure that things are getting under way for the day to unfold. People go to work, people go to school and that sort of thing, so it was not a question of age, because I had an older brother, but I would also actually have to serve him, or to service him.

F- Did you think about that too?

L- Yes, you know sometimes you don’t think about these things very concretely in terms of saying: this is gender bias but you actually note that (F-
You don’t like it.) there is something you don’t like about what’s going on, you question it! And you are just left with a vague kind of ... bitterness about it, maybe bitterness is to strong, but there is just something about that, dissatisfaction, yes...

F- What (?) come home late?

L- No, my mother and father would be very angry with both of us, they would scold us but I would actually be beaten up. So the unhappiness, in particular, as regarding me would be more intense, you see. So there were those sorts of things. And I found that a whole lot more was expected of me although I was a child. For instance, I should be able to not want to go and play, rather take on duties in the home, at a time when I actually want to go and play with other kids. And a lot more was demanded of me then was demanded of my older brother or my brother who was two years younger than I was. So, I think from there, maybe the seeds of gender sensitivity or a person who would later on in life be a feminist...

Lilian has a similar experience as Tandeka of having been beaten if she did not ‘behave’ and of bearing a heavier burden of household duties compared to her brothers. *I interpret their stories as reflecting an socio-culturally grounded dichotomization of gender meanings and relations; including a dichotomization of sexual meanings and relations and expectations on women to serve men. These dichotomous gender-means and relations reduces women's space of action compared to men’s and places a heavier burden of responsibility on women’s shoulders.* Furthermore, my interpretation is that there is a socio-cultural acceptance that the dichotomization of gender-means and relations which put restrictions on women’s space of action, such as her duty to perform household chores and her husband’s or boyfriend’s exclusive right to her sexuality, *may be enforced by violence.*

**Male violence against women**

I have not asked the women interviewed specifically about experiences of male violence, but the subject has been strikingly present in much of the interview-material. The women interviewed bring it up both as personal experiences and in relation to many other subjects discussed. Sisiwe and Mhudi have been battered themselves, and they also refer to other women who have been battered. When I was staying in a student dormitory in Johannesburg, I heard my neighbour beating his girlfriend. The woman in charge of the dormitory had numerous stories of male violence against women at the campus including a rape at gunpoint that same weekend. Violence against women is endemic in South Africa and the country has one of the highest rates of rape in the world (Wood et al 1998, Jewkes and Abrahams 2000, Watts and Garcia-Moreno 2000). This has to be thought of in relation to the violent South African history in general with its race-related
violence. But is there also a history of socio-cultural acceptance of violence against women? Violence against women is a universal problem but there may be differences in how openly it is socio-culturally sanctioned. When I reported my neighbour to the university, the man in charge, who was Afro-American, told me that black male students used to refer to ‘African culture’ to legitimate male violence against women. This was also an argument by students in Cape Town in a survey conducted in 1991.126

Lucy Mair discusses the historical dimension of African marriage in her article "African marriage and social change" and she describes the African husband’s rights in relation to his wife in regard to using violence as follows127: "The husband’s right to enforce his authority by beating his wife was recognised, though she could appeal to the protection of her own people if he abused it (1969:17)".

Thandabantu Nhlapo discusses the relationship between marriage and violence in a recent context:

> It may also be plausibly argued that a marriage where the most important aims are external to the parties involved, where men acquire rights over women and children but not vice versa, and where these rights are secured by the movement of cattle, has a direct bearing on the perpetual minority of women. This in turn surely has a bearing on the chastisement and physical violence in general, not to mention the position of widows and the dehumanising bereavement rituals and mourning taboos to which they are sometimes subjected (1991:114).

There seem to be a history of socio-cultural acceptance of male violence against women under certain circumstances, which may be used by African men today to legitimate violence against women in a broader socio-cultural context.128 Such an interpretation of a ‘broadened context for male violence against women’ is that a husband may have had the right to use physical violence against his wife under certain circumstances in the past, which is now interpreted/abused by men (such as the students referred to above) to mean that they may beat their girlfriends to enforce their will in a more arbitrary way.

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126 “Final report of the Committee of Enquiry into Sexual Harassment” Oct 25 1991, University of Cape Town. For a discussion on this document see Nhlapo 1992. In this article Nhlapo argues that violence against women and sexual harassment cannot be considered part of ‘African culture’.

127 Other anthropologists who refer to wife-beating as accepted in certain circumstances are for example Schapera (1940:158) and Hilda Kuper (1950:92).

128 There are, of course, ‘counter-discourses’ which argues against male violence against women, sometimes framed in a broader human rights discourse but also as prohibited by South African law today.
The power of families

In previous chapters we have seen that the families of the woman/bride/wife and the man/bridegroom/husband often have a central place in the discussions of marriage and lobola. In Chapter three, Mmatshilo and Mhudi give great significance to the power of families in their discussions and their strategies in relation to marriage and lobola. Mmatshilo is married by lobola, and I interpreted her as using discursive strategies in order to make a space for action in relation to what she seems to perceive as very oppressive aspects of ‘the extended family’. A key statement as I interpreted it was “/.../ all I wanted was them to accept the fact that I’m also human”. Mhudi chose not marry her partner as she wanted to keep some independence and one argument she offered was that: ”/.../ if I married him, tomorrow that would change. Not because he would make me change but his own family and clan.” Both Mmatshilo and Mhudi clearly relate to the ‘extended family’ as a possible threat to their freedom of action. In Chapter four, Lilian offers the explanation as an argument against lobola that she doesn’t want her daughter to be ‘swallowed up’ by her husband’s family.

We have also seen how some women attributed to the families a very positive part in relation to marriage and lobola. Emma discusses lobola as insurance for a woman in times of need: ”You see lobola was meant to be an insurance for women. When you got married /.../ what was exchanged was cattle or whatever, which in times of need would form a kind of recourse for you.” I have called this a family-related discourse on lobola, which disguises relations of gender-related power. For instance, in the citation above I interpreted Emma’s statement as disguising that a woman had to fulfil certain expectations as a mother in order to be able to expect lobola to function as an insurance for her. Furthermore, I have analysed the family-related discourse of the women as being linked to a political discourse on lobola. These discourses put ‘the extended family’ and the kinship system at centre-stage when defining lobola, which is also the case with academic functional discourses. Radcliffe-Brown defined one major feature of African marriage as, “In Africa marriage is not simply a union of a man and a woman: it is an alliance between two families or bodies of kin” (1950:51).

In this part of the dissertation I will go deeper into the issue of ‘the extended family’ and relate it to gender-meanings and relations and relations of gender-related power.

The power of families and gender-related power

Tandeka is very negative and Bertha is very positive about the families’ role in marriage. What are the meanings Tandeka and Bertha attribute to the

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129 See An economic discourse and a family-related discourse?
man’s and the woman’s families in marriage? Is it possible to see any relationship between their views on the role of the families and how they relate to relations of gender-related power?

Tandeka is very critical of the power of families in marriage negotiations of which she has bad experiences in her own life. How does she describe the power of families in marriage negotiations?

T- Another thing that is very bad when you get married in our culture – you don’t get involved most of the time. The family does everything on your behalf, you are not part of that, and I feel that is bad. I don’t remember one day when we sat down with my parents and discussed everything. They just did everything on their own, on your behalf. It’s like negotiations, they did everything ... at least with negotiations the CA (Constitutional Assembly) had to go back to the people (Laughter) and say: "This is what we have done, what is it that you want?" Our families, they don’t negotiate, they just take the decisions. I think that is unfair.

F- You had decided that you wanted to get married? Or was that also...

T- Not very early … everything was quick, quick, quick!

F- Really!?  

T- Yeah

F- So, suddenly you found yourself married? (Laughter)

T- Everything and I’ve been independent all along. And another thing I think contributed is that most of my lifetime I did not have boyfriends, you know. Because of the situation. I did not have experience of men. I just see it very far from me and when it happened to me I could say...

F- You could say? What do you...?

T- You know it’s bad not to be part of negotiations. It’s bad to take quick decisions, because new love is always glittering. I think that if I would have had experience I could have said: "Wait. I still need time to think."

F- So that was also part of your upbringing?

T- That is when I get angry with my mother, maybe I could have had a little experience about the behaviour of men.

Tandeka refers the involvement and power of families in marriage to "our culture" and contrasts it to the Constitutional Assembly - a new democratic institution in South African politics. Tandeka’s parents seem to have negotiated lobola for her and don’t seem to have discussed it with her. It even
seems like her marriage might have been arranged without her consent. Tandeka means that if she would have had more experience of the "behaviour of men" she could have told her parents that she needed some more time. Tandeka puts emphasis on her *not was being part* of negotiations. Tandeka could be interpreted as meaning that family involvement in marriage negotiations is acceptable but *not families’ taking decisions* for their daughters. Tandeka is very explicit about families having too much power over their daughters and that this aspect of "culture" is undemocratic.

Bertha has also experienced "the power of families" in marriage negotiations. How does she describe her influence over marriage negotiations?

F- But how come you married him?

B- I think at that stage it was more what the parents decided for you, yes. Before that I escaped about three times. My parents are also from Transkei, although they are coloured, but they were very much in tradition and so on. This tradition of being paid lobola.

F- Oh is it? Why was that? Was it because they were..?

B- They grew up in that culture so...

F- So they didn’t grow up in a coloured community?

B- No they grew up in Transkei.

F- You escaped three times from marriage that they wanted you to..?

B- Yes (Laughter)

F- (Laughter) Why was that?

B- I wasn’t ready. And I didn’t want to. So I just ran away from home and then after three or four months then I came back when everything was over.

F- And then they tried another one?

B - Yeah, then they - no the others come, you see. It’s always the men who come to ask if they can marry you and speak to the parents and spoke about lobola and so on. Without you being involved. You will only find when they offer (?) you to pay lobola. That is the way of...

F- So your parents didn’t consult you even though you ran away, they didn’t learn (Laughter)?

B- No, they didn’t.
F- Was it common that women ran away or was it a very bad thing to do?

B - It was a very bad thing to do but we...

F- How did you get the courage to do it? You just thought this is very wrong?

B- Yeah, it’s very wrong. I would … sometimes my mother would assist me to get away.

F- Oh yeah.

B- Because she - we were very close - she would tell me that: "This is happening now: your father and your uncles are (?) this. Would you agree?" and I would say no. Then she said we must work out something. She would give me the money and she pretended she doesn’t know about this. Also to be surprised when I’m not in my room. So I happened to get away three times but the forth...

F- ... you couldn’t (Laughter).

B- I couldn’t (Laughter).

Bertha escaped marriage three times, and she describes the lobola negotiations as not involving herself at all. Bertha got to know about the negotiations from her mother who also helped her to escape.

Tandeka’s and Bertha’s experiences of ‘the power of families’ seem to reflect socio-cultural gender-meanings and gender-related power. It is clear that their husbands and parents have had great influence over marriage and lobola. It seems that the women interviewed have to relate to such socio-culturally entrenched gender-meanings and relations even when do not adhere to them. There is a wide consensus among anthropologists of the great significance of families in marriage. It seems to vary significantly though to what extent married women had to be incorporated in the husband’s lineage upon marriage. In strongly patrilineal societies such as the Zulu, women had to be fully incorporated into the husband’s lineage and it could take many years for them to achieve status as a trusted member of their new families. As a contrast, a Lovedu woman was not fully incorporated in her husband’s family and retained important ritual and political rights and duties in her natal family. A Lovedu woman also had a final say in the disposition of the bridewealth of her daughter and she could conduct her own cases in court, which was not possible in Nguni or Sotho-Tswana society. Another important aspect of the wife’s position in relation to her husband’s family is the widespread rules of conduct she was subjected to when married. Even

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130 See Krige (1981) for a comparison of how the socio-cultural organisation of different South African societies affect the position of the married woman.
though these rules of subordination and etiquette probably are not as harsh today as before and vary significantly between different socio-cultural contexts, such as rural and urban areas, we have seen among the women interviewed that there are expectations about a married woman’s behaviour in relation to her husband’s family. Expectations which are expressed as very oppressive by a woman like Mmatshilo who has negotiated the meaning of lobola to escape such expectations.

Even though Bertha relates personal bad experiences of lobola, she does not see it as oppressive to women as Tandeka does. How does Bertha argue for lobola as positive for women? How does Bertha discuss men’s agency in relation to lobola, marriage and the extended family?

F- One thing that has been discussed a lot is customary law and... (End of tape)...or about those discussions? Is it oppressive or?

B- No, it’s not. Lobola is not oppressive. In the African tradition, if a woman has been paid lobola she has got a lot of dignity compared to the women who has not been paid lobola. And it’s not easy for a male to maltreat you when he has paid lobola. Because his fears are that your parents can come and fetch you or you will go and report him to your parents. And he won’t be in a position to get another woman, because he can’t go and take anyone and put her in the house if he wants to be respected of others.

F- So it comes some responsibility with the payment...

B- Yes.

F- ...towards her parents and towards her.

B- Yeah, and towards the women. While in the other customs you can just take this one put her in the house and tomorrow you are fed up you can chase her and get a better one. But now in the African tradition you have to pay up to ten cows and the men used to go out and work for those ten cows. And when these ten cows are collected then he would come and tell his parents: ”I’m ready now to take a wife, there is somebody that I have in mind”. It took him a while to work - he must still work to furniture this house (?) And if in a worse time there are problems and he is prepared to chase her – where is he going out, how many times is it going to take him to work for another ten. Because the parents of the next woman won’t say that you have paid for the first one: ”We know you are...” They expect the full amount for their daughter. So it makes them think twice before messing up.

F- Okay (Laughter)

B- (Laughter)

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131 See Chapter three.
Bertha means that lobola gives a woman dignity and that the man takes on more responsibility towards his wife through lobola than he would otherwise. Lobola puts pressure on the man not to maltreat his wife since he fears that her parents might come and fetch her or that she reports it to her parents. Since the man also had to work to pay lobola that functions as a security in that he has invested time and money in the marriage. We can also note that her discussion on the positive aspects of lobola is partly situated in the past.

But how are men depicted in Bertha’s account of lobola as good for women? You could say that the premise for Bertha’s reasoning about lobola, as good for women, is the protection lobola offers the woman in an unequal power relationship between husband and wife. She does not seem to expect men to take responsibility in a relationship without some economic pressure and pressure from the woman’s parents and the community: “Because his fears are that your parents can come and fetch you or that you will go and report him to your parents. And he won’t be in a position to get another woman because he can’t go and take any one and put her in the house if he wants to be respected of others”. Bertha treats the power of families (and economic pressure) as a necessary counter-force(s) to the husband’s gender-related power. Lobola seems to be expected to prevent the man from being irresponsible and for maltreating his wife. The non-payment of lobola is depicted as “While in the other customs you can just take this one and put her in the house and tomorrow you are fed up - you can chase her and get a better one.”

This is a rather dark picture of men’s gender-related power behaviour towards women. She does consider men as actors when she discusses the positive effect of lobola. But the acting man is not expected to take responsibility on his own; he is expected to use his position of gender-related power as much as he can. Bertha depicts lobola as an institution, which might help women in countering the worst parts of the spectrum of men’s abuses of gender-related power against women in marriage. And the "power of families” is depicted as one possible counter-force to men’s worst uses of their positions of gender-related power.

The discussion above in which Bertha depicts lobola as positive to women and as a counter-force to men’s use of their positions of gender-related power is on a general level and partly situated in the past. Does Bertha discuss lobola as a security for her in the context of her own marriage? How does Bertha discuss her own husband’s use of his position of gender-related power?

B- I grew up in Transkei and in Johannesburg. So when I got married my husband said it’s okay – I can still attend church and all those things. But after we were married he didn’t allow me to go to church. He was very jealous; he was older than I was. I had to sneak out to go to church and when he found out it was all quarrel and so on.
F: So he was jealous about you going out to see other people?

B: Yes, and he said I’m having an affair in church. So, I reported this to the church – that I can’t attend church anymore because my husband doesn’t want it. Then the church leaders told me, by right, I’m supposed to attend his church. I’m not supposed to attend my church as when I was a young girl. And I said: “But he is not attending church, he is only in politics.” Then they said: “You must also be in politics if he is in politics. That is his church.”

F: How was he politically involved, when you first started and when you had problems to go to church?

B: He wasn’t much involved at that time because he was involved in the 60’s when the movement was banned. And they were also banned. So he was in jail and he was beaten and so on. So he didn’t want to be very visible and worked underground - I would say. I got into this executive and started to attend meetings and workshops and all of that. And I was now very involved.

F: How did he take it when you became more involved?

B: Oh! That was the biggest quarrel we had. Every time he would quarrel. The time I’m coming in the house: “You think you are the man now? You come at ten”. And I must be at home: “What kind of a mother are you?” and so on and so on. So we used to quarrel. He would sometimes even make me choose between him and the organisation. And he did that before with the church, he made me choose - and that’s when I went to the church and explained and they said I must choose my marriage. /.../ So we used to quarrel a lot.

F: And what did he object to?

B: I’m out late, and I was a married woman. In his custom- my husband was a black person and he was a Zulu from Natal. And in his culture a woman must obey (Laughter). A woman is not to behave like a man and all those things.

F: So behave like a man, that would be to attend meetings and...?

B: To behave like a man is to be out at night and come after hours in the house and so on. So you are not supposed as a woman - you are supposed to be at home cooking and washing and do all those sort of things. And he was very oppressive.

Bertha has experience of a husband who tried to stringently control her behaviour, and she relates his oppression to what is expected of a married Zulu woman.
It is possible to interpret Bertha and Tandeka as having similar views and experiences of men’s gender-related power in that they discuss their husbands as having been very oppressive. But they have diametrically different opinions on whether lobola is protective or oppressive to women. Tandeka sees it as enforcing a man’s power and Bertha as protecting the woman. When Bertha discusses lobola as protective to women it is on a general level of discussion partly situated in the past. When she discusses her own marriage and marriage negotiations she doesn’t mention any positive effects of lobola but, on the contrary, describes how her family’s power in marriage negotiations and the gender-related power of her husband have restricted her space of action in very profound ways. Her parents decided whom she should marry and her husband has been able to use marriage as an argument to restrict her activities. I interpret Bertha as viewing lobola as positive and lobola and marriage as oppressive in relation to two different but, possibly, interrelated contexts: a general context and a personal context. The positive depiction of lobola is expressed in what I previously have called a traditional/family-related discourse and a political discourse on lobola. But she also expresses what might be called more implicitly held gender-meanings and relations when she refers to the higher status accorded to women for whom lobola has been paid.

Bertha’s and Tandeka’s different views on lobola – as either protective or oppressive – might also be related to differences in their relating to gender-meanings and relations within marriage. Tandeka is explicit about wanting to have a say in decisions made and not wanting her husband to have girlfriends. Bertha on the other hand seems to have a greater acceptance of her subordinate position in marriage, since she left church on her husband’s insistence and refers to the advice given by her church, to leave church and follow her husband, as good advice. Her argument that lobola is protects women is also premised on women accepting ‘traditional’ subordination, to which Tandeka does not appear to adhere. If a woman conforms to a more ‘traditional’ woman’s role in marriage, she might gain support from her family if they consider her husband abusive. But if a wife does not fulfil the obligations expected of her such as performing household duties and being faithful to her husband, or if she spends too much time away from the family – if she transgresses dichotomised gender-meanings and relations and demand a greater independence and space for action – it seems less likely that she can appeal to her family for protection with reference to the lobola payment. There seems to be a strong dichotomization of gender-meanings and relations with respect to gender-related power connected to lobola and marriage as well as a direct connection between lobola and the notion of the man as the head of the household. The positively depicted ‘power of families’ as a counter-force to men’s use of gender-related power is associated with the lobola payment; it is premised on the dichotomous gender-meanings and relations as well as their relation to gender-related power.
Furthermore, Tandeka’s and Bertha’s experience of powerful families in relation to marriage can be interpreted as the role of the extended family in relation to giving the woman some protection against a husband’s extreme use of gender-related power, but depends on that particular family’s behaviour and values. The woman’s wish not to have lobola paid for her might even be ignored by her parents. The wife’s family must also be seen as ‘actors’ with a capability to, for example, enforce gender-related power in marriage through accepting the husband’s ‘traditional’ rights towards his wife or with a capability to refrain from using their ‘traditional’ powers over their daughters in marriage negotiations. As an example Bertha’s mother helped her in escaping marriage three times.

Lobola, gender-related power and men as actors

We have seen that the women interviewed pay great attention to men as individual actors who can break with or follow and use socio-culturally entrenched gender meanings and relations as well as relations of gender-related power. But even though the women seem to relate to men as individual actors with a possibility to choose their behaviour, this possibility is sometimes discursively disguised and a ‘man without responsibility’ is created. Men are not expected to break with their positions of gender-related power in order for women to achieve a greater space for action. When a man breaks with his position of gender-related power, his choice might be individualised. And when he follows or uses his position of gender-related power, his choice might be described in a discourse of socio-cultural structure; it might be ‘tradition’ or ‘culture’ which explain his choices. But we have also seen that women manoeuvre in different ways to achieve some space for action in a male-dominated society. Sometimes women challenge relations of gender-related power overtly making them explicit. This seems to be the case with Tandeka.

Tandeka uses a discourse on equality when arguing against her husband’s use of lobola. She wants to take part in decision-making in the household as well as be treated with respect by her husband. Tandeka makes her husband a responsible actor who she expects to change his behaviour so that her space for action is expanded, and she also expects him not to have girlfriends out of respect for her. Tandeka seems to have been quite explicit in her challenging her former husband’s position of gender-related power. Can we find further clues on men’s possible uses of their positions of gender-related power through analysing a man’s response to a woman like Tandeka who openly challenges his position? How does she describe his response to her challenging him?
Because he doesn’t want me to be part of decisions that are taken in the house. Secondly he feels, he once said to me, I did not have a child until very late, he once said to me: "When are you going to have a child?" Things like that and he thinks he must have girlfriends. And I feel if you are married you should respect one another. I wouldn’t allow my husband to have a girlfriend. Because I also don’t want a boyfriend so it’s unfair for him to do that and when I say something he says I’m talking like that because I’m a breadwinner.

Tandeka’s former husband seems to have attempted to keep his position of gender-related power, which was challenged by Tandeka, by connecting her demands on him to her role as the breadwinner.

The argument by Tandeka’s former husband that Tandeka is talking like she does because she is the breadwinner could be seen as a strategy of making a distinction between gender-related roles and gender-related power in order to keep his position of the "head of the household" and other male privileges. Tandeka’s former husband could be interpreted as meaning "Yes, you are the breadwinner, but you are still a woman and therefore should be subordinated to me who is the man". Or "Yes, you are the breadwinner but you are still my wife because I paid lobola for you and you should therefore be subordinated to me.”

Tandeka’s break with dichotomous gender-meanings and relations might be interpreted as being countered by Tandeka’s former husband by a redefinition of the meaning of dichotomies; A redefinition which aims at keeping the gender-related power position of a husband. Here, it seems that it was possible for the husband to use lobola’s gender-related power aspects, such as its connection to the role of the man as the head of the house, in his quest for a redefinition of gender-meanings. A husband’s gender is no longer connected to the position of a breadwinner or supporter of the family but solely to the payment of lobola.

In addition, he may use the economic discourse on lobola to enforce his claims to a position of gender-related power. When Tandeka’s husband says, "I paid lobola” when they argued there is a direct connotation to the power of a buyer over the object which he has bought.

Gender-related power and the dichotomization of gender, which was previously connected to various gender-meanings and relations (which included some obligations on the husband’s part towards his wife and to a wider network of kinship relations) as well as directly to the payment of lobola could in this way be reinterpreted and concentrated to the actual payment of lobola. And it is enforced by the use of an economic discourse on lobola.

At the same time Tandeka’s husband seemed to have used a more ‘traditional’ discourse on gender-relations and meanings when he demanded that she have children for him.

In this sense men might be interested in upholding dichotomous gender-relations through activating a ‘traditional’ discourse on lobola in some situa-
tions and activate other discourses in other situations such as the economic discourse on lobola. The content of dichotomous gender-meanings might change in the process of men’s strategizing to keep their positions of gender-related power in response to women’s attempts to break with dichotomous and oppressive gender meanings and relations. The husband may, through a switch of discourses on lobola, uphold gender dichotomies in order to enforce relations of gender-related power. In this sense, lobola can be given the function of upholding dichotomous gender-relations and meanings and men might use the institution to keep a position of gender-related power. A man may play up certain dichotomous gender-meanings and play down others in his quest to keep his position of gender-related power. Moreover, he may switch discourses on lobola to further enforce his position.\textsuperscript{132}

Lobola, gender-related power and socio-cultural change

Lobola has been shown to be used by men in their quest for political power. In Chapter two, I analysed John Comaroff’s account of how Tshidi men used the ambivalence of the institution to gain positions of power. But even though Comaroff emphasised ‘the public’ use of lobola by men, it was also evident that men manipulated women within relationships through, for example, promising to marry although that was not their intention.

In a historical perspective, Anne Kelk Mager has contextualised men’s holding onto lobola in Ciskei as a response to apartheid politics:

\begin{quote}
The endless saga of fence cutting, militant confrontations, litigation, and jail sentences typifies the turmoil of the period (the late 1940’s, my comment). If there was one single issue that provoked the greatest resentment, it was stock limitation. To reduce a man’s cattle was not only to strip him of his wealth (there was little wealth in the Ciskei) but to destroy his social base in the community and the foundations of male supremacy. Reducing cattle numbers interfered drastically with African social and economic relations; impoverished women and men were driven to seek work in town. While men were fending off the threat of proletarianization, they were also fighting back the onslaught on lobola and patriarchal authority. While men held onto cattle, they retained the symbolic power of the patriarchal order (1999:80)
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{132} Signe Arnfred has studied lobola in Mozambique and she means that the institution is spreading north to matrilinear areas where it has not been practised before. She argues that the practice has functioned to increase male-dominance in these areas as women had more space of action in the previous matrilocal and matrilinear setting (1997:11). Could this be interpreted as an example of how men are able to use lobola in this setting to redefine gender-dichotomies and thereby increase their position of gender-related power in relation to their wives?
In Mager’s account it was important for men to hold onto cattle both as a source of wealth and as a source of symbolic patriarchal power.\footnote{See Ramphele and Boonzaier (1988) for a discussion on lobola as oppressive to women, which includes a symbolic dimension.} If we see lobola today as still signalling male authority and power although cash has often replaced cattle it is not difficult to see that men may use the institution against women in times when women are attempting to break with traditional gender roles. In this sense, ‘tradition’ may be an argument to hold on to patriarchal power when women are moving beyond the traditional limits of women’s activities and decision-making powers.

But how is it possible to understand women’s holding onto lobola in times of social change? I think Harriet Ngubane’s description of the detrimental effects that the monetisation of lobola has had for women in a patrilineal society gives many clues to women’s motivations in this regard.\footnote{See Chapter two.} Firstly, she points out the difference between cash and cattle in that everyone benefits from cattle and cattle do not easily disappear unlike bank savings, which may disappear. This is of major importance to women as it has a direct impact on their possibility to feed their children. Thus, since women do not have control over lobola, the payment in cash increases their economic insecurity. Secondly, the monetisation of lobola goes hand in hand with the individualisation of marriage which Ngubane, points out, may increase the power of a husband over his wife. There might not be a family nearby to protect the wife from the worst displays of gender-related power. Thirdly, women have lost their traditional ritual power-base in relation to lobola as it has become more individualised. It is clear through Ngubane’s account that women’s traditional space for action and means of protection have dramatically decreased through the monetisation of lobola and that men’s position of gender-related power is enforced in many ways. When women’s structural space has so diminished, it is not surprising that they will appeal to traditional gender-meanings and relations connected to lobola in order to protect themselves and to maintain room for action. There may not be any other means at their disposal in a context of economic deprivation and within relations with domineering men.

The women interviewed in the dissertation may have alternative structural space in terms of other means of survival, but in their socially and culturally lived context, discourses on lobola may constitute a means to create structural space within the boundaries of marriage.
Final discussion

In this chapter I have explored gender-meanings and relations that may shed some light on the women’s dealing with lobola. I’m taking on the difficult task of considering socio-cultural meanings and relations without reducing women’s behaviour to socio-cultural structure. One way of handling the problem has been methodological. The interviews are used in a slightly different way than before. The gender-meanings and relations, which I have explored in the analysis, are meant to further our understanding of other interviews as well. These interviews are used as a socio-cultural context for previous interviews – this means that they are used and analysed as examples of more generally held meanings and lived relations. But they are also analysed in their own right as individual women dealing with ‘structural’ – as well as with personal relations.

Lobola has been analysed as situated in a context of gender-meanings and relations that are to a large extent dichotomously defined. There seem to be dichotomously defined expectations toward women and men in marriage such as the expectation that women bear children, perform household duties, serve men, whereas men are, for example, considered the head of the household and have the right to many sexual relationships. There are sexual meanings and relations intertwined with gender-meanings and relations. This also dichotomises gender relations in that sexuality is differently defined for men and women. These gender-meanings and relations are normative and intertwined with relations of gender-related power as they restrict women’s space for action compared to men’s and assign decision-making powers to men to a larger extent than women.

Furthermore, there seem to have been a socio-cultural acceptance under certain circumstances of using violence against women and girls to uphold or enforce these relations. This acceptance may be used by men today to enforce their will in relationships with women by using violence in a more arbitrary way.

These dichotomous gender-relations are not only constructed within the ‘nuclear family’ but are tied, through lobola to the woman’s and man’s natal families through obligations and expectations. Gender-identity is, thus, not constructed in an exclusive relationship between husband and wife but through a broader context. The families of the husband and wife may function as a guardian of an unequal relationship between the spouses in that the families may not support a woman who does not perform as traditionally expected of her. At the same time they may function as protectors of the woman if the husband is considered to have no reasons to complain and beats her ‘unjustly’. Structurally, a woman’s identity is very much tied to her importance as ‘mother’. It is through being a mother that a woman, traditionally, could gain social acceptance and a certain position of power. Lo-
bola is the institution which has transferred a woman’s identity from her natal family to that of mother/‘mother to be’ in her husband’s family.

Theoretically, the analysis in this chapter has taken the route of seeing socio-cultural structure as not only reflected in a particular situation but also as a basis for an active strategy for individual women and men in their particular context and in particular situations. A response from a man to his wife’s expanding her traditional spaces for action may, for instance, be to use a traditional discourse on lobola in one situation and an economic discourse in another to try to maintain a position of power. This may at first sight appear to be to uphold ‘tradition’ in a certain situation but may be analysed as an active strategy to maintain a position of power, which may be combined with ‘non-traditional’ discourses. There is a difference between my analysis of this kind of appeal to traditional socio-cultural meanings and relations in order to maintain a position of power and what is referred to as the ‘invention of tradition’, in a book with the same name edited by Hobson and Ranger (1983). The ‘invention of tradition’ seem to be more elaborated as a discourse on tradition in which tradition is ‘invented’ for political purposes. This is a concept closer to what I have called a political discourse on lobola. But ‘traditional’ meanings- and relations may also be used in different contexts for individual purposes. This may be done in a less conscious way though, and may vary according to the situation. In this analysis ‘tradition’ or ‘culture’ is contextual and flexible depending on the interests of – and relations between the people involved and the contexts of, for example, social change that they are acting upon. A discourse on ‘tradition’ may be interpreted as multi-contextual. A ‘political discourse on lobola’ may, for instance, serve individual purposes and collective political purposes at the same time. I thus see such as discourse as formed in relation to different contexts and in relation to different interests but ‘not’ as instrumentally used for ‘rational’ political ends. This multidimensionality of culture/ideology could be seen as played out in a mixture of conscious and not (explicitly) conscious agency (cf. Ortner 1989).

Women may also adhere to lobola on a discursive level while they are breaking with associated gender-meanings and relations in practice, as is the case with Bertha. This may be analysed as a discursive strategy to gain a space for action as was done in Chapter three, but it may also be analysed as a selective adherence to culture in that Bertha feels that lobola gives a woman a higher status than if it hasn’t been paid. Thus, there may be multi-dimensional ‘objectives’ for a certain adherence to or acceptance of an institution. These may simultaneously break with and follow gender-meanings and relations seen in a broader context.
Chapter 6 – From ‘doing gender’ to ‘doing what?’

Are there aspects of women’s oppression, which are universal? How can we study women’s oppression as culturally related without falling into the trap of cultural relativism?

The above two questions have been central to my interest in discussing lobola with the interviewees. Lobola – commonly depicted as culturally specific and as an institution connected to women’s position in African societies – actualises the above questions politically as well as theoretically.

The problem of universality/particularity of women’s oppression is central to feminist theory, sometimes explicitly formulated and sometimes as implicit assumption. How we formulate this theoretical problem is a scientific as well as a political issue. Lobola, veiling of women in Muslim communities, circumcision of women, pornography and male violence against women are all issues, which are discussed theoretically as well as politically and in culturally particular as well as in universal terms.

Related to this problem is a more general problem in the social sciences of how to conceptualise social power relations with respect to ‘culture’? This is a highly political issue as well. ‘Culture’ and ‘ethnicity’ are, for instance, political conceptual weapons today, not least in South Africa with its history of oppression in the name of cultural and racial superiority. But ‘culture’ has also become an everyday, more implicit, political concept in many societies – a concept understood as some kind empirical entity of bounded and essensialised content.

In the course of analysing interviews for my dissertation, the above problems have become increasingly acute, and I developed an ‘open’ analytical approach discussed in Chapter one. In developing this approach there has been a tension between discourse oriented interpretations – how the women talk about lobola – to one which sees discourse as part of women’s agency in relation to structures and relations of gender related power in their political as well as personal lives.

In this chapter I will relate the analytical approach discussed in Chapter one to the themes above and I will also discuss it further in relation to the

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135 An example of this is the discussion in Chapter four on how ‘culture’ became marginalised in South African academic work on power relations in the 70’s when materialist analysis was put centre-stage.
empirical analysis in the dissertation. The central themes in feminist theory and sociology which will be discussed here have a common denominator as they are ‘traditionally’ conceptualised as distinctions: the sex/gender distinction and the distinction between cultural meaning and social relations and between structure and actor. I have explored how such dichotomizations have influenced the analysis in the dissertation in what I have called ‘a theoretical and methodological journey’. In this chapter I will show how I have attempted to transcend the dichotomies?

The researchers referred to and discussed in this chapter should best be regarded as discussion-partners which have helped in clarifying the evolution of a theoretical and methodological approach rather than as representative of any theoretical discussion or school. The chapter primarily constitutes a development of the analysis in Chapter three – more specifically the development of the concept ‘creating a space for action’. This is theoretically interesting to contrast to a ‘doing gender’ perspective and the other sociological dilemmas discussed above. The concentration on ‘creating a space for action’ implies a focus on the interview with Mhudi since this is where I develop the concept more fully in the empirical analysis.

In the first part of the chapter I will discuss my empirical analysis in relation to a ‘doing gender’ approach. In the second part of the chapter I will explore how I have attempted to transcend a dichotomous understanding of actor and structure, culture and social relations in the empirical analysis.

A non-essentialising approach to gender

Western feminist theory has been criticised by black and ‘third world women’ for taking ‘the white middle-class woman’ as an implicit assumption in theorising gender-relations. Following this critique there has been a development from discussing ‘woman’ as a basic unit of study to the deconstructing ‘woman’, on the one hand, adding variables such as race and class to the analyses, on the other hand.136 Related to this critique there has been a discussion on the sex/gender distinction in feminist theory and its possible essentializing of gender categories in spite of its original purpose to point to the constructed nature of gender.137 The concept of gender has thus been scrutinised. There seems to have been a resurgence of the concept of

136 The concept of ‘woman’ has also been criticised for being heterosexist by lesbian feminists. For an interesting discussion on this and the development of the gender category in relation to poststructuralist theories as well as a discussion on the role of the sex/gender distinction in feminist theory see Moore 1994. See also Amina Mama for a discussion on how post-colonial theory has influenced the feminist theoretical discussion (1995).

‘doing gender’ and related perspectives following this debate. Gender is, in this perspective discussed as a process and as a verb instead of as an inherent psychological entity or structural feature of social life. It may be that ‘doing gender’ as a processual theoretical perspective has gained popularity through its promising potential for accounting for both the stability and change of gender relations.

I clearly had my roots in a ‘doing gender’ perspective when starting the research for this dissertation. But my intention was to hold the analysis as ‘open’ as possible so as not to force the empirical material into a particular theoretical form. I never assumed it possible to go into an analysis with a ‘blank’ mind, since the researcher necessarily draws on pre-conceptions in investigating and interpreting a material. Nevertheless, my attempt was to be as flexible as possible when approaching the women and the text and not to preempt the analysis by theoretical or other conceptions of how to understand what the women were telling me.

The sex/gender distinction and ‘doing gender’

I will now explore a ‘doing gender’ perspective and how it has influenced the study in a non-intentional way. But also how an ‘open’ analytical approach has led to a different gender-analysis, which, in turn can be used to criticise a ‘doing gender’, perspective.

The critique of the sex/gender distinction in feminist theory in the past decade has mainly been credited to post-modern thinkers like Judith Butler (1990). In Gender trouble she develops the concept of the ‘heterosexual matrix’ to explain how our understanding of sex as dichotomous stable biological entities is formed. She explains this stabilisation by referring it to a hegemonic discourse on two stable dichotomously defined genders, which become stable through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality (1990:151). Butler’s approach to the sex/gender distinction lacks a connection between theoretical concepts and empirical material. Is this one reason why the ‘heterosexual matrix’ seems inadequate in trying to contemplate my empirical material? In Chapter three I analysed ‘the construction’ of ‘a man without responsibility’ as part of an attempt by Mhudi to enlarge her space for action with respect to relations of gender-related power. She was avoiding marriage in order to avoid the ‘role of a traditional wife’ which she saw as the only possible option if she married her partner whom she referred to

138 Post-structuralist theory has also had a strong following in feminist theory. Perhaps not as much in sociology as in, for example, literary theory. In a Nordic context examples of the resurgence of a ‘doing gender’ perspective is feminist works of such different natures as the psychologically oriented Att göra kön (Doing gender) by Ylva Elvin -Nowak and Helén Thomsson published in 2003 and the anthology of feminist organisation theory with a ‘doing gender’ perspective Where have all the structures gone? Doing gender in organisations, Examples from Finland, Norway and Sweden which was published the same year.
as ‘very traditional’. I interpreted Mhudi as avoiding relations of gender-related power by this choice of not marrying. But she did not explicitly refer her choice to relations of gender-related power but used discursive strategies, which disguised relations of gender-related power and thus constructed her partner as ‘a man without responsibility’. In Butler’s crude theoretical frame, this woman seems to be reduced to a reproduction of the ‘heterosexual matrix’. Subversivity, in Butler’s terms, can only be thought of in terms of cross-gendering. Mhudi does not question the gender order through cross-dressing or non-heterosexual practise. But she is nevertheless widening the possible action space for women and is thus acting against ‘traditional’ gender-orders.

Although Butler bases the ‘heterosexual matrix’ on the theoretical level of discourse and does not conceptualise it in relation to socio-cultural structure and agency139—she refers to anthropologists and ethnomethodologists in her discussion on the problems of the sex/gender distinction. Ethnomethodological and anthropological critique of the distinction has been formulated in quite different terms than the discourse ‘paradigm’ of which Butler’s heterosexual matrix can be said to be a part of. The anthropological critique is centred on the ethnocentrism of the concepts of sex and gender and of the distinction between them. Postcolonial thinkers like Oyèrónké Oyewùmí (1997, 2002) have also problematised Western gender concepts as ethnocentric and not based on African realities.140

The anthropological and post-colonial studies help in distancing ourselves from our western concepts and the ethnomethodological approach seems to provide a theoretical framework for understanding the process of how gender is constructed in different contexts. An ethnomethodological study to which Butler refers is that of Kessler and McKenna (1978) which very early discussed gender in terms of interaction. They argued that gender has to be accomplished—the determination if somebody’s sex is male or female in everyday interaction is not a biological determination but a purely socio-cultural act which means that you have to socio-culturally “pass” as one gender or the other. In this approach, gender since the assessments of people’s (biological) sex is only made in social interaction. That is, there is the ‘doing of gender’ (West and Zimmerman 1987). How is my empirical analysis related to a ‘doing gender’ perspective? Below, I will explore an eth-

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139 Except through her concept of ‘practice’ in the ‘compulsive practice of heterosexuality’. 
140 See footnote 111 for other references on the subject. As an example Oyewùmí questions the category of ‘woman’ as being Western and based on an understanding of gender as based in the body. Furthermore, she means that woman in the West is connected to an understanding of wife-hood and as based in the nuclear family in contrast to the Yoruba centrality of motherhood in any conceptualisation of ‘womanhood’. Amadiume (1987) also put motherhood centre-stage when arguing for a Nnobi social structure in which there is a matricentric structure parallel to a male-focused one. She means that the great importance of the matricentric unit has been largely overlooked in African studies (See Arnfred 2002 for a discussion of the above two researchers)
nomethodological approach to ‘doing gender’ as well as contrast it to the approach developed to gender in the empirical analysis.

‘Doing gender’ and gender-related power.

The ethnomethodological approach to gender as developed by Kessler and McKenna (1978), West and Zimmerman (1987) and West and Fenstermaker (1995) shares insights with the anthropological and ‘post-colonial’ critique of Western conceptualisations of sex/gender in that sex/gender is studied as a purely socio-culturally produced phenomena. At the centre of the ethnomethodological analysis is ‘interaction’ and the way in which gender is produced as a ‘natural feature’ of everyday life. By starting the analysis on the ‘micro level’ of interaction and studying how gender is ‘done’, sex becomes irrelevant as a biologically defined analytical category. People do not do biological examinations of each other in everyday life; people make socio-cultural assessments of whether one is ‘male’ or ‘female’. In everyday interaction ‘sex’ is ‘gender’; there is no pure biological ‘sex’ in people’s understanding of each other. Therefore, gender cannot be defined as a socio-cultural construction of sex. To define gender as a ‘socio-cultural construction of sex’ is a Western socio-cultural and historically situated definition of sex/gender.

In the article ‘Doing gender’ Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman propose an understanding of “gender as a routine accomplishment embedded in everyday interaction” (1987:125). The authors introduces three analytical categories ”sex”, ”sex category” and ”gender” which they argue should be kept analytically apart in order to understand “the relationships among these elements and the interactional work involved in ”being” a gendered person in society” (ibid:127). Even though West and Zimmerman do not abandon ‘sex’ as analytical category the ‘nature’ of the concept is socio-culturally defined:

Sex is a determination made through the application of socially agreed upon biological criteria for classifying persons as females or males. The criteria for classification can be genitalia at birth or chromosomal typing before birth, and they do not necessarily agree with one another. Placement in a sex category is achieved through application of the sex criteria, but in everyday life, categorisation is established and sustained by the socially required identifiable displays that proclaim one’s membership in one or the other category. In this sense, one’s sex category presupposes one’s sex and stands as proxy for it

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141 The ethnomethodological approach does not insert ‘sex’ as a theoretical, biologically defined, foundation of gender. ‘Sex’, as a biologically defined category is thus irrelevant for understanding interaction. People’s understanding of biology may thus be interesting in interpreting interaction but not ‘pure’ biology.

142 See Thomas Laqueur (1994) for a discussion on how sex/gender was previously defined in a Western context in different terms than as biologically based.
in many situations, but sex and sex category can vary independently; that is, it is possible to claim membership in a sex category even when the sex criteria are lacking. *Gender*, in contrast, is the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one’s sex category. Gender activities emerge from and bolster claims to membership in a sex category (ibid.).

When developing a definition of sex West and Zimmerman refer to Garfinkel’s (1967) study of the transsexual Agnes, anthropological discussions of ”cross-genders”, and Kessler and McKennas’ discussion of ”the gender attribution process”. West and Zimmerman mean that Garfinkel’s study of Agnes, who was raised as a boy and went through a sex reassignment at the age of 17, points to gender as an accomplishment: ”Agnes, whom Garfinkel characterised as a ”practical methodologist”, developed a number of procedures for passing as a ”normal, natural female” both prior to and after her surgery”(ibid:131). Moreover, West and Zimmerman point to Agnes’ shared assumption with the rest of ”our culture” that there are essential biological criteria that unequivocally distinguish females from males and that she therefore insisted that ”the penis was a ‘mistake’ in need of remedy”(ibid). West and Zimmerman argue that Garfinkel’s study ”does not explicitly separate three analytically distinct, although empirically overlapping concepts – sex, sex category and gender”(ibid.). To develop their theoretical argument that the categories should be analytically separated they draw on Kessler and McKenna: ”More central to our argument is Kessler and McKenna’s point that genitalia are conventionally hidden from public inspection in everyday life; yet we continue through our social rounds to ”observe” a world of two naturally, normally sexed persons. It is the presumption that essential criteria exist and would or should be there if looked for that provides the basis for sex categorisation”(ibid:132).

It is the analytical concept of gender which puts agency and ‘accomplishment’ centre-stage. It is the interactional aspect of ‘accountability’ which includes the assessment by others and the context as important for a person’s accomplishment of gender:

And to be successful, marking or displaying gender must be finely fitted to situations and modified or transformed as the occasion demands. Doing gender consists of managing such occasions so that, whatever the particulars, the outcome is seen and seeable in context as gender-appropriate or, as the case may be, gender-inappropriate, that is accountable. If the sex category is omnirelevant (or even approaches being so), then a person engaged in virtually any activity as a woman or a man, and their incumbency in one or the other sex category can be used to legitimate or discredit their other activities /.../. Accordingly, virtually any activity can be assessed as to its womanly or manly nature. And note, to ”do” gender is not always to live up to normative conceptions of femininity or masculinity; it is to engage in behaviour at the risk of gender assessment (ibid:135).
West and Zimmerman thus analytically treat interaction and the accomplishment of gender. The latter is dependent on context and individuals interpretation of the situation. Actors are not only seen as following or breaking with norms and notions of femininity and masculinity on a structural level but as competent cultural interpreters. It seems that there is not enough elaboration of relations of gender-related power in West’s and Zimmerman’s conceptualisation of gender. What is lacking in their conceptualisation of social power relationships?

The great advantage of this approach is that it points to the necessity to analyse gender in specific situations and contexts and as interactional.

The analysis of ‘the man without responsibility’ in this dissertation is interpreted in interactional terms. Mhudi is interpreted as making a space for action in relation to a particular man in a particular context. The doing of gender in this context cannot be understood without considering gender-related power. It is when Mhudi is acting with respect to gender-related power that she creates a space for action and new gender relations. ‘The man without responsibility’ can be understood in relation to gender relations as well as cultural meanings such as what is expected of a woman upon marriage; he is also understood in terms of the ways in which gender-related power are enacted in this particular context. It is in the process of acting on relations of gender-related power that ‘the man without responsibility’ is produced. The ‘doing of gender’, in this context, is not as assessment of somebody’s gender but a strategy for independence. In the article "Doing Difference" (1995) West and Fenstermaker develop the theoretical framework of "Doing Gender" further with an attempt to include ‘class’ and ‘race’. By incorporating ‘class’ and ‘race’, they elaborate the issue of unequal social relationships. This is also the point at which the weaknesses of their approach become clearer. West and Fenstermaker argue that class and race are comparable with gender as mechanisms for producing social inequality: "... calling on our earlier ethnomethodological conceptualisation of gender, we develop the further implications of this perspective for our understanding of race and class. We assert that, while gender, race and class – what people come to experience as organising categories of social difference – exhibit vastly different descriptive characteristics and outcomes, they are, nonetheless, comparable as mechanisms for producing social inequality”(1995:9). The authors are critical to earlier theories on gender, which they mean individualises and essentialises gender, and thereby loose the power dimension. West and Fenstermaker point to Joan Acker’s (1992) theorising on ‘gendered processes’ as a fruitful attempt to unite micro and macro levels and to study the ways in which gender distinctions are produced. The focus shifts from essence to "the doing of difference; historical and social institutions are ‘restored’ as theoretical concerns. What Acker’s perspective lacks, however, according to West and Fenstermaker, is a specification of how difference unfolds in daily interaction (ibid:18,19). According to them
this problem arises from a separation between ‘macro’ and ‘micro’ levels. They take as an instance that "processes of interaction” are conceptualised apart from the "production of gender divisions”, that is the overt decisions and procedures that control, segregate, exclude, and construct hierarchies based on gender, and often race (Acker 1992,568) (ibid:19). West and Fenstermaker develop an approach which ties these different levels and processes together: "we propose a conceptual mechanism for perceiving the relations between individual and institutional practice and among forms of domination”(ibid.).

How do West and Fenstermaker manage to fulfil this aim? I will exemplify by taking up their reasoning about race:

To the extent that race category is omnirelevant (or even verges on this), it follows that persons involved in virtually any action may be held accountable for their performance of that action as members of their race category. As in the case of sex category, race category can be used to justify or discredit other actions; accordingly, virtually any action can be assessed in relation to its race categorical nature. The accomplishment of race (like gender) does not necessarily mean “living up” to normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate to a particular race category; rather it means engaging in action at the risk of race assessment. Thus, even though individuals are the ones who accomplish race, "the enterprise is fundamentally interactional and institutional in character, for accountability is a feature of social relationships and its idiom is drawn from the institutional arena in which those relationships are enacted” (West and Zimmerman 1987:137) (ibid:23,24).

Although West and Fenstermaker attempt to fill the above mentioned gap in theorising gender and power, their approach essentialises social power relations into ‘accomplishments’; actors are seen to accomplish gender, race and class and these categories are given a content of ‘cultural meaning’. Related to the problem of essentialising social power relations in ‘accomplishment and assessment’ is the reduction of interaction to the ‘accomplishment and assessment’. Intentions are reduced to assessment and accomplishment of gender, race and class.

At the heart of these problems is the ambivalent status of the analytical categories used. Race, class and gender are utilized both as empirical ‘truths’ and as analytical categories without clarifications of their interchangeable. This ambivalent use of categories may be related to a shortcoming of the ethnomethodological approach in general when its aim is formulated as: "... to analyse situated conduct to understand how “objective” properties of social life achieve their status as such” (ibid:19). With such a formulation the ‘sex category’, ‘race category’, and the ‘class category’ are given the status of empirical entities which people make ‘objective’. The categories are thus formulated as empirical entities rather than analytical categories. This puts the researcher in a position of interpreting people as creating categories as ‘natural’ and ‘objective’ features of social life rather than investigating if and
how these categories are useful analytical concepts for understanding and interpreting a certain situation. In a sense this perspective makes the researcher the ‘objective’ part who already knows what people – ‘cultural interpreters – are doing in a certain situation instead of investigating what they are doing and thereby making the observer a cultural interpreter as well. Even though the sex/gender distinction has been scrapped by this perspective, it still informs the thinking and dichotomises gender through making the ‘sex category’ the stable and essentialised referent in social life instead of a biologically defined category.

Even though the authors theorise social power-relations, these are only the outcome of ‘cultural interpretations and interactions’. The intentional actor is lost and social power relations are reduced to cultural interpretations of what should be seen as natural social relations. These ‘objectifications’ thereby legitimise power-relations.

Eva Lundgren is inspired by an ethnomethodological approach to gender in her theoretical attempt to use sex/gender as an open non-essentialising analytical category (1993). She sets out to break down the sex/gender distinction and sees a theoretical opening in Kessler and McKenna’s discussion on gender. It is Kessler and McKenna’s gender attribution process, which Lundgren develops when introducing the concept of gender-constitution. Gender-constitution is seen as a life-long process in which sex/gender is constituted in interaction and in relation to different sets of norms and in different arenas (ibid:191 ff.). This conception shares the shortcomings of the ethnomethodological ‘doing gender’:

– sex/gender is analytically formulated as the aim of people’s interaction which means that the analytical frame may hamper an analysis of the empirical material as it may reduce our question about what people do to a question simply of ‘doing gender’.

– sex/gender is not analytically conceptualised and problematised with respect to (social) relations of gender-related power but only to ‘systems of meaning’/culture.

Furthermore, the conceptualisation of gender-constitution risks dichotomising actor and structure in that it becomes difficult to ‘think’ agency in terms other than the possibility of the actor to follow or break with gender-norms.143

We have seen that ‘the man without responsibility’ is created when Mhudi attempts to break with relations of gender-related power. This means that the analysis may not be reduced to a simple breaking or following of gender-norms and meanings. Mhudi creates a space of independence at the same time that she creates new relations of gender-related power.

143 Lundgren argues that the concept also includes the development of norms for gender which seems, in theory, to imply a possibility for an inventive actor (1993: 191ff)
The ethnomethodological ‘doing gender’ perspective has been criticised for leaving cultural relations out and for not taking structural relations seriously. Korvajärvi (1998) has discussed different perspectives on ‘doing gender’ in which she separates the ethnomethodological approach from what she refers to as cultural, processual and performative approaches. The cultural approach adds a cultural/symbolic dimension to the ethnomethodological interactionist perspective. The processual approach adds the ‘traditional’ sociological concern of “how to grasp social structures as everyday processes and practices” (ibid:28). The performative approach is represented by Butler’s discursive and positional ‘paradigm’. Even though these different approaches to ‘doing gender’ add different sociological dimensions to the problem, they all seem to ‘get stuck’ in a theory of the reproduction of gender-relations. This may be due to the theoretical concern of explaining ‘how gender is done/constructed’ and in the theoretical foundation in which gender is (must be) defined in dichotomous terms.

I have taken my analysis of the ‘doing of a man without responsibility’ as a contrasting example in order to clarify differences between the analytical approach to gender developed in the dissertation and an ethnomethodological ‘doing gender’ approach. In my analysis gender-related power is included as a social relation which the women relate to and act upon when they attempt to make a space for action. Mhudi is widening traditional boundaries for gender through discourse and practice. She leads a political life and attempts to combine it with having a relationship with a man whom she defines as traditional. My approach to gender is thus relational and not dependent on the theoretical pre-conception that gender has to be an aim in social interaction – Mhudi is interpreted as an intentional actor who makes a space for herself in gendered social interaction. Is it possible to advance this discussion on gender as relational through the analytical approach developed in Chapter one?

144 Korvajärvi takes Celia Davies and Silvia Gherardi as examples of researchers with such an approach in that they emphasise ‘the gender we think’ and shared symbols (Korvajärvi 1998: 24 ff).
145 An example of a researcher with a processual approach to ‘doing gender’ is Joan Acker (Korvajärvi 1998: 27 ff).
146 For a discussion on how Gherardi intends to keep a theoretical opening for social change but, nevertheless seems to end up in the ‘reproduction of gender’ line, see Eriksson and Eriksson (2003). Even if the sex/gender distinction is questioned the foundation for the concept of gender is in two different bodies. For an interesting discussion on this body-logic see Oyewumi, 1997.
Gender, gender-meanings and relations and gender-related power

Could my analytical concepts as defined in Chapter one – gender, gender meanings and relations, and gender-related power – point to an alternative theoretical approach which enables an analyses in which:

– gender is not reduced to cultural meaning or a social relation
– gender meanings and relations are not universal or particular
– gender meanings are not essentialised into social or cultural ‘content’

If we are to use gender as an analytical concept we have to consider its socio-cultural origin. Sex/gender are concepts infused with Western cultural meanings and are part and parcel of the socio-cultural organisation of society. Gender-related power is intrinsical to the socio-cultural organisation of society and to cultural meanings of gender. Gender-related power must be conceptually connected to sex/gender for us to be able to consider these aspects. Sex/gender should not be conceptually separated from relations of gender-related power as such a separation leads to shortcomings such as the ethnomethodological above. Gender-related power and sex/gender cannot be analytically thought apart although analytically separated. The conceptualisation of sex/gender as separated from gender-related power is probably related to the Western cultural view of sex/gender as biologically founded or as founded in bodily differences; what sex is. is thought of in terms of bodily differences, not in terms of power. With such a view of sex/gender as based in the body power easily becomes relegated to a different theoretical conceptual sphere. ‘Man’ and ‘woman’ - sex - is conceptually distinct from masculinity and femininity - gender. In this thinking gender-related power may only be conceptualised as separated from ‘man’ and ‘woman’, for example, ‘men are more valued than women’ – Or as inherent in notions of masculinity and femininity; it is masculine to be strong and feminine to be weak.

My analytical concepts gender, gender meanings and relations and gender-related power takes into account this Western history of gender as inherently infused with socio-cultural relations of gender-related power. Furthermore, it is possible to study gender and gender-related power in another society than the Western through keeping the concepts analytically separate; It is possible to keep the possibility open that gender-related power is not a part of gender relations. But the concepts facilitate an analysis which do not dichotomise relations of gender-related power and gender or make relations of gender-related power synonymous with sex/gender. The analytical trinity of gender, gender meanings and relations and gender-related power puts relations of gender-related power on a par with sex/gender. Sex/gender is not seen as the base on which relations of gender-related power are organised but gender-related power relations may be analysed as part and parcel of sex/gender. The analytical trinity also takes into account that sex/gender
must be studied as both a socio-cultural relation and as socio-cultural mean-
ing.

‘The man without responsibility’ is created in the process of relating to and resisting relations of gender-related power both on an individual level and as part of cultural meanings. Mhudi relates to socio-cultural meanings (structure) such as ‘the man is the head of the household’ and the position a wife is supposed to take. She also relates to a specific man and his actions. She does not expect him to break with ‘tradition’. In order to keep her independence she does not marry him and she simultaneously treat him as though he is not responsible for his choice of action.

By analysing meaning as part of socio-cultural acts it is possible to de-
essentialise meaning. Social gender meanings are created in socio-cultural acts and those acts are part of specific human relations. The social gender meanings as part of socio-cultural acts does not have a straightforward relationship to cultural notions of ‘masculinity’ or ‘femininity’. ‘The man without responsibility is created in the interaction between people and may or may not resonate with cultural notions of masculinity and femininity.

In this theoretical framework gender can be analysed as both universal and cultural. To create a man without responsibility may well be a universal phenomena in patriarchal societies in certain circumstances although cultural gender meanings and relations of gender related power may vary considera-

bly. In a Swedish context ‘the campaign’ to make men take parental leave comes into my mind. Arguments of all the things men have to gain through staying home and take care of their children flourish whereas the argument that men have responsibilities as fathers is seldom heard. To analyse this phenomena as only mirroring notions of masculinity would not be sufficient. The stately ‘campaign’ for realizing an ideal of equality between men and women takes place in a socio-cultural context in which gender-related power relations are part and parcel. Both cultural notions of masculinity and femin-

ity and gender-related power relations would have to be considered. In a society in which men are not traditionally associated with parenting (care-
taking has not been considered masculine) and in which men hold socio-
cultural positions of power (men, for instance, earn more money than women) it is perhaps not considered a fruitful argument by the government that men have responsibilities as fathers. To persuade men to give up a powerful position for some time and to go against traditional values of masculinity the government’s strategy seem to be that men must be persuaded that they have something to gain from it. And in the process the government creates ‘a man without responsibility’.

The swedish ‘state campaign’ to draw men into parenting could serve as an example on how ‘a man without responsibility’ is possible to create as a political discourse - a political-social act - in a campaign which is supposed to serve the political interest of equality between men and women.
Dichotomous and non-dichotomous gender-meanings and relations

In my discussion of the ethnomethodological approach to gender, I criticised the narrow frame of thinking it entails through its only focusing only on gender, for instance, in the notion of ‘doing gender’. The approach is trapped in dichotomous thinking on gender, since ‘doing men and women’ must be the outcome of such an approach. I have attempted to develop an analytical approach which does not essentialise gender in two dichotomised entities. The concepts used in my approach are gender, gender meanings and relations and gender-related power.147 Have I succeeded? In Chapter three I interpreted Mhudi as creating a space for action at the same time as she constructed ‘a man without responsibility’. Did I put emphasis on her creating a space for herself or on her constructing a man without responsibility? I think the emphasis initially was on the latter. And in Chapter one, I discussed how this interpretation fails to do justice to Mhudi and what she attempts to do. This shortcoming was discussed as a theoretical one as well as a personal one (I was not able to see the somewhat reductionist and harsh character of the analysis). The theoretical shortcoming was a result of the choice of discourse analysis, which made the woman (women), seem autonomous actors independent of socio-cultural structure. But I also believe that the focus in feminist theory on ‘construction of gender’ has resulted in a biased emphasis as in my construction of ‘a man without responsibility’ (Interview with Mhudi). The feminist theoretical lens made me look for constructions of gender. However, my open approach enabled me to find a non-essentialist construction of gender, which is primarily relational. Nevertheless, there were still limitations in focusing almost exclusively on the ‘construction of gender’; I ignored, to some extent what the women were doing. Through the focus on the construction of gender I create a dichotomous gender relation: Mhudi appears to create a non-responsible man and a responsible woman. Even though this interpretation is non-essentialist since it is relational, it is still a dichotomous gender construction. But is this gender-construction really central to what the woman is doing in real life? I do not think so. My gender construction is an outcome of a theoretical focus on ‘the construction of gender’. But the women’s creation spaces for action is an interpretation which I think is closer to the empirical world. And when ‘the man without responsibility’ is contextualised in relation to this creation of a space of action, Mhudi does not appear to merely construct a dichotomous gender-relation but rather expand the boundaries of traditional gender-relations. This focus on the creation of a space for action become more central to the dissertation when I develop an analytical approach which attempts to transcend the

147 See Chapter one, Analytical concepts and theoretical motivations, for a discussion of the concepts.
sociological dichotomies of culture/social relations and actor/structure. But an increased awareness of my own position as a white feminist researcher has also contributed to a different focus on how to interpret discourses on lobola and what the women are doing, as discussed in Chapter one.

A relational and contextual approach to agency and structure

There has been a tension throughout the empirical analysis between agency and structure and between cultural meanings and social relations. I have described this tension as partly resulting from my working with a hermeneutic approach – which is ‘biased’ towards interpreting meaning in terms of linguistic and cultural meaning – At the same time, I wanted to understand women’s agency. I believe the tension is partly due to the different academic traditions of anthropology and sociology, which I have encountered during my education and which I think is well described by Sewell.148 Furthermore, there is often a polarisation between focusing on either agency or on structure in social scientific work.149 In analysing the interviews from a hermeneutic perspective, women’s agency became difficult to analyse. This became evident to me already in Chapter three when I began to consider the women as attempting to create discursive spaces but switched focus and interpreted the creating of spaces in relation to concrete others and in concrete contexts, contexts which involve socio-cultural structures as well as other people’s interpretations and intentions.

A ‘relational’ break with agency and structure

In Chapter three I introduced the concept of discursive strategy in order to analyse what the women were doing. This concept was an attempt to include agency in a ‘discursive paradigm’. When I tried to to find the ‘meaning of gender’ in the text, I was forced to recognise that there was no fixed ‘cultural’ or ‘discursive’ meaning of gender which the women ‘used’ or had as an implicit understanding. Or I should rather say that such gender meanings were inadequate to understand the text. The women were actively creating meaning through discursive acts. But this creation of meaning was not simply a dispute of whether a certain cultural trait or gender meaning meant this or that. These discursive acts were creating relations in language, which could be interpreted as relational meaning in addition to the meaning created as cultural or discursive ‘content’. Distinction-making is an example of the

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148 See Chapter one, footnote 48.
149 See, for example, Sewell 1992. For a discussion on the agency/structure problematic in anthropology see Karlsson (1997:276 ff).
creation of such relational meaning whereas the definition of lobola as ‘a bond between families’ is an example of meaning created as ‘discursive content’.

I would like to introduce the concept of relational meaning in an attempt to transcend a dichotomous conceptualisation of actor/structure, culture/social relations. ‘The man without responsibility’ would constitute the construction of relational meaning through social acts in that Mhudi relates to a particular man and operates on relations of gender-related power when the particular ‘he’ is constructed. Relational meaning is thus directly connected to social relations and social acts.

But relational meaning could also be exemplified by my interpretation of a woman such as Mmatshilo who is redefining lobola in order to escape oppressive aspects of it. Mmatshilo opposes a view of lobola as a purchase of women, and she attempts to counteract what she perceives as oppressive aspects of ‘the extended family in marriage’. She attempts to define lobola as an economic means for the new family, which is initiated through marriage. Through this definition she seems to be creating a space for action for herself in marriage. Furthermore, the negotiation with families and husband creates new relational meanings, which are gendered in a new way. This relational gendering is not connected to a discursive definition of masculinity, femininity, nor to men’s and women’s obligations and so forth. In my interpretation it is her awareness of possible aspects of gender-related power which motivates her for negotiating lobola but it would be very reductionist to theorise these new relations in terms of ‘doing gender’. She has a conscious understanding which she acts upon, and I believe her attempt to change structural meanings and relations seems to have succeeded. But she is not in a position to control this change in a total sense. The change is dependent on her surrounding relations as well as on her own position, consciousness and behaviour. Furthermore, structural relations connected to lobola are far too complex to ‘grasp’ in a total sense. Nevertheless, Mmatshilo seems to have succeeded in negotiating a structural change in her relationship to her husband and his family. This change is fundamentally relational and not a one-dimensional between actor and structure.

I have also interpreted Mhudi as widening a ‘traditional’ dichotomous gender structure in opening up a new space of action for herself and other women. With a meaning centred analysis such as the ‘doing gender’ perspective, we would loose sight of this relational aspect of Mhudi’s widening of spaces and only focus on the ‘doing of difference’. In my analytical perspective social acts which create new gender relations and meanings may be analysed as partly independent from any cultural conceptualisation of ‘what gender is’.

Relational meaning is a concept which makes it possible to study social change without leaving socio-cultural structures out. The relational meaning created by Mhudi with respect to her partner through her attempts to gain a
space for action could not have been recognised without consideration of socio-cultural structures. ‘The man without responsibility’, which could be said to form part of such a relational meaning generated in the interaction between Mhudi and her partner is not analysed as a new gender relation independent from ‘old’ structures. ‘He’ is a result of Mhudi’s widening her space for action in a concrete context. She is thus contributing to a transformation of socio-cultural structure.

The concept of relational meaning also sheds light on the contextual character of human interaction and the multidimensional aspects of socio-cultural structure in which explicit discourses and practices are intertwined with non-verbalised socio-cultural meanings and relations.

A discourse on politics as a means to create a new identity and space for action in personal life

The analysis in Chapter three of ‘the creation of spaces for action’ points to the possibility to theorise the meaning of socio-cultural acts as non-essential and relational. But the analysis would not have been possible without considering particular cultural notions of gender. It was necessary to consider which socio-cultural structures the women attempt to evade or revise. Furthermore, socio-cultural structures are situational and interactional – they depend on the individuals involved and the choices they make. Mhudi has an socio-economic position in which it is structurally possible for her to avoid marriage. She can support herself and has means to create an identity other than a ‘traditional wife’. She identifies herself as a political leader, which means she has, as she points out, certain responsibilities, which is not compatible with ‘traditional wife-hood’. When Mhudi individualises and essentialises her identity, gender-related power and male agency were disguised.

But this strategy to gain room for action could also be analysed as though Mhudi has the possibility to use an alternative discourse on political activism and an alternative political structure for action in creating a new identity for herself – an identity which is not as restricted by socio-cultural structures of gender-related power as those of traditional wife-hood and motherhood. The political sphere and the political discourse seem to constitute an alternative, but not entirely separate, sphere of action and a means to formulate a new identity. It is noteworthy though that this alternative ‘identity’ is an individualised as well as collectivised identity’ in that the identification of a ‘political leader’ draws upon a political discourse in which political representatives are supposed to ‘work for- and take responsibility for others’.150 Drawing on a discourse on political activism and leadership in the quest for a wider space for action may be said to parallel ‘traditional womanhood’ in

150 That is the ‘ideal’ politician. In practice, politics in the ANC, is of course permeated by individualist career-seeker’s as any other political party.
that women need to put the wellbeing of others centre-stage. On the other hand this enlarged space of identification and action is individualised in that Mhudi claims the right to be ‘this kind of person’. Thus, individualising identity constitutes a possibility to conceptualise her present situation and ‘what she would like to be’.

‘Identity’ on the level of the individual is at the same time formed by available discourses and socio-cultural structures as well as actively formed by a person’s wishes, choices, and relations. Identity in this perspective is not separated from social acts but is relational. Identity is directly linked to what a person does. Identity is thus not seen as a separated psychological entity but involves a person’s whole sense of belonging, worth and being, which includes body, acts and relations.

Agency and structure in the context of identity and relations

In Chapter three I interpreted Mhudi as disguising relations of gender-related power when discussing her relation with her partner who she described as a traditional man. She relegated gender-related power to the ‘institution of marriage’ and did not discuss her partner openly as able to choose or reject ‘tradition’. At the same time, she seemed to connect her choice not to get married to her partner’s choice in that she said she might have considered marriage if she had another relationship. In a sense this interpretation is quite dependent on a dichotomization of agency and structure. In my interpretation her partner may seem free to choose his actions as though he were independent from the ‘traditional structure’ in which he now operates. The interpretation of Mhudi making him ‘a man without responsibility’ could also be critisized for reducing Mhudi’s choices and own interpretations of what she is doing into a simple ‘maker of an irresponsible man’. But what if we supplement the previous analysis with an interpretation, which is closer to her own? Why does she think her partner will not make choices if they got married, which would leave her more freedom for action? She says he is very traditional, that his family would expect her to lead the life of a traditional wife if she married him. His position as a leader within the community in which he lives requires him to have a (traditional) wife who can make the guests comfortable and so on. A complementary interpretation of Mhudi’s discussion would be that she knows very well that her partner’s identity which includes his way of leading his life does not leave much room for alternative choices on his part. She may be interpreted as a very realistic woman who does not expect another person to change such a central part of his identity for her in marriage. His identity, or sense of worth, belonging and being, may be closely tied to a socio-cultural structure which includes relations of gender-related power, and these Mhudi would like to avoid. This interpretation does make him partly irresponsible for relations of gender-related power in the sense that it is not his individual wish to reduce her
space of action and sense of worth through marriage – but marriage is such a
central part of ‘traditional life’ that his (already chosen\textsuperscript{151}) way of life ‘re-
quires a traditional wife’. In this interpretation Mhudi respects her partner
and his choices at the same time as she respects herself and takes responsi-
bility for her own life. The price she may have to pay is that she will loose
her partner.

\textit{In this interpretation I would like to stress every person’s dependence on
others when making their choices.} Mhudi is dependent on her partner’s
choices which includes his identity. This is more complex than a simple
choice but includes choices in the past and his whole sense of worth, belong-
ing and being. But her partner is also, on his part, dependent on his family
and his community and their expectations toward him.

Furthermore, identity could be interpreted as more or less closely tied to
socio-cultural structure. Identity may be tied to relations of gender-related
power directly as, for example, a man’s sense of being superior to his wife
and making decisions for her through his position as the head of the house-
hold. But it could be more indirect through, for example, notions of mother-
hood, which may tie a woman’s identity closely to her possibility to have
children. She may feel incomplete if she is infertile.

For a woman to expand her span of possible identification from tradi-
tional socio-cultural structures, there must be- or she must create- alternative
socio-cultural structural space and discursive space. But to say that a per-
son’s identity is more or less closely tied to traditional socio-cultural struc-
ture does not mean that there is not room within that structure for different
identities. It only means that \textit{within a socio-cultural structure, there may be
particular limits or frames for the possibility to form one’s life and identity.}
Those frames are not static entities but more or less subject to interpretations
by particular actors in specific contexts. An example would be that in the
past it would be almost structurally impossible for a woman to lead an un-
married life whereas the notion that ‘the man is the head of the household’ is
more open to interpretation and more dependent on those actors involved.

In an article in \textit{Agenda} 2002 a young African feminist, Sisonke Msimang,
describes why she decided to marry her white partner by lobola.\textsuperscript{152} It was not
an easy decision either to get married or to do so with lobola. She discusses
how they negotiated with her parents about what lobola should mean in their
particular marriage and how more conservative members of the family were
prepared to negotiate the meaning of lobola in order to accommodate her
feelings. I think her discussion illustrates how an institution with patriarchal
elements may be negotiated if there is mutual respect of the individuals in-
volved (compare this with how Mmatshilo negotiated the meaning of lobola

\textsuperscript{151} She did not know that he was a ‘traditional man’ when she first met him.
\textsuperscript{152} She was 28 years old at the time of writing the article.

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in *Chapter one*). But she also indicates that there are limitations to possible redefinitions of the institution:

> We refused to engage in the exchange of thousands of rand that has become the norm. Instead we talked with my parents about what lobola meant to them and agreed on a recipe that worked for us. My departure from the home would symbolise an emotional loss and my marriage to Simon would mean the introduction of a new son. They wanted to do something that acknowledged this, but also laid down the ‘law’, in a sense, for the newest member of the family /…/ Clearly the experience of lobola is different even amongst Zulu-speaking people. Being middle-class, having been raised ‘outside’ and having chosen to marry a white man, altered the practice even for the conservative members of my family. What is interesting from a feminist perspective, is that the lobola was not called off when we offered our revised version. It was reinterpreted to accommodate my feelings and my immediate families’ values. A new script was invented by the men who sat in the negotiations. Yet were I lesbian, I am acutely aware that the very notion of lobola would be called off. It is so heterosexist in its conception, that I find it difficult to re-imagine it occurring outside the heterosexual norm. (2002: 11, 12)

‘Western’ missionary and feminist discourses on lobola as oppressive to women as well as academic discourses on ‘what lobola is’ could be said to form a discursive structure, which the women interviewed have to relate to. They may have difficulty in evading such structure when attempting to formulate their perceptions of the institution. As these discursive structures are part and parcel of colonial and racial political power dimensions they will probably have a role in how they both strategize in relation to the institution and in the formulation of it. But their practice of lobola may include other dimensions of the institution, which are not formulated by ‘Western’ discourse. Msimang’s (see above) feelings when getting married by lobola may be an example of more experience-based dimensions of the institution:

> But I am also proud of my heritage, of the rich traditions that kept African people alive through the centuries of colonialism and apartheid. I happen to be born a Zulu and it is a legacy I am not prepared to throw away. The lobola was a work in progress, an organic process that had me blinking back tears – peeping through a window as my partner gave presents to my aunts, as they doted on and danced for him. Now they all know his name, Just as they know mine, and that on some level, as inscribed as it may be with the weight of his male importance in the family, feels good (2002: 12).

Thus, personal relations in a woman’s life also form her space for action. Msimang (above) and Mmatshilo (see *Chapter one*) were able to negotiate lobola in their families whereas that may not be possible for all women. In Sweden a woman has structural possibilities to form her own life in many ways. Still women are by no means equal to men. With the above view on identity, agency and structure, we can interpret women as constrained by
socio-cultural structures which are not very articulated such as notions on women’s sexuality and men’s superiority. These notions may be internalised as self-identifications. But instead of only seeing them as internalised cultural structural notions it may be more fruitful to analyse them as part of social relations. In Chapter five I interpreted Lindiwe as partly having internalised views on men’s sexuality. She seemed to hold the view that men necessarily have many partners and, moreover, that they should show their women partners the respect to keep ‘affairs’ out of sight from them. I interpreted this view as dependent on how she perceived the social context (‘all men do it’) but also as a strategy in relation to her own partner in order to create a space for action. Her view was thus interpreted as directly linked to context and her relationship with her partner. I have also interpreted Mhudi as being dependent on the assessment of her partner in her views on marriage. She said that she didn’t know whether or not she would have considered marriage if she had had another partner. In her present context, her view of marriage is that it ‘ties you down’ and that she ‘just don’t want to be part of that institution’.

Socio-cultural messages are mediated and negotiated in personal relations. A socio-cultural structure, such as men’s superiority to women, may also be enforced through personal relationships. A man may, for example, abuse his wife, and reduce her sense of worth and space of action to nil (as well as traumatising her). Another man may ‘only’ be reducing his girlfriend’s sense of worth through other means such as telling her she is useless in every way. The result may be depression on her part. The socio-cultural structure could be seen as a context which makes it easier for a man to enforce his position in relation to his girlfriend. When we use this theoretical approach, we can also analyse how women may use means of power to limit men in personal relationships. But women have to work against a socio-cultural structure which privileges men; the means available for reducing men’s sense of power, worth and space for action, are therefore much more limited.

The economic discourse on lobola and socio-cultural structure

In Chapter three I analysed women as relegating gender-related power to an economic discourse whereas the ‘true meaning of lobola’ was cleansed of gender-related power relations.

This was analysed as a discursive strategy to gain space for action. But at this stage, my analysis was still on a discursive level. The women were interpreted as creating a discursive space. How could we advance the analysis with the theoretical discussion above? What if we make an analysis which is closer to the women’s own interpretations of lobola?

Lobola is central to ‘traditional’ gender relations and to the whole ‘traditional’ socio-cultural organisation of society. In the ‘traditional’ context
women’s space of action was confined to certain spheres of action, which were connected to unequal gender relations. But in this traditional context there were obligations and responsibilities connected to each gender. Women could appeal to men’s responsibilities towards them if treated too badly. In a modern context in which the extended family might not be living together or close by, women may be isolated from her family. For the most part, much more vulnerable to her husband; in a context in which money ‘talks’, women’s situation has become something very different from the ‘traditional’ context. The discursive and socio-economic structure of a market economy may have worked against women in that a ‘traditional’ unequal situation with women’s space of action limited may be reduced even more. Women may be objectified by monetary lobola – they may be considered a purchase and the property of their husbands (and their families). Men may use their ‘traditional’ power position as the ‘head of the household’ to enforce their position of gender-related power. It seems to be this total discursive objectification of women which is possible through lobola’s form as money, which the women in Chapter three protest against. Is it possible to change the meaning of lobola to women’s advantage through discursive means in a modern market economy when money is used for lobola?

Two women of this study, Mmatshilo and Thokozile, who are married by lobola, emphasise that they were already feminists when they married. In addition to this consciousness about possible oppressive aspects of lobola, they lead economically independent lives, which provides a good position to negotiate the meaning of lobola. Poor women in a less politically aware context may have difficulties in combating the possible objectification of women by monetary lobola.

Dichotomous - and non-dichotomous gender relations and identities

Essential to the attempt to develop a theoretical approach is the question ‘What are the women doing?’ When analysing gender relations in this light, gender might be the outcome of ‘women doing other things’; ‘the man without responsibility’ could be viewed as such a ‘gendered outcome’ of women’s activities. But the outcome may also be ‘other things’ than gender although the gender dimension is present.

What happens with gender if we shift focus from ‘doing gender’ and ‘the construction of gender’ into ‘doing something else?’? We may come back to the question of ‘what is a good life’. Gender is a very powerful force in our lives as it is such a central part of the socio-cultural organisation of society and of our identities. But we are more than gender – men and women may understand each other’s experiences to a certain extent and they may have similar views on what a good life constitutes. Even though gender is di-
chotomised socio-culturally and by men and women themselves, gender is also de-dichotomised through men and women’s activities. In real life gender is not a simple dichotomy between people with different genitals. In real life people also have common interests and goals even though they may be positioned differently due to their gender category (and race category etc).

The above theoretical approach may open up a view of gender as possible to change through action including discursive action. Women may break with cultural notions of gender and socio-cultural organisation of gender relations. This may be done through consciousness raising but there must also be alternative spaces for action – politically, socio-culturally, economically, discursively as well as through personal relations. A permissive space must thus be created politically, discursively, organisationally, relationally and emotionally. Such a space will always be a matter of interpretation and must be a matter under constant scrutinising in personal as well as in political life. A central question for personal as well as political change could thus be – What is a good life and how do we achieve it? Then gender would be a question of how gender relations reduce our possibilities to achieve a good life for all. A healthy switch of focus of gender studies may be from ‘doing gender’ and the ‘construction of gender’ to ‘what do gender-relations and gender-related power do?’ and how does gender-relations and gender-related power reduce our possibilities to achieve a good life. Such a shift of focus makes the concept of gender a clearer analytical category. Gender relations are studied in action and thus clearly become a matter of interpretation. An analytical fluidity is achieved – gender is studied as but one (important) dimension of human existence and not as the only aim of people’s activities. This shift of focus may mean that certain gender related relations and notions may not be considered very important to change. We may lead full lives with certain gendered threads as long as these do not reduce our possibilities too much. Women have started to break the dichotomised gender relations a long time ago and when we continue to do so, ‘old hegemonic traditional structures of gender-related power’ may fade away as these are dependent on dichotomised gender relations. If we view lobola in this light, we can see that the institution is intertwined with a dichotomised gender organisation which is also infused with gender-related power. It may be possible for individual women in specific contexts to create a space for action within the (extended) boundaries of the institution. But for poor women this seems a difficult project within a market economy since money is used for lobola. Men may use monetary lobola to objectify and dominate women. But there are dimensions of lobola which many women and men hold on to and which may not have been given their just due by ‘Western’ discourses on lobola. Thus women who recognize gender oppressive aspects of lobola but wish to keep lobola may have to deal with both gender-related power and imperialistic and race related power in the form of ‘Western’ discursive
definitions of lobola. Their quest for creating spaces for action and in leading fulfilling lives is a complex undertaking.

Finally, there is the difficult question of the relationship between individual women’s creating spaces for action and the larger feminist project of transforming socio-cultural structures so as to create structural space for all women (and men). But this is not a problem which can be solved by the individual feminist when trying to find workable solutions in her own lived relations. Sisonke Msimang points out the problem in discussing her own choice to get married by lobola as a choice which feels good for her (See the section *Agency and structure in the context of identity and relations*):

I’m not prepared to say the same for bride price as it is practised everywhere /.../ But I think that there are ways to reinterpret some traditional practices so that they draw on positive meanings of tradition and culture – particularly where those meanings were about cementing family ties and celebrating in ways that are unique to each ethnic group. Yet we cannot stop here. It is essential that feminists working in the realm of culture, grapple with imagining into our cultural practices those who have been reviled and feared as threats to patriarchy. Lesbians and gay men, unmarried women, women who are not mothers – where do they fit in relation to revisioned and refashioned rites? If we cannot find space for them in our new frameworks then ultimately these are of little use to the feminist project (2002:12)

And she adds in a footnote:

This point seems to contradict my earlier statement about what lobola meant to me. The larger issue is that lobola as I see it, cannot make room for lesbians. Yet it was useful for me as an individual. This utility is one gained at the expense of lesbian disadvantage. I’m working within a structure that validates me, which does not mean that it is a structure that is good for feminism in the long run (ibid).
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Appendix 1– Method

The subject of study and its specification

In 1994 I went to South Africa for the first time to explore the possibility of studying women’s organizations/women’s struggle for empowerment in ‘the New South Africa’. I visited numerous organizations and met with activists working with gender issues. A lasting impression from that first visit was the determination and awareness by women activists that this was a very crucial time for women to put their demands on the political agenda. The women interviewed referred to the experience of women in other ‘liberated’ countries who had ‘struggled side by side with the men’ but were forced back to ‘traditional roles’ when their organizations had gained political power.

When I came back to Sweden I decided I would concentrate on women in the ANC and on ‘gender constitution’. I thought that I would interview women about their experience of political struggle and personal life to see how the women conceptualized themselves and their political and personal lives as women in a context of diverse gender discourses. There has, for instance, been a strong discourse on ‘women as mothers’ in the liberation movement and there seemed to be new discourses emerging and sometimes clashing with older in the context of democratization, for instance in the drafting of a new constitution. 153 Other crucial issues, which would actualize different discourses on ‘woman’, were what role ‘customary law’ would play in a new constitution, violence against women and the question of ‘free abortion’.

In 1994 I also had the opportunity to visit the big conference of the National Coalition of Women which had as one of its aims to conduct a national survey of the demands of women which would be put into a Women’s Charter. The Charter was endorsed as a working document at the conference, which was quite amazing in such a diverse setting in which about 100 different women’s organizations participated. I specifically remember a rural woman demanding ‘one husband one wife’ as protest against polygamy and

153 An inspiration for this angle of enquiry was Dorothy Driver’s discussion on the ANC-draft for a new constitution in which she highlight different discourses on women and the family (1991).
to the applause of the audience. And then the white woman giving 'evidence' to the terrible acts of sexual violence she had been a victim of – both by her father during childhood and as an adult by a group of white men. But also in the coffee break how a black politically prominent woman complained about a white woman treating her like a maid. Adding to the 'problem' of diverse experiences in adopting a common Women's Charter there was such a great number of women's organizations ranging from women's church groups to political parties who had to agree on its formulations. The ANC was one of the main organizations in the Coalition and the woman who was one of the main driving forces in forming the Coalition is a prominent ANC activist/politician, Frene Ginwala, who later became the Speaker of Parliament.

How did the women experience and formulate 'womanhood', 'women's oppression', and 'women's empowerment' in such a vibrant political context. I decided to concentrate on ANC-women and begin the exploration of such a meaning-centered analysis by interviewing the women on different themes. I conducted the first interviews in 1996 and I started each interview by asking the women about their background, where they come from, their first language, how they became involved in politics, if religion was important when they grew up and so forth. I also asked about how they started to reflect on gender-inequalities and their experience of unequal relations in political and personal life. 'Tradition' and lobola was one of the themes which I thought would bring out different views on how to conceptualize 'women's oppression' as it was such a central theme in the political debate and very controversial. I also asked about the women's views on the emphasis, which had been put on 'women as mothers' within the liberation movement.

In 1998 I returned to South Africa again to do a second round of interviews.\footnote{I was in South Africa for about two months in 1997 to do an appraisal of a woman’s organisation for Sida. This was a valuable experience as I got to travel around the country and meet with women from both rural areas and squatter areas in a way which wouldn’t have been possible to do on my own.}

The themes were about the same as before but I also asked the women if they would call themselves feminists. I thought this question would bring out discourses on 'women's empowerment' as 'feminist' has been such controversial label in the liberation movement.

It was not until after transcribing the interviews that lobola became the main theme for the study. I started analyzing views on lobola, partly because I had to start somewhere and partly because there were such diverse views on the subject, which I thought would be interesting to interpret from the point of view of different discourses on gender in 'the New South Africa'.
The women interviewed

I have conducted interviews with 27 ANC women politicians/activists in national parliament, in one of the provincial legislatures and in two of the provincial branches of the ANC-Women’s League. 155 15 of the women interviewed are Africans with very differing backgrounds; some have lived in South Africa all their lives, some have lived in exile longer or shorter periods of time, some have a rural background and some have an urban, they have different mother tongues and religious backgrounds. 156 Three of the women interviewed are Indian, four are coloured and five are white. 157 Some of the women were selected on the ground that they hold or have held key positions within the ANC and the ANC-Women’s League as regards gender issues. This, as I have an interest in policy-making on gender but also because my initial interest has been to investigate how the women conceptualise gender and women’s oppression in such a vibrant political setting which actualise diverse gender discourses. I have also attempted in my selection of interviewees to obtain diversity as regards backgrounds and political positions as diversity may be an asset for the interpretation of the material. 158 I did not have an ambition of selecting a representative sample of women as I work with an interpretative approach which do not seek to make generalisations from the analysis. Some of the women have not been selected on any other ground than that I was able to get an interview with them – which was not always an easy project. 18 of the interviews brought up the theme of lobola. 14 of those are analysed in the dissertation. 159

155 The interviews were conducted in 1996 and 1998. One of the interviewees was interviewed both in 1996 and 1998.
156 I am not able to make a full presentation of the mentioned dimensions of the women’s backgrounds which would ‘cover’ all women. This is due to the varying time given for different interviews and which made me choose not to ask ‘background’ questions of some of the women as this would have made the time available for asking about the themes I was interested in very short. I have sometimes indicated in the analysis when I think such a background dimension, for instance if the woman has been living in exile, may have a bearing on how to interpret what is said.
157 In Apartheid South Africa people were divided into racial groups: African, coloured (people of ‘mixed’ decent), Indian/Asian and white. These divisions are still widely used as is the term ‘black’, which was introduced by the liberation-movement to unite the oppressed groups. I do not condone these racial categories but they are necessary to use as descriptive terms as they have been enforced politically, economically and socio-culturally in South Africa. On the individual level race may have different meanings as dimensions of people’s subjectivities. Thus, I don’t regard race to take on a specific meaning or to become a static entity for the individuals’ subjectivities when living their ‘lives’ in a context in which these categories have been politically enforced.
158 An example would be that it might be easier to discern meanings when different views are contrasted to each other.
159 The three of the 18 interviews, which have not been used, one is with a white woman one is with an Indian woman, one is with a ‘coloured’ and one is with an African. As I was interested in experiences and implicit meanings connected to lobola the interviews with women with no experience such as the white, ‘Indian’ and ‘coloured’ woman were not included. As regards the ‘African woman’ who was not included, the interview has been used indirectly.
Table 1: Political location of the women interviewed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>National parliament</th>
<th>Provincial legislature</th>
<th>Provincial ANC-Women’s League</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2 (3)*</td>
<td>1*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coloured</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian/Asian</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*One of the women was both active in the provincial ANC-Women’s League and a member of the provincial legislature.

As this material includes interviews with gender-conscious women with high political positions, it is quite possible that there is an over-representation of women who do not agree with or accept lobola on a personal level compared to an average sample of women activists/politicians. This does not constitute a problem, however, as the reasoning of these women has been illuminating when reading them in relation to other interviews. It is not the pro- or against-lobola, which has become the subject of study but rather explicit and implicit discourses on lobola, which do not seem to correlate with explicit opinions on the institution in any simple way. Furthermore, these discourses are analysed in relation to women’s political and personal strategies to gain room for action in relation to relations of gender-related power. The analysis thus constitutes an attempt to contribute to the knowledge production and understanding of the women’s reasoning about lobola as well as their strategies to gain room for action in a context of gender-related power.

and I think her views are represented in the final analysis. It would have been interesting to ask non-African women of their views on lobola in relation to what has been interpreted as a political discourse. But as lobola was not planned to be the only theme in the dissertation, I did not have enough material on lobola for such an analysis.

As mentioned before I do not condone the racial categories used but as they have been so politically, economically and socio-culturally enforced in South Africa they are necessary to use in describing the backgrounds of the women interviewed. To use these terms in a table may seem to enforce their political connotations of objectifying people stripping them of their humanity but I only mean to make a description of two of the dimensions of the women’s backgrounds which may help the reader to contextualise the interviews.

Many of the women interviewed have also been living in exile for many years, which may have had an impact on their personal views on lobola.

An example would be that an implicitly expressed discourse on lobola might be present in interviews both with women who agree to lobola or disagree with lobola on a personal level.
The interviews

The interviews were semi-structured and I tried to cover all the themes discussed above, but 'follow-up questions' were very individual and depending on the interaction between the woman interviewed and me. All interviews were conducted at the women’s offices and they were ranging from half an hour to about two hours.

I introduced myself as a PhD-student in sociology who would like to study the experiences of ANC women politicians/activists. I also said that I would like to study and understand gender through the complexities of individual lives and that I think that it is possible to learn from each other’s experiences. Furthermore, I presented myself as having worked politically with gender issues at my student union and elsewhere. Each woman was also informed that she would be anonymous and that she would be able to read the transcript of the interview and make changes or choose to withdraw from the study if she wished.

Even though the interviews were semi-structured and thus allowed for 'a freer conversation' than a fully structured interview, the interview-structure was undoubtedly that between researcher and informant in that the frame of reference was set by the interview and me steering the conversation. A power-relationship is thus established from the start in which I make the frame for the interaction. The power-relationship is also evident in that I as the researcher have the final say in interpreting the interviews. Although this is the primary frame for the interaction there were many other elements influencing it.

I enjoyed talking with the women and I generally felt that after an initial more formal interaction the 'talk' got more relaxed and informal, sometimes with a lot of laughter. In a couple of cases I felt it was more difficult to have more personal contact with the interviewed woman. In one of those cases the interviewee (African) woman held a political top position and I felt quite uncomfortable, and she questioned me on, for example, the legitimacy

\[163\] See the interview-guide in Appendix 2.

\[164\] Laughter does, of course, mean different things in different contexts. As an example it may function as de-loading a situation in which I felt I may have come close to offend someone. In the interview with Sisiwe in Chapter three I am very persistent in asking her about what seemed to me to be contradictory views on lobola and the position of the man as the head of the household. At one time she counter my question by asking implying that I might not think she truthful:

F- But at the same time you said something about like... in connection with 'the man is the head of the household', that he paid lobola for you and there's a connection there.
S- Yeah (F – Yeah.), so that is proof that ... (F; Laughter)
(S ; Laughter)
F- No, I just wonder how you think...
(F, S; Laughter)

But in many instances I felt the laughter was part of 'connecting' and having established some trust in the situation.

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of my doing research on black women’s experiences/culture. Furthermore, she did not elaborate on my questions but answered very shortly on each question. I thought this interview was a ‘bad’ one but when transcribing it, it became clear that the woman’s questioning of my position was valuable in later interpretations of ‘discourses on lobola’. Furthermore, there was as much interpretative material in this interview as in any other despite my ‘feeling’ that there was a ‘lack of contact and confidence’. It was probably not a coincidence that this woman with a high political position felt confident in questioning my position, but there were other women with high positions with whom I felt more comfortable.

In some cases I felt the interview was too short to establish some kind of basic confidence and in another case with a (‘coloured’) parliamentarian it was evident that she, after the tape-recorder was shut off, (and I had to leave) was interested in talking more about her situation in parliament. I had the feeling that she was quite lonely in a leading position and would have liked to talk more about her experiences and maybe receive some support from me.

I, being a white middle-class, feminist researcher from Sweden have certainly had different effects in relation to women of different ‘colours’ and political positions. In 1998 I was helped by a parliamentarian administrator and ANC-political activist in arranging interviews with women in parliament. I had spent a great deal of time trying to reach the women and arranging interviews so this help was fantastic. Furthermore, this woman had such a pleasant personality so she was very successful in persuading the women to agree to an interview. This initial introduction by ‘an insider’ may have had some ‘confidence’ effect. But this ‘helper of mine’ was very clear about that I was regarded as a white, bourgeois academic (in contrast to political activists). And she said that it was my coming from Sweden which made the women agree to an interview, as Sweden had supported the liberation movement.

Education is most certainly also a factor involved in how the women and I have interacted. Some of the women interviewed have university education, but some don’t. Class is also a relevant factor as a few women come directly from quite meagre conditions whereas some have more of a middle-class background and a few come from more affluent conditions. I’m not able to make an extensive judgement as to how this has influenced our interaction. But it is clear that I have more of common frames of reference with women

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165 See interview with Ellen in A political contextualisation of the women’s discourses.
166 One woman interviewed expressed it as ‘who can resist when she asks with her sweat smile’?
167 This woman also described her first reaction when I approached her for help as ‘here comes another one’. Furthermore, she related to a situation when a vice-minister had agreed to talk to two Swedes because they were Swedes as this person said that ‘we owe much to the Swedes’.

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with university education or with women who have worked actively with gender issues. We sometimes have a common ‘meta-language’ for discussing issues. Some women use this ‘gender-language’ in making their own analysis on a situation or issue. An example would be when Lilian makes a summarising comment of her telling about her childhood: “/…/And a lot more was demanded of me then was demanded of my older brother or my brother who was two years younger than I was. So, I think from there, maybe the seeds of gender sensitivity or a person who would later on in life be a feminist...”

This common ‘meta-language’ may have functioned as help sometimes in that the women themselves are able to express their explicit interpretation of certain issues in ‘gender-terms’ instead of me providing the entire interpretation. But sometimes a political gender-discourse has been difficult to ‘break’ in order to reach more complex levels of the issues which I think is usually more evident in relating to ‘personal experience’ than if discussing matters on a general level.

On the direct interactional level, I did not feel that ‘whiteness’ was a ‘strong’ common identification between the white women interviewed and me in that we interacted more freely or with the supposition of common denominators. Sometimes, I felt quite the contrary. As an example, one of the white women interviewed was very careful when I interviewed her but became more relaxed after some time. But this woman withdrew from the study after having read the transcription of the interview. I had the impression that a couple of the white women were careful partly because they were ‘insecure’ about their position in a largely black setting.

On a more ‘indirect’ level my ‘whiteness’ certainly had an influence on the whole research process including interviews. There has been a certain insensitivity on my part as to the political dimension of my position as a white researcher which I will discuss below. I am of the view that positions due to class and race, etc do influence interaction as discussed above but I also believe that we are able to some extent transcend positions in concrete interactions.

Language and culture differences

The interviewees of my study have different cultural and social backgrounds. I have chosen to interview, to a large extent, top politicians/activists and I think that this choice was made with a not totally conscious intention to avoid some of the interpretation obstacles that anthropologists encounter when trying to learn another language in a short period of time. Even though they may use interpreters they face a very difficult interpretation problem by

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168 She was the only woman interviewed who withdrew from the study.
169 See Ethical considerations.
not having command of the language. I face the same problem, but I have chosen interviewees who have been reflecting on gender issues and who know English. I therefore think that the interpretation work might, to some extent, be easier because they have already verbalised and developed their thinking on these issues which means their views are more accessible to me than if I had interviewed women without a history of ‘gender reflection’.

It also means we have, to some extent, a mutual frame of reference; we are both interested in changing relations of gender related power and we have some terms for expressing these understandings and ambitions. This is possible through our being connected to a universal women’s struggle against oppression. An example is that all women use the term ‘gender’ and it is part of ANC policy programs. This is a term which was appropriated by feminist research in the 70’s in order to be able to catch, what was thought of as cultural and social meanings of sex, and which has spread by the women’s movement to a wider group of users. But sharing these terms and the ambition to change relations of gender related power might obscure the fact that we are also talking from different socio-cultural frames of reference. We might think that we mean the same thing when we, in fact, are not. In order not to take the meaning of terms for granted I have tried to follow up on the women’s answers to my questions by asking what they mean as much as possible. To be persistent and follow up on questions all the time might be easier for me as a foreigner than it would be for a South African researcher. The women might not be as offended as they might have been with someone they would consider should know more about them. With me they can sometimes take on a teaching role and explain things thoroughly.

The fact that these women know English and that they have been in contact with many political ideologies and with academic discourses on gender also makes them skilled in changing frames of reference. They are, many times, fluent speakers of several languages and I think they may be translating things for me because of this experience of changing frames of reference. An example is a woman who referred to a saying in an African language and then translated it for me. She also explained that the word used in the African language for ‘man’ did not have the general meaning of ‘man’ in English but of a special kind of man with certain characteristics. This woman was conscious about the different meanings of ‘man’ when she translated it for me, but I would expect that many of the implicit cultural meanings are not clear to the users even though they translate their mother tongue into English all the time. My strategy has been to follow up with questions as much as possible to make meanings explicit (c.f. Lindberg 2003). Important in this context of making meanings explicit is the question of power of interpretations. As I as a researcher has the final power to make interpretations a good strategy to counteract this power is to get as much as possible in explicit terms. Another strategy is to present the reader with relevant excerpts of the
interviews so that every interpretation may be evaluated by the reader herself.

Interviewing ‘politicians’

When I started this project I had a certain awareness that I would ask about both personal experience and more ideological views on gender issues, because I thought that the complexity of gender issues would become more evident in discussing personal experiences than on a more general level of dialogue. I was also interested in the inter-connection between personal and political life for this group of women.

I have been amazed at the openness shown to me by so many women in discussing personal matters but it was far more difficult to discuss issues of gendered experiences in political life. It was quite frustrating to hear ‘party-loyal’ answers as to relations of gender-related power in their political lives. It was not until I had enough ‘inside’ information about political matters that I was able to confront the interviewed woman with ‘facts’ when served with general answers. Then, the discussion opened up a more complex field of relations. In one such instance I had information about open hostility from men at a political meeting which I could use in confronting a woman with when she did not recognise relations of gender-related power. This was one of the very last interviews so I never managed to get enough material on ‘political life’. Interestingly enough this woman did not react by distancing herself when being confronted but I rather had the impression that she felt it became interesting. She commented after the interview was finished that ‘this was a different interview’ and she said it in a way which made me think she quite liked it.

One day I complained to a woman working in Parliament that I was frustrated over all the ‘party-loyal’ answers. I also explained to her how I viewed my own research – for example, that I believed gender research could help in furthering gender politics and that it was possible to learn from each other’s experiences. This woman, who also became a friend, looked at me and asked if I had explained this to the interviewed women. She said that they would definitely take more time and become more open if they were able to see that the research had a goal other than a PhD-degree. I realised that I had not taken enough time in presenting myself and my position, as I had been so concentrated on getting enough time for interviewing the women. I’m not sure it would have helped in getting beyond ‘party-loyalism’ but I could definitely have thought more about establishing a common interest between the women interviewed and myself.\textsuperscript{170} I was also told, though, that questions

\textsuperscript{170} I partly had such an awareness as I explained that I had also worked with gender issues politically. But I probably did not understand that I could have explained even more that my
about problems within the ANC was likely to be seen as an attempt to harm the party – a feeling, which probably would have been difficult to break through in a single interview however I presented myself.

Even though the theme of ‘political life’ was extreme in receiving ‘politically correct’ answers, the theme of ‘lobola’ also evoked ‘political/general’ answers. But when interviewing the women about lobola and asking about personal experiences seemed fruitful in breaking with ‘one-dimensional political’ answers. In some cases the women were reluctant to answer about personal experiences; M is an example of this. She didn’t answer at all when I first ask about lobola but gave a general statement on ‘tradition’. And when I ask if she would like it in her personal life, she first avoids answering and then is very short. It would have been unethical for me to pursue questioning her about her personal experience but I think that my persistence in keeping to the subject of lobola was fruitful in generating interesting material.

If I had only kept to a political level of discussion the dissertation would have been much more discourse oriented – I would probably only have been able to discuss lobola as a political discourse in relation to different political contexts. The contrast of personal experience added a more complex dimension to the analysis, which would not have been possible to get if only discussing the matter on a general level.

The empirical material

The empirical material/the interviews are formed both as a consequence of my pre-conceptions and choice of interview-questions as well as through the interaction with the women. The material thus already starts to take form through my formulating questions and topics of interest. The questions put to the women has, to a certain extent, developed through time as my knowledge and understanding of certain issues deepened. This is most obvious in the case of discussing political life as discussed above but was also evident in other areas. An example is when I ask Tandeka about the African women’s expectations in regard to African men having several partners. I would not have asked such a question if this issue had not come up in other interviews. I would have felt that I reinforced a stereotypical view of ‘African men’ in asking such a question without support from the interviews.

As this is primarily a hermeneutic analysis; questions are not regarded as leading/misleading but as a resource for the interpretation and as a part of the creation of the material. The questions are thus already part of the interpretation-process and may be regarded as an essential part in the interaction be-

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interest in gender research is based in a fundamental interest in changing gender and power relations.

171 See The personal is not political.
tween the women interviewed and myself. Questions could thus not be regarded as ‘neutral’ or as non-interventionist as a more traditional sociological approach might have aimed at. With such a perspective a ‘provocative’ question may even be regarded as an asset in eliciting meanings for interpretation. And as discussed above, I believe that a certain ‘provocativeness’ or persistence in pursuing a theme or question have enriched the empirical material when interviewing political activists/politicians who are ideologically trained and skilled in articulating a political message.

The concrete interpretation of interviews

One consequence of my hermeneutic approach is the way the material is presented and analysed in the dissertation. In order to bring out meanings and to be able to interpret the interviews I have grouped them. They have functioned as mirrors and inspirations in relation to each other in the interpretation-process. The dissertation presents close to the whole material gathered about lobola in the interviews with African women. There are only two interviews which are not cited but all the other interviews are presented in full except one. The selection of the interviews, which are presented and linked together has been guided by several initial questions, which may or may not, be central to the final analysis. This is so especially as the course of interpretation has taken another route along the way. An example of this are the first interviews presented in Chapter three. They were selected with an initial intention of comparing views of women with different explicit views on lobola. But during the course of analysis I left this thread of interpretation behind. I started to explore what was expressed in explicit terms and what was more implicitly expressed, as this course of analysis seemed to be more fruitful.

The process of interpreting the interviews as texts started by me organising the text under subtitles or themes. Such themes were, for instance, ‘us and them’, ‘tradition’, ‘change’, ‘ANC-policy’, ‘polygamy’, ‘personal opinion’ and so forth. I then read the interviews together grouped under these themes which sometimes resulted in developing the theme to an analysis as

172 Lundgren discusses how a certain ‘provocativeness’ may be fruitful as an interview-technique and possible to argue for ethically (1993:305ff). Haavind also discusses that interaction is methodologically necessary in order to interpret any subject of study and should not be considered a source of ‘bias’ (2000:9). Furthermore, Eriksson points out the ethical aspect that the researcher’s own interpretations become visible for the informant in interaction (2003).

173 The views of Henrietta are not cited but are discussed in A political discourse on lobola in the context of political pragmatism. Ida is the only African woman whose views are not discussed in the dissertation. I believe her views are very similar to those of Emma and Cholofelo discussed in Chapter three. It is the interview with Sindiwe in A political discourse on lobola in a context of political pragmatism which is not presented in full. I made the assessment that the citation presented with Sindiwe was illustrating the interpretation I made in this chapter and that further citations with her was not necessary for the argument made.
in the case of ‘us and them’ in Chapter three. The first threads of interpretation were thus very text oriented in order not to force the material into categories or theories. These first interpretations were then more explicitly read in relation to political contexts, anthropological material and so forth. In the final stage of analysis the interpretations were read in relation to other more theoretical material such as ‘doing gender’.

### Transcription of interviews

The interviews have been transcribed word by word and have been interpreted as texts which is in line with a hermeneutical tradition. Such a ‘translation’ of an interview-situation into a written text is not without methodological problems. An example of such a problem is ‘the open character’ of oral conversation which may be ‘fixed’ through transcribing it into a written text (Kvale 1997:147 ff). Words which were open and searching in a specific situation in the interaction between interviewer and interviewee may become more static and definite then intended in a written text (ibid). Furthermore, interaction between two individuals as a frame of reference is substituted with a context in which the interviewer ‘reads’ a text (cf. Carstensen, forthcoming). I believe this process of shifting frames of reference in transcribing interview into a written text leads the interviewer into more or less of an ‘objectification’ of the interviewee. If the interviewer have only met the interviewee once and don’t know the person it may be difficult to keep interpretative perspective which is characterized by respect and don’t loses sight of ‘the living person behind the text’. I feel that this have been a methodological problem in that it may have contributed to a somewhat reductionist character of some interpretations made. In addition to this translation of an ‘interactional event’ into ‘text’ there is another editing of the situation in transcribing the interviews. In this dissertation there is the additional problem of language and culture in that English is not the first language of either interviewee nor interviewer and that we have different socio-cultural backgrounds.

I have chosen to primarily make the text readable by making sentences shorter but not to change grammar or words of the interviewee if it is not grammatical changes which I assessed as not risking to change the meaning of what is said. In addition to not distorting the intended meaning of the interviewee, this strategy of minor editing also permit the reader to make her own ‘reading’ of what is said. I have sometimes made changes in order to protect the anonymity of the interviewed person. An example would be to change name of the place a woman grew up.

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174 See Chapter one.

175 I discuss the problem of reductionism from another angle in Chapter one, p. 24 ff.
I have not been as cautious in editing my own questions as I most of the time felt that I knew the intended meaning.

I have chosen to indicate ‘laughter’ by (Laughter) and ‘silences’ by … as a means or context for the reader (and for myself) to interpret meanings.

Sometimes I have not been able to hear what is said on the tape which is indicated by (?). When parts of the interview text is left out in a particular citation that is indicated by /…/.

**Ethical considerations**

I have, from the start of this project, been aware to some extent of the north/south debate in which western academics have ‘colonised’ the ‘third world’ into ‘others’ through their writing.\(^{176}\) I was very reluctant to approach the concept of ‘culture’ when interpreting the interviews as this might make lobola into a static unit and the women into ‘the other’.

I have discussed this theoretical consideration and how it has influenced the analysis. I have also discussed how an agency-centred approach in the first empirical analysis tended to make the women seem as ‘collaborators’ in their own oppression since they appeared to be free to choose any behaviour regardless of socio-cultural structures. Furthermore, I have discussed how ‘white guilt’ on my part has played a role in the analysis. But in the beginning of the project I was not particularly conscious about the way in which the choice of subject of study also has political consequences and a dimension of power. I simply went out to investigate what I thought was interesting and had the view that the women working with gender-issues and I have a common interest in changing relations of gender-related power even though those relations might look different in our respective countries. I was aware of the academic/activist debate and it worried me but I believed I had good intentions and might make some contribution to the complex field of gender studies which hopefully in its turn might help in formulating politics on gender issues.

At some point during the last stages of writing the dissertation I was increasingly uncomfortable with my own analysis. The issue of lobola appears so complex! And there are so many political and socio-cultural contexts in which I feel I have little experience and which would have helped in interpreting the material. During the course of writing I have also become aware – in another way – of the north/south debate. I now have more respect for the limitations of my capability as a researcher coming from a different context in interpreting how my interviewees discuss lobola. And even though I was

always reluctant to ‘define’ lobola in any specific way but to find out the meanings attached to it by the women themselves, I now also connect the women’s discussion on lobola to the political north/south dimension in a way I did not first. I was insensitive to the possibility that the women might attempt to formulate a meaning of lobola also in relation to ‘western’ hegemonic discourses on lobola. I first interpreted this only in political terms as a political discourse but I then saw the possibility that there are experiences of lobola, which the women attempt to formulate in the face of hegemonic discourses on the institution.

The difference for me in the beginning of writing and in the last stages of writing the dissertation in relation to this north/south power dimension of my position as a researcher, is that I now understand that it is impossible to escape and that it will inevitably influence the interpretative work. In the beginning I thought it was possible to avoid through being conscious about the pitfalls. I still believe in a conscious approach but I can see there are limitations and I think the best beginning of a conscious approach is to acknowledge the power position you have.

One way of handling the power-position is to present the reader with the text, which is analysed to give the reader as much material, as possible to make her own judgements of whether my interpretation seem reasonable or not. This is one reason as to why there are long passages of interviews presented in the dissertation. The women interviewed have also been able to read the transcribed interviews and to make changes or to withdraw from the study. One white woman withdrew from the study. One other white woman made significant changes in the text. Of the other interviews only five returned the transcripts and changes were only minor, such as supplementary comments and many times of a grammatical character.

All the women were informed that they will be anonymous. The pseudonym they have is not necessarily a name from the same language as their real name. First I wanted to give the women a pseudonym from the same language as their real name as I felt this was important as a sign of respect. But I have changed my mind out of consideration of the high positions some of the women hold and to make it more difficult to identify individuals by choice of pseudonyms.

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177 Mainly in the form of crossing over large passages of the text.
Appendix 2 – Interview-guide

1) Could you tell me a little bit about your background?
- Where did you grow up?
- Your family, language?
- Was religion important in your lives?

2) How did you become involved in politics?
- What role did you and the women around you play in political life? Did you reflect on that and what did you think about it?

3) Tell me a little about your political life – what you have done before and what you are doing now.

4) Do you remember how you first started to reflect on gender inequalities?
- Are there certain instances that you remember?

5) What kind of inequalities do you encounter today in your political and personal life. Could you give examples?

6) Would you call yourself a feminist and what does feminism mean to you?*

7) Some African traditions, such as lobola have been discussed as oppressive to women. Are there traditions which you feel are oppressive to women?

8) Do you feel that your ‘African’ background also contributes to the way you emancipate yourself? Are there values or practices that you would like to keep in your ‘emancipated life’?

9) What has the ‘black consciousness movement’ meant to you?**

10) What kind of racism do you encounter today?

11) How does your personal life look like – married, children?
- Is it difficult to combine personal and political life? In what way – and how do you deal with it?

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12) How do you work with gender issues today in your job?*

13) How would you describe the role of the Women’s League today? What would you like it to be?*

* Questions that were added in the 1998 interview-guide.