SURVIVAL AND CRISIS IN A DIVERSE INFORMAL SETTLEMENT – AN ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT IN OVERCOME HEIGHTS, SOUTH AFRICA

By Nanna Schneiderman, Shari Thanjan, Derrick Naidoo and Steffen Jensen with Yolanda Anderson, Karen Mentoor, Shakena and Haziz Noredien and Gift Piri
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PRAXIS PAPER ON URBAN VIOLENCE

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CONTENTS

FOREWORD 9

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 10
  MAIN RESEARCH FINDINGS 10
  THE BENEFITS OF ACTION RESEARCH 12

1. INTRODUCING OVERCOME HEIGHTS 13

2. METHODOLOGY: STUDYING OVERCOME HEIGHTS 16
  RESEARCH DESIGN: EXPLORATIVE SEQUENTIAL DESIGN 17
  METHODS: DIARY STUDIES AS ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELD STUDY 17

3. HISTORY OF OVERCOME HEIGHTS 21
  A TIMELINE OF OVERCOME HEIGHTS 21
  UNDERSTANDING SETTLEMENT PATTERNS 23

4. STRATEGIES OF COPING WITH CRISIS OR SEVEN TYPES OF RELATIONS PUTTING WELLBEING AT STAKE IN OVERCOME HEIGHTS 25
  RELATIONS WITH AUTHORITY 25
  RELATIONS WITH LAND AND PROPERTY 27
  RELATIONS WITH LIVELIHOOD 29
  RELATIONS WITH COMMUNITY 30
  RELATIONS WITH FAMILY AND KIN 30
  RELATIONS WITH THE BODY 31
  RELATIONS WITH THE MIND 32

5. STRUGGLING LIVES 34
  ELISE 34
    HUNGER 35
    FAMILY TROUBLE 35
    TROUBLE IN THE BACK STREET 36
  MITCH 36
    GOOD AND BAD JOBS AND BOSSES 37
    GETTING ILL 38
    CONFINEMENT AND VIOLENCE 38
  NANDI 39
    CHILDREN’S SOCIAL LIVES 39
    POLITICAL LANGUAGES AND CLAIMS TO THE CITY 40

6. THREE MONTHS IN OVERCOME HEIGHTS 42
  CRISIS IN EVERYDAY LIFE 42
    LATE FEBRUARY TO MID-MARCH: 43
    LATE MARCH TO MID-APRIL: 43
    LATE APRIL TO MID-MAY: 44
  TYPOLOGY OF CRISIS 44
    GANG WAR 44
    SINKHOLE 45
    SHACK FIRES 45
    LAND OCCUPATION AND PROTESTS 45
    ATTACKS AGAINST SOMALI TRADERS 46
    REVISITING CRISIS AND EVERYDAY LIFE 46

CONTRIBUTORS 47

WORKS CITED 48
FOREWORD

Since 2014, DIGNITY – Danish Institute Against Torture has worked to address and prevent urban violence. While it might seem odd that a human rights organization should involve itself with urban violence, it makes eminent sense at the empirical level. Torture and ill-treatment are often considered spectacular incidences of state violence against political opponents, but our research, and that of others, illustrates that what we could call mundane, everyday forms of state violence account for massive human rights violations, especially in the ordinary lives of poor people. Corruption plays a huge part in the everyday violence as bribes, protection money, sexual favours or just small ‘favours’ levied off motorists are enabled because of the violent potential of state law enforcers like the police. Thus, poor people must constantly factor in the risk of state violence – not as a rare occurrence but as something that is always on the horizon. In this light, we argue that it is imperative for the human rights world to begin working with what in human rights terms is called extra-custodial violence – in this instance, state violence on the streets. Our 2018 report on the connection between corruption and torture to which DIGNITY’s research contributed.

We have worked through a concerted effort to combine top-of-the-line research with intervention at the level of communities, state and non-state institutions, and the global human rights world. This report on Crisis and Survival in an informal settlement in a diverse urban centre in Cape Town carries on from DIGNITY’s (2018) report on the connection between corruption and torture to which DIGNITY’s research contributed.

This report follows on from our research project. It tells the story of survival and suffering in one volatile and violent informal settlement in Cape Town. As the report suggests, understanding this place and how people survive will allow us to glimpse one possible, fairly dystopian, urban future as the poor and the marginalized struggle to survive in the most unequal city in the most unequal country on the planet. However, the report is also richly written with local voices and deals with the progress of human rights. This is the case for the world of human rights to recognize the importance of understanding violence and survival in such places if it is to remain relevant to the large majority of the world’s population.

Henrik Rønsbo and Steffen Jensen
DIGNITY – Danish Institute against Torture
While there are differences in levels of poverty. All research participants enumerated...
The benefits of action research

Each of these findings must be met with appropriate strategies and interventions from the social services, the education system, housing authorities and the police. These strategies must be based on committed partnerships with and in support of local organizations, residents and families. Such partnerships have already been developed but they need to be deepened. The aim of this report has been to enable such partnerships in a more egalitarian way by:

• Showing that people can and want to work together on identifying common problems;
• Carrying out research with local residents in collaboration with civil society organisations;
• Increasing ownership of the conclusions;
• Building organic intellectuals with research and analytical skills to find community solutions;
• Facilitating collaboration across different groups by engaging in collective (research) activities;
• Providing research-based knowledge about the community to community workers and civil society organisations; and
• Making visible and giving voice to the challenges of survival for different groups of people.

1. INTRODUCING OVERCOMEHEIGHTS

Overcome Heights is a shack settlement between Seawinds to the north, the low-cost housing settlement of Capricorn/Vrygrond to the south, a nature reserve to the east and, to the west, the M5 highway leading from Muizenberg to the City of Cape Town. Established in 2005 by a court ruling legalizing the settlement of thousands of squatters of different ethnic backgrounds, Overcome Heights is a product of post-apartheid South Africa. With almost no formal buildings and rapidly increasing density – pathways between shacks are in some places less than 30 centimetres – it appears as the archetypical squatter camp. It is also a contested, precarious and often violent space where tens of thousands of people are seeking to turn their lives into good lives, and trying to plot pathways towards safer, healthier and better futures for themselves and their families.

During our fieldwork between January and May 2018, Overcome Heights was affected by sinkholes, shack fires, service delivery protests, looting and gang wars. However, it is also a settlement that attracts large numbers of incoming residents with its promises of land and its relative proximity to urban centres of economic activity. Overcome Heights is inhabited mainly by three groups: coloureds, black South Africans of mainly Xhosa descent, and migrants from other African countries, many of them from Malawi. We use these categories with great caution, as the first two at least are remnants of apartheid’s racial classification system, which designated essentialized identities. These categories came to structure how life could be lived. Life in post-apartheid Cape Town has undermined the categories to a certain extent, something to which the highly diverse settlement of Overcome Heights bears testimony. In many ways, all residents face the same structural marginalization as informal settlers. However, while they occupy the same territory and space, they stake different claims to post-apartheid Cape Town and harbour different aspirations. These claims and aspirations have deep historical roots in the divided history of South Africa. The claims also point to a number of competing futures of what the city could become. In this light, it is fair to say that what happens in Overcome Heights is both an expression of and structuring for what the Mother City can and will be. Hence, exploring how different groups – together and separately – attempt to survive and build a future is imperative for understanding Overcome Heights; further, the study provides a critical lens for understanding what kind of city Cape Town may become. This research report asks: ‘How do different groups survive in Overcome Heights? How are these struggles related and how do they animate the emergence of post-apartheid Cape Town?’

 Especially the term ‘coloured’ has been embroiled in constant and decades-long debates. While we agree with the criticisms launched against apartheid usages and categories, we also note that despite this criticism, people consistently refer to themselves as coloured. At the same time, the coloured group is far from unitary and it makes little sense to collapse middle-class and township residents. For some of the debates see Jensen, 2008; Erasmus, 2017; Adhikari, 2005.
Today Vrygrond has been singled out as one housing area adjacent to Overcome Heights that, at the time of the previous research, had only slowly begun to grow and had remained largely invisible. Hence, the purpose of the 2009 research was to explore the ramifications of post-apartheid Cape Town.

Firstly, while the research did not identify or engage with any direct, primary victims of xenophobic attacks, it did pick up on the xenophobic attacks and showed that many residents in Overcome Heights were over-represented when it came to being victims of crime and violence. They were also more likely to have been involved in the symbolic and literal destruction of people and property, and they were more likely to have been the targets of xenophobic violence in the 2008 xenophobic attacks.

The research revealed Vrygrond as a fractured, poor and violent community, yet also one where residents were connected to each other in ways that were important for survival. The study showed that residents in Overcome Heights had to rely on each other for support and survival, and that they had to be able to trust their neighbours and to expect some level of support from them.

The report is structured in seven chapters. Immediately after the Introduction, we briefly describe the methodological and design of the research project in Chapter Three. In Chapter Four, we explore with qualitative methods. Firstly, while the research did not identify or engage with any direct, primary victims of xenophobic attacks, it did pick up on the xenophobic attacks and showed that many residents in Overcome Heights were over-represented when it came to being victims of crime and violence. They were also more likely to have been involved in the symbolic and literal destruction of people and property, and they were more likely to have been the targets of xenophobic violence in the 2008 xenophobic attacks.

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2. METHODOLOGY: STUDYING OVERCOME HEIGHTS

In this research project we ask the following questions: ‘How do different groups survive in Overcome Heights? How are these struggles related and how do they animate the emergence of post-apartheid Cape Town?’ The basic research design is a mixed method design and can be described as an exploratory, sequential design (Creswell 2014) in which quantitative research helps to identify a number of themes that are subsequently explored through qualitative methods. In our case, the quantitative research and the initial qualitative data collection were conducted almost ten years before the qualitative follow-up. This evidently means that we cannot draw the same conclusions (inferences) as if we had conducted the second round of qualitative research immediately after the quantitative part. Furthermore, the original research had a slightly different geographical focus. Where we conducted the quantitative research in a larger area, we zoomed in on one part of the larger area in the second round – that is, the squatter area of Overcome Heights (see maps 1 and 2).

To deal with the temporal and spatial differences, we have formulated a set of hypotheses based on the first round of research in 2009 that we have explored, if not tested, in the second round of research in 2018. Thus, we do not claim that the second round of research maps directly on to the first. However, the research in 2018 more or less confirms the hypotheses developed based on the 2009 research, at the same time as it develops and deepens the understanding. Further, the time span before the first and second rounds of data collection introduces a temporal dimension through which we are able to explore developments in the area. This particularly concerns the increasing number of people, the densification of the area and the continued and escalating conflicts over local and municipal resources. Hence, with careful methodological reflections about limitations, we are able to explore our hypotheses as well as understand historical changes.

Research design: explorative sequential design

As mentioned above, this present research project follows a quantitative victimization survey (Jensen, Naidoo and Polatin, 2011) from which we deduced two main hypotheses:

1. Overcome Heights is populated by three distinct groups based on claims to the city and aspiration. The three groups comprise coloureds, amaXhosa, and African foreign nationals. The group affiliation informs how they survive and how they engage with the urban space.

2. While the three groups are different and often live separate lives, they share the urban space in both contentious and intimate ways.

In this report, we are exploring how and the extent to which these hypotheses are correct and useful for understanding what happens in Overcome Heights. Thus we are examining the hypotheses in explorative rather than experimental ways.

Methods: diary studies as ethnographic field study

To explore the hypotheses, we have chosen ethnographic fieldwork and so-called diary studies (Jacobsen et al, 2008) as methodological techniques. Diary studies here are a particular version of a field-based case study. A case study usually involves the detailed study of relatively few individuals or items, and in this research project, we followed 12 households’ survival and health practices in a context of violence and insecurity over a period of eight weeks. While interviews give indications of how people go about survival, the main drawback is that interviews are representations of what people want to and can tell at a particular point in time. We wanted to understand evolving practices and cases over time. For example, while Elise, one of our informants, could have told us

Drawing on previous research, mainly in coloured townships (e.g. Jensen 2008), we are also able to track and explore some historical changes from before the fall of apartheid. We will draw on this research as it becomes relevant.

All names are pseudonyms to protect the identity of our informants.
about her problems with and fears in relation to her daughter-in-law, it was only by following the case as it evolved that we were able to appreciate the depth and nature of her worry and how she decided to act on it. Hence, a diary study is a way to systematically follow people over time. In this way it is a particular form of ethnographic fieldwork where the researchers are present and participate in activities (Spradley, 2016).

A central concern for our study was sampling. In qualitative research researchers are often too lax in their description of their sampling method. However, the sampling method determines what the researcher can say on the basis of the research. If one asks only women, one can paradoxically not say anything about the relationship between men and women. If one interviews people in a queue to the clinic, one cannot say anything about those who are sick in general, only about those in the queue (Root, 2016). In our research we combined purposive and randomized sampling. Purposive sampling refers to reasoned sampling of specific groups or individuals, whereas randomized sampling is done to avoid all selection bias and ensure that all people have the same chance to be part of the project. The choice of a focus on Overcome Heights was decided to be based on a combination of factors. The first and foremost were the challenges that Overcome Heights presented for the researcher, in particular that the area constantly changes and grows. Therefore, the researchers decided to break down the area into five smaller parts, each of which was sampled by placing random GPS locations on a map (randomized). We used the latest Google Earth maps for this purpose. We then used a computer program to sample households by placing random GPS locations on a map, and carrying out interviewing at those locations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>AGE</th>
<th>GENDER</th>
<th>HOUSEHOLD TYPE</th>
<th>BACKGROUND</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Else</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Married w family</td>
<td>coloured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Married w family</td>
<td>coloured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaine</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Married w family</td>
<td>coloured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cumia</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Single mother</td>
<td>coloured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sizwe</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Married w family</td>
<td>Xhosa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pumla</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Single mother</td>
<td>Xhosa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christine</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Single mother</td>
<td>Xhosa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missy</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Single mother</td>
<td>Zimbabwe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nandi</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Single mother</td>
<td>Malawi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Married (family in home country)</td>
<td>Malawi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitch</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Married (family in home country)</td>
<td>Somalia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reason</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Malawi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hassan</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Married (family in home country)</td>
<td>Somalia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After selecting informants and obtaining informed consent, each participating household selected their own main contact person, and she or he was given a diary to write in. Diary studies do not depend on people writing long entries. In some of the diaries only a sentence or two had been marked down. The aim of the diary is not to write long, elaborate diaries. The fieldworkers’ field notes are important as the diaries themselves. In the final move, the diary study coordinator (Thanjan) and the senior researchers (Schneidermann and Jensen) debriefed the fieldworkers as well. Hence, the full diary consists of diary entries, fieldworkers’ notes, debriefings and observations. We combined the diary study with longer

Researchers spent a long time explaining the project and throughout the project we clarified that people could leave – as some did.
3. HISTORY OF OVERCOME HEIGHTS

A Timeline of Overcome Heights

Ouma got off the train from De Aar in the mid-1960s as a young girl running away from her own family after she was married off. She ran away from Cape Town to Overcome Heights, then known as Vrygrond. She established a home for herself and her children. Ouma had lived with families of railway workers, and she was told that there was a place where she could get a job and a place to live. Ouma moved into a shack near the train line and worked as a domestic worker. She later moved to Overcome Heights around 2010 with her granddaughter, whose mother had moved just north of Seawinds to Lavender Hill, one of the most notorious townships in Cape Town for poverty and gang violence. Sipho became a community organizer from the mid-1970s, invading land around the township, as well as with the illicit social networks he was part of. In his own narrative, Vrygrond means ‘free land’ in Afrikaans and was referred to as such by the people who lived there. For Ouma it was indeed a free land because no one claimed rent or fees from her as she settled. For complex reasons, Vrygrond had remained largely untouched by the authorities. This analysis constitutes the empirical section of the chapter. It testifies to the existence of the three different groups, but also illustrates just how complex settlement patterns have been. Hence, in the concluding section, we briefly discuss some themes in the settlement process that we could identify from the life stories. These themes are intimately related to the history of contemporary Cape Town, like the distinction between peripherality and cosmopolitanism, leading to specific mobility and immobility patterns.

Throughout the research project, we conducted reflexive sessions with the resident fieldworkers around findings and the way forward. This allowed us to adjust methods and the focus of our study as it unfolded. The seven themes identified in Chapter Four were the result of these reflexive sessions and fieldworkers gave important insights into understanding each of them and what they meant. While not perfect as a method to produce an objective historical account, we present here a history of Overcome Heights based on the life stories of our research participants as a way to discuss how the过程 of the settlement of Overcome Heights. However, as we randomly sampled our research participants, these accounts highlight other aspects than the chapter. It testifies to the authorities. This analysis constitutes the empirical section of the chapter. It testifies to the existence of the three different groups, but also illustrates just how complex settlement patterns have been. Hence, in the concluding section, we briefly discuss some themes in the settlement process that we could identify from the life stories. These themes are intimately related to the history of contemporary Cape Town, like the distinction between peripherality and cosmopolitanism, leading to specific mobility and immobility patterns.

Each step of the study was conducted in a consultative process with community activists. Our initial contact was through the Community Healing Network NGO chapter based in Seawinds (which had just south of the sand-swept land that would eventually become Overcome Heights. However, as we randomly sampled our research participants, these accounts highlight other aspects than the chapter. It testifies to the existence of the three different groups, but also illustrates just how complex settlement patterns have been. Hence, in the concluding section, we briefly discuss some themes in the settlement process that we could identify from the life stories. These themes are intimately related to the history of contemporary Cape Town, like the distinction between peripherality and cosmopolitanism, leading to specific mobility and immobility patterns.
Missy came to Overcome Heights in 2011 from Samora Machel settlement near Philippi, where she had been staying for six years. She had moved to Cape Town to work as a chef. She found a room in an area called Overcome Heights, which she had heard about from friends. She was looking for a place to stay while she found a job, and Overcome Heights seemed to be a good option.

Overcome Heights is a settlement in Cape Town, South Africa, located in the city’s northern suburbs. It is one of the many informal settlements that have emerged in recent years, particularly in areas where there is a high demand for housing and where formal housing is not accessible to all.

Overcome Heights has a population of around 10,000, with a large number of migrants from other parts of South Africa and from other countries, such as Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Mozambique. It is known for its dense and overcrowded housing conditions, with many residents living in small rooms or shacks.

In Overcome Heights, the main factor driving migration to the settlement is the desire for better housing and living conditions. Many residents come from other parts of the country, such as rural areas or other townships, to seek better opportunities and a better future. The settlement has become a hub for many people who are looking for a better life, and it continues to grow as more and more people arrive, often seeking ways to improve their living conditions.

Understanding settlement patterns

The trajectories described above confirm to a large extent the original hypothesis of the research that there exist distinct groups – coloureds, black South Africans, and immigrants, and that there are salient differences in their circumstances, inclinations, and strategies for handling crisis in everyday life. However, there are many complexities to understand how the three groups had different experiences as well as how lives are interconnected.

The coloured residents of Overcome Heights overwhelmingly see themselves as backyarders. Backyarders is a concept used by people themselves to describe a history of moving in and out of the area, of living in spaces that were not officially recognized as a home. In the case of Overcome Heights, the council did not approve any building plan for the entire area, and the residents have been living in informal structures for many years. The coloured residents have been claimed by the council and have had to organize themselves to claim their rights to the land.

The black South African residents of Overcome Heights have distinct experiences. Many of them have been living in the settlement for a long time, and they have developed strong ties to the community. They have also faced many challenges, such as lack of services and security issues.

The immigrant residents of Overcome Heights, particularly those from Zimbabwe and Malawi, have unique experiences as well. Many of them have been forced to leave their home countries due to political or economic reasons, and they have sought refuge in South Africa. They have faced many challenges, such as language barriers and cultural differences, but they have also found support within their communities.

In conclusion, the residents of Overcome Heights have different experiences and challenges, but they all face the same issues of living in an informal settlement. The council has not recognized their land claims, and they have had to organize themselves to claim their rights to the land. The residents have also faced many challenges, such as lack of services and security issues, but they have found ways to overcome these challenges and build strong communities.

SOUTH AFRICA: A DIVERSE INFORMAL SETTLEMENT | 23

SURVIVAL AND CRISIS IN A DIVERSE INFORMAL SETTLEMENT | 23

2 2  | DIGNITY PUBLICATION SERIES ON TORTURE AND ORGANISED VIOLENCE
the 2005 court proceedings that had made Overcome Heights a legal reality, and this is why basic servicing in the Road Reserve is so much worse than the ‘official’ part of Overcome Heights. Most of the residents came a few years later. In our sample, three out of four came from Site 5, a vast squatter camp near Fish Hoek on the False Bay coast that forms part of an ongoing circular migration between the Eastern Cape and Western Cape provinces. The Road Reserve seems much denser than the ‘front’ of Overcome Heights. There are no roads going through wide enough to allow a car (let alone a fire engine) to pass and almost all land within an ever-moving boundary has been occupied. The extreme overcrowding, lack of sanitation, water and garbage collection, together with the fact that almost all Road Reserve residents are amaXhosa from the Eastern Cape, resonate with and reproduce a potentially racialized grievance which is further fuelled by the fact that the ANC has very little influence in Cape Town and in Overcome Heights.

While the Road Reserve appears more crowded than the front, the front is dense in a different way. Many of the residents who came after 2005 have subsequently built rooms or accommodation on the plot. It is in accommodation like this that all our Malawian interlocutors stayed. Reason, for example, as mentioned above, lived in a room sharing a yard with nine other men, mostly Malawian and younger. Mitch stays with five other families in a yard or compound. Hence, while the streets are relatively wide, the compounds may be very crowded. Renting out has become an economic staple, bankrolling hundreds of families. As Mitch says, ‘we are their income’. The influx of Malawians began in the early 2000s.

In many ways, it makes sense to discuss the groups individually. However, there are also entanglements. Some forms of entanglement are less than benign, such as when foreign nationals are caught up in gang fights and service delivery boycotts and quasi-riots – or when black youths are drawn into gang structures that used to be reserved for coloureds (see below). However, most entanglements emanate from the very intimate lives of people in Overcome Heights. It is simply impossible to know nothing about the other groups and to never cross paths in one way or another. Most of these entanglements are amicable, everyday relations borne out of shared lives. At other times, like in the 2008 xenophobia flare-up mentioned above, coloured and black South Africans engaged in horrendous acts of violence — but also in heroic acts of civil courage to protect their Malawian and Zimbabwean neighbours. Thus, Overcome Heights has become a radical illustration of post-apartheid South Africa, stuck as it is at the bottom of society in the most unequal city of the most unequal country in the world: grotesquely poor, terrifyingly violent, unequal in almost incomprehensible ways — and yet its residents are still capable of extraordinary acts of generosity!

4. STRATEGIES OF COPING WITH CRISIS OR SEVEN TYPES OF RELATIONS PUTTING WELLBEING AT STAKE IN OVERCOME HEIGHTS

The central question of our research was: how do residents in Overcome Heights experience crisis and what strategies and possibilities do they have for coping with or resolving crisis? Based on the diaries of our twelve participating households, fieldworkers’ notes and longer interviews charting significant life events, in this chapter we identify and begin to explore seven types of relations that were significant for the wellbeing of our participants. These relations were at the center of both crisis and its resolution.

The seven types of relation play out at different social scales and spheres of social life in the city. While in many ways they are interlinked in practice, here we treat them individually. In doing so we highlight that while the same types of relations are at play in our interlocutors’ lives, there are distinct differences in the content and what is at stake in these relations for each of the three groups. We unpack this below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPES OF RELATIONS</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relations with authority</td>
<td>The public spheres of social life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relations with land and property</td>
<td>The Intermediate/interpersonal sphere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relations of livelihood</td>
<td>The personal sphere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relations with community</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relations with household and kin</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Relations with the body</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relations with the mind</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Relations with Authority**

The informality of Overcome Heights complicates relations with formal institutions and economies. The structural dynamics of weak ties with ‘formal’ South Africa in an informal settlement often took the shape of seemingly trivial bureaucratic problems for our interlocutors. One example is the difficulties of getting ‘Proof of Address’ (PoA), a routine form of identification in activities like applying for a job, obtaining a mobile phone sim card and enrolling children in school. For several of our interlocutors not having a PoA was a
relations with local and property

Informal settlements like Overcome are rife with ambiguous claims to land in everyday life. None of the residents in Overcome Heights can prove that they own the land they live on.

As mentioned above, a court ruling in 2005 legalized the settlement of the front section of Overcome Heights. But from the diaries of our participants it became clear that residents referred to the area as the front section.

Informal settlements are often the result of self-organized and self-built developments, where residents do not have formal proof of ownership or tenure. Overcome Heights is no exception, and residents often struggle to prove their land rights to institutions like banks and government agencies. The lack of proof of address is a central obstacle to gaining access to government services and the legal economy, and the residents of Overcome Heights are no exception.

In the case of Overcome Heights, the residents are largely dependent on informal means of obtaining services, such as informal traders and community-based organizations. However, the lack of proof of address and tenure undermines the residents' ability to access formal services and the legal economy, further marginalizing them.

The lack of proof of address and tenure highlights the disconnect between the formal and informal economies, where residents of informal settlements like Overcome Heights are often left out of the formal economy and cut off from formal services. This further exacerbates the residents' vulnerability and undermines their rights as citizens.

The lack of proof of address and tenure is a central obstacle to gaining access to government services and the legal economy, and the residents of Overcome Heights are no exception. The lack of proof of address is a key issue in the informal settlements of South Africa, where many residents are left out of the formal economy and cut off from formal services. This further exacerbates the residents' vulnerability and undermines their rights as citizens.
In the 13 households we followed, four had members who were renters. Several of the men in our study sought income as casual day labourers. Renting was one way of earning income, but community leaders spoke of the sale of shacks as problematic, as residents did not own the land upon which the shacks were located. Several of our interlocutors confirmed that shacks were sold and bought when residents moved to other shacks or changed landlords. Renting out, for commercial purposes and renting out was obviously a popular income generating strategy for residents who had ‘taken the land’ in Overcome Heights. Renting out, however, is not unproblematic, as landlords might suddenly find that their tenants have moved out, leaving them to face the prospect of losing rent. One business owner who had stayed in the area for longer seemed to be relatively secure in his tenure, as he had cultivated positive relations with the committee and the leader of the community. Households who stayed with friends or family, or near them, but still found themselves susceptible to exploitation and extortion by landlords, as we describe below.

Selling and buying:

Several of our participants rented out space or shacks for residential or commercial purposes and reported receiving income in this way. Some owned shops that sold items such as snacks, drinks, furniture, or clothing. One dollar shop owner had recently moved to Overcome Heights and had been renting a room in her shack to someone who had been introduced to her by a local shop owner. She had received a steady stream of income from this activity, which had helped her improve her living conditions.

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Insights from the 2009 research.

There were, however, differences in how family mattered for the three groups. For the coloured households the study, kinship was a constant source of pain and worry, often renewed in the underwriting of the economy. In interviews many of the respondents told stories of growing up with abuse and violence. They were intensely worried about what growing up in Overcome Heights would mean for the future of their children.

Intimate relations in Overcome Heights are fraught with tension and oftentimes conflict and violence permeate everyday life. There were, however, differences in how family mattered for the three groups. For the coloured households the study, kinship was a constant source of pain and worry, often renewed in the underwriting of the economy. In interviews many of the respondents told stories of growing up with abuse and violence. They were intensely worried about what growing up in Overcome Heights would mean for the future of their children.

The importance of kinship seems to have increased from the 2009 research. One explanation is surely that the numbers of Malawians had increased significantly, making the need for kinship networks more critical for their survival and crisis in a diverse informal settlement. The importance of kinship seems to have increased from the 2009 research. One explanation is surely that the numbers of Malawians had increased significantly, making the need for kinship networks more critical for their survival and crisis in a diverse informal settlement.

Relations with family and kin

Overcome Heights is one of the few multiethnic informal settlements in Cape Town, and we set out to explore the ways in which people of different backgrounds shared physical space in the city. How our participants experienced relations with the community based on their ethnicity and lived in Overcome Heights. The diaries, as well as the interviews, illustrated how colour, class, and gender were intertwined in the lives of the participants. They also described how colour, class, and gender affected their daily lives.

Almost all of our participants reported getting help from family, friends, and neighbours during the period of the study. This could be in the form of sharing food or money—usually small amounts of between 10 and 50 rand. Support from friends and family:

Food and money were always available to those who needed it. The companies and organizations that provided services to the residents of Overcome Heights often provided food and money to their employees, and the women in our study, colour, and black South Africans, were working for a local service provider during the study or had done so in the past.

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every night to quiet his thoughts and go to sleep.

them. One male community activist, for instance, took a small handful of painkillers ‘symptoms’ to what the women called stress and had similar strategies for handling public health system with depression or anxiety. But several men described similar men, and several of the women who described stress to us were diagnosed in the space around them, as causes of stress. Women were more overtly affected than with a partner, and more ongoing conditions, like the drug economy dominating public

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Hunger

In her diary entries, like those of everyone else, Elise frequently mentions the constant worry about food. Her legs hurt, and she needs to walk carefully. Her daughter-in-law, who is often ill, tells her story as one of constant changes as parents die or remarry, and as the family is forced to move from one area to the next, as is the fate of many backyarders.

Mitch's biggest worry relates to his teenage son, who is facing serious issues with his relocation from the Eastern Cape. Mitch spends all his writing on conditions at work, on trying to find other jobs and on dealing with his employers, who are often demanding. In his diary, entries like this are common: Elise often does not have enough money to buy bread to take with her pills. She so much wants a (social) grant but she has to make her ID.

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Mitch is 30 years old from Nkhotakota district in central Malawi. He is married with three kids aged 11, 7 and 4, all of whom are in Malawi with his wife. Mitch came to South Africa eight years ago and has worked in different jobs in Malawi, including the tourism sector and as a casual worker. Mitch has worked in South Africa for two years and has never been in contact with the police or the authorities. He has never been involved in any criminal activities and has always tried to stay away from trouble. Mitch lives in an informal settlement in Cape Town, where he shares a room with two other Malawians. Mitch is not afraid of his place and feels safe in the area. He has never experienced any problems with his neighbours and feels that they are all friendly and supportive of each other. Mitch is a hardworking man and enjoys his work. He has never been on strike and has always been punctual and reliable. When asked what a good job was, Mitch explained that it was about being trusted to do the job properly and being able to work without constant supervision. Mitch is a member of the local community and participates in activities such as soccer and religion. He feels that these activities are important for his well-being and help him to stay connected with others. Mitch is hopeful that he will one day be able to return to Malawi and continue to work there. He feels that his future is uncertain and that he cannot rely on the government or anyone else to help him. Mitch is concerned about the future of his children and feels that they need a stable environment to grow up in. He hopes that they will one day be able to find a better life and get a good education.
Mitch continues that the ‘dangerous people’ are not interested in attracting police to them, they protect us. Some of the dangerous people, they protect us.’ Asked to explain is an ‘enemy’. With a somewhat surprising twist, Mitch asserts: ‘But you know! Some of rob you! You cannot go out at night or wander aimlessly around.’ However, not everybody.

Some families we know in the road, they don’t care what their children do. They will just throw them away. If I refuse they can take my life. I got money but I cannot count it. I have to be in hospital as a legitimate cause of absence and proceeds to pay and employ the worker. Whether his illness represents a real problem depends very much on his foreman. In his entry, Mitch only writes about work, jobs and his illness as it directly impacts on his body, his work and his worries about the future. Mitch depends on his illness makes his working life more precarious and he has gotten several ‘short-time

Confinement and violence

Frequent hospitalization, absence from work and worries about the future. Mitch depends on his illness as it directly impacts on his body, his work and his worries about the future. Mitch depends on his illness to survive financially and emotionally. He relies on regular visits to the hospital for injections to manage his illness. This worry took on full force in his diary entry when, after a medical check-up, he was told:

But you know! Some of rob you! You cannot go out at night or wander aimlessly around.’ However, not everybody.

Mitch started feeling sick in September 2017. Since then, his life has been marred with frequent hospitalization, absence from work and worries about the future. Mitch depends on his illness to survive financially and emotionally. He relies on regular visits to the hospital for injections to manage his illness. This worry took on full force in his diary entry when, after a medical check-up, he was told:

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Nandi is attending night school to redo her matric in order to qualify for a nursing degree, leaving the house at 17.30 and returning at around 20.30. During this time her children are home alone, and this is a recurring concern in her diary: ‘Leaving the kids alone is stressing me a lot because of safety reasons,’ she writes. In the evening hours, her son is instructed to make sure both children stay in the house to do homework, but Nandi describes coming home to find her house empty:

“My son came home 20.45. I tried to talk to him, trying to find out what was his problem and why he doesn’t want to listen. Raising a young teenage boy as a single parent is stressing and difficult. Even when I’m talking to him I find it hard for him to answer me. I don’t know whether I’m a bad mother or not. Yhoo [drawing of a crying face]. My heart is sore, just don’t know what to do.”

Nandi’s daughter also struggles to adapt to her new surroundings. Nandi had with well-spoken insistence managed to get both of her children enrolled in the local primary school, despite the teachers’ scepticism about how the two isiXhosa children from the Eastern Cape would cope in an English-medium school. Now Nandi worries not just for her son, but also her daughter, who she frequently describes as a ‘slow learner’. Her lack of English skills makes it impossible for her to do her schoolwork, but worse, for her fellow students she came to embody the stereotype of a recent migrant from the Eastern Cape: poor, unintelligent and lacking the street smarts and style to get by in the city. During a school ceremony the young girl became the laughingstock of the class, because of her poor clothing and lack of language skills. In her diary Nandi describes her attempts to inspire her children to face their hardships with dignity:

“I told them they must learn to stand up for themselves in a positive way. I told them if somebody is saying that she is ugly, she must always know that she is beautiful. And then they mocking her saying that she can’t speak English – the only way to help her is to read more and speak more English in order for her to learn.”

At the end of the term, both children failed several classes in school, and the difficulties in adjusting to life in Cape Town seemed merely to escalate for them both. When riots over land invasions erupted in Vrygrond, Langalethu participated with other youths in adjusting to life in Cape Town seemed merely to escalate for them both. When riots over land invasions erupted in Vrygrond, Langalethu participated with other youths in the upheaval. He took part in stoning and looting the local Somali-owned spaza shop. Nandi, who depended on her positive relationship with the shop owner for credit, was devastated by her son’s participation in the violent everyday life of Overcome Heights and the (self)destruction it brought on the family.

Political languages and claims to the city

Nandi’s hope for solutions to her problems are vested in government and state power, and in her diary as well as interviews, she succinctly analyses her situation as a result of short coming of the state to provide housing and services for the residents of Overcome Heights. For instance, she makes sense of the children’s gang-like turf war over places to hang out and play as the failure of the municipality to make recreational areas like play grounds and sports grounds accessible for children. She ends a diary entry about her son’s conflicts with children from the neighbouring Capricorn: ‘I’m pleading with the municipality[pleading with the municipality] to take a closer look at the informal settlements.’

This turn to place responsibility with public and state authorities, and to plead for their involvement in addressing violence and lack of services in Overcome, is characteristic among those in our study who were migrants from the Eastern Cape. As described above, a ‘second committee’ representing the area populated mainly by isiXhosa speakers approached questions of governance in a different way than the more recognized Housing Committee in Overcome. This kind of political consciousness also shapes Nandi’s participation in ‘the community’, as she called it. When a woman living in the same compound as Nandi was attacked in an attempted rape, Nandi attended a community meeting with local leaders, the family of the perpetrator and the victim, aiming at mediation. When the perpetrator was later arrested for stabbing his girlfriend, but was out on bail a few hours later, Nandi writes:

“Justice was not served again and my family don’t feel safe, because people are getting away with crime and there is nothing happening. The community is trying its best, but it took us time to find the police and get hold of them. […] I’m pleading for safety and security services.”

The same kinds of principles seem to apply when Nandi speaks about trying to hold the local Housing Committee responsible for the wellbeing of the residents in Overcome. Her compound is designated to use a row of flush toilets on the street, but they are almost always broken and at times cause sewage to overflow into the street. Nandi calls upon committee members to witness and address the problem and writes repeatedly of it in her diary. Though the problem was not resolved, Nandi continues to insist on her right to a decent life in the city, even if living in an informal settlement.

Despite Nandi’s insistence on the right to a good life in Cape Town, she was constantly faced with her inability to realize these claims. In her diary and interviews she calls this frustration ‘stress’, and she herself addresses how her problems with poverty, the children and violence are aggravated by her precarious position as a tenant in an informal settlement: ‘I’m keeping someone’s house staying with my two kids. What will happen to me if the owner can decide to come and stay back [in the house]. This is what stressing me mostly’. 
6. THREE MONTHS IN OVERCOME HEIGHTS

In this last chapter we want to focus on a series of events that took place in the period between January and May 2018 when we were conducting fieldwork in Overcome Heights. These events were not necessarily connected but all were characterized by crisis – or had crisis-like properties. They comprised gang wars and crime, shacks collapsing into sinkholes; shack fires; land invasions; lootings; service delivery demonstrations and protests on top of a water crisis that peaked in the three months we were conducting fieldwork in Overcome Heights. While each of these crises had devastating consequences for inhabitants in Overcome Heights (death, injury, loss of property and belongings, fear), what becomes clear is that they are not extraordinary. Rather, crises are everyday occurrences that people deal with as best they can. Crisis is the context of most people’s lives when they live in precarious, unstable, uncertain and often violent circumstances, not only in Overcome Heights but around the world (Vigh, 2008). Apart from the fact that people are unsurprised at the advent of crisis, most of these crises do not affect everybody. For instance, our friend Taliah was affected by the gang war and to some extent the sinkhole (it happened next to her house), but not the other crises. Furthermore, crises can be ripe with opportunities and resources. Again, the sinkhole is a good illustration as it galvanized the municipality to dispense resources in Overcome Heights that it is otherwise unlikely to have done.

Using the diaries and interviews, we produced a five-month timeline of crises in the first half of 2018. In the final section of this report we revisit the timeline and describe each crisis in more detail.

Crisis in everyday life

The following chronological list of events, compiled through diaries and interviews, references particular (anonymized) participants.

Late January to mid-February:

- A’s son is in a scuffle and is injured in the face by gangsters in the street
- B’s house is raided by the police
- Known murderer hides out in Overcome and tries to rape a woman in C’s yard. The community chases him but he disappears
- Unknown criminals are chased through D’s yard at night
- E complains that the neighbour is selling drugs
- G tells of a vigilante mob which strips and kills a robbery suspect in the road
- H says a young man was shot dead in the area and police were blocked from entering by barricades of burning tires
- I intervenes in a robbery in a woman’s home, knows the assailants
- J’s soccer match is cancelled this Sunday as there is shooting at the soccer field (four people are injured)
- K and her husband are robbed in their house at night
- Unknown assailants try to break in at L’s house at night, she screams and scares them off
- M’s mother’s house is attacked by gangsters, the police intervene
- N is confined at home because of shootings in her road; a young man is shot in the hand
- Large police raid or intervention in O’s section, many rumours about what really happened
- P is confined at home because of shootings
- Q meets a group of gangsters in her road, with guns, hurries home. Complains of shootings every night from 8pm onwards
- R and her friend flee and lock themselves in the house when the gangsters start shooting in the street
- S goes to visit grandchild in Lavender Hill, flees from shooting on the way home

Late February to mid-March:

- A young man is stabbed in the stomach at F’s neighbour, they wait for the ambulance with him
- Known murderer hides out in Overcome and tries to rape a woman in C’s yard. The community chases him but he disappears
- G tells of a vigilante mob which strips and kills a robbery suspect in the road
- H says a young man was shot dead in the area and police were blocked from entering by barricades of burning tires
- I intervenes in a robbery in a woman’s home, knows the assailants
- J’s soccer match is cancelled this Sunday as there is shooting at the soccer field (four people are injured)
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- R and her friend flee and lock themselves in the house when the gangsters start shooting in the street
- S goes to visit grandchild in Lavender Hill, flees from shooting on the way home

Late March to mid-April:

- T’s neighbour experiences attempted break-in
- U has clothing stolen from her yard
- Community leader in V’s section arrested with large quantity of drugs
- W is in a scuffle during robbery of Malawian man by group of coloured men
- Drive-by shootings at night near X’s shop, police give chase, but do not catch shooters
In April, during a working day when few people were at home, a small bomb exploded in a shack in Overcome Heights. The explosion caused serious damage to nearby structures and disrupted normal life in the area. The residents of Overcome Heights were shocked and devastated by the incident.

The attack was one of several events that occurred in the area in recent weeks. Gang violence has been a major issue in Overcome Heights for many years, and it seems that the situation is worsening.

The residents of Overcome Heights have expressed their concerns about the safety of their families and property. They have also called on the authorities to take action to prevent further violence.

The recent events have highlighted the need for a coordinated approach to addressing gang violence in the area. The authorities must work closely with the community to develop effective strategies to prevent further incidents.

In conclusion, the recent events in Overcome Heights demonstrate the ongoing challenges faced by the residents of the area. The authorities must take urgent action to ensure the safety and well-being of the community.
neighbourhood was fire-bombed. This happened amid a nationwide wave of urban land protests. As one informant said, voicing minimal disapproval of the violence: ‘They say that the council only comes when there is a fire. That’s why they burn the structures.’

Attacks against Somali traders

Parallel to the looting of more formal malls and street protests, informal spaza shops in the settlements, especially those owned by Somali traders, were also attacked. These attacks, carried out by black and coloured South African teenagers, were accompanied by the singing of freedom songs from the struggle against apartheid. One Malawian informant witnessed from the wall around his compound how one shop was besieged by twenty youths throwing stones and hammering at the walls while the Somali shop keeper was inside the shop. Another Somali trader tells of his fear as the youths approached. He was rescued by local community leaders. A third Somali trader killed one of the intruders as the latter was entering his shop. These attacks are reminiscent of the xenophobic attacks that happen regularly across the country, most seriously in 2008 when hundreds of thousands of migrants were displaced.

Revisiting crisis and everyday life

While these events were all spectacular incidents of crisis, they were neither extraordinary nor surprising. Rather, they were part of everyday life in Overcome Heights as a microcosm of the conflicts that beset post-apartheid South Africa. They occurred simultaneously with the other ongoing crises of everyday life that we describe in the other chapters – hunger, crime, illness, poverty and desperation. While the Cape Town water crisis attracted much attention in the international and national media, it also became part of a general context of crisis – not even particularly visible in Overcome Heights, except as a critical reduction in water pressure, especially in the Road Reserve (leading to sanitation challenges). In this way, different crises in Overcome Heights are not exceptional; they are part of what residents cope with as part of everyday life.

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WORKS CITED


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