

**THE SOCIAL NICHE OF FARM DWELLERS:
A SOCIAL WORK STRENGTHS APPROACH**

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May 2004**

THE SOCIAL NICHE OF FARM DWELLERS: A SOCIAL WORK STRENGTHS APPROACH

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MA (SW) Mental Health (Unisa)

Thesis submitted for the degree Philosophiae Doctor

in Social Work

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May 2004

Potchefstroom

benadering te ontwikkel om omgewingsterktes en –risiko's te assessee. Dit is
gedoen met behulp van 'n literatuurstudie en 'n empiriese ondersoek.

Die sterkteperspektief en die sosialenis-konsep word beskryf en geëvalueer as 'n teoretiese perspektief vir die ontwikkeling van 'n benadering vir die assessering van die omgewing. Daar word tot die gevolgtrekking gekom dat vanuit 'n sterkte-perspektief 'n omgewing as sterk (instaatstellend) beskou kan word indien daar mense aanwesig is wat in voeling is met hul eie aangebore sterktes en kapasiteit tot heling, waar daar gemeenskap, lidmaatskap, wederkerigheid en verbintenis tussen mens en omgewing is, mense hul omgewing as sterk ervaar en bydra tot die skep van 'n sterk omgewing. Vanuit 'n sosialenis-perspektief verwys die optimale nis na die omstandighede en bronne wat mense in staat stel om op die beste vlak moontlik te funksioneer. Die gerealiseerde nis, daarenteen, verwys na die meer beperkte spektrum van omstandighede en bronne waarbinne mense 'n bestaan maak. Alle sosiale nisse beskik in 'n mindere of meerdere mate oor instaatstellende en beperkende elemente.

Daar is tot die bevinding gekom dat die sosialenis-konsep wel 'n teoretiese benadering verskaf vir die assessering van die omgewing ten opsigte van sterktes en risiko's en dat dit lig werp op die transaksionele proses tussen mens en omgewing. Daar is ook bevind dat die niskonstruk nie die aannames van die sterkteperspektief ten volle reflekteer nie, veral rakende twee punte: (1) die oortuiging dat die mens oor inherente sterktes en helingskapasiteite beskik, en (2) die begrip vir realiteit soos dit subjektief geskep word. Gegrand op hierdie evaluering is daar onderneem om die beskrywing van die sosiale nis, gebaseer op 'n kritiese analise van die ekologiese analogie, te verbreed, asook om die sterkteperspektief in 'n groter mate te inkorporeer. 'n Hersiene omskrywing van die sosialenis-konsep word voorgestel en elkeen van die niskonponente soos dit in die omskrywing omvat word, word bespreek, geëvalueer en in sommige gevalle uitgebrei.

Plaasbewoners se ervaring van hulle omgewing word ondersoek en beskryf aan die hand van 'n kwalitatiewe benadering ten einde 'n begrip te vorm van hul spesifieke ervaring en persoonlike perspektiewe. Die sosialenis-konsep word as 'n tentatiewe konseptuele raamwerk gebruik om die hoofdimensies van hulle

ervarings te beskryf. Die analise van die plaasbewoners se narratiewe het ses kategorieë (elk met verskeie subkategorieë) opgelewer:

- werk (mans se ongesonde werksomstandighede, bedreigde werksekuriteit, onbevredigende grieweprosedure, beperkte werkseleenthede vir en die onderindiensneming van vroue);
- inkomste en besteding (onvoldoende inkomste en hoë lewenskoste, verstrikking in skuld, 'n verlange na die voormalige praktyk van goedere gratis ontvang (*mahala*), die aanvulling van gesinsinkomste);
- behuising (bedreiging van behuisingsekuriteit en die beskikbaarheid van en toegang tot behuising buite die plaasomgewing);
- vervoer (afstande, beperkte vervoermiddele en koste verbonde aan vervoer);
- gemeenskapslewe (die belangrikheid van familie en vriende, gebrek aan bande met ander inwoners, gemeenskapslewe in die verlede wat beter was, en ambivalensie oor die werkgewer as 'n ondersteuningsbron); en
- mense, plekke en dienste buite die onmiddellike omgewing (belangrikheid van die uitgebreide familie, die kerk as 'n bron van sterkte, en gesondheidsdienste as 'n aanknopingspunt met die buitewêreld).

Daar word tot die gevolgtrekking gekom dat heelparty beperkende elemente in die plaasbewoners se narratiewe na vore kom, naamlik 'n gebrek aan tasbare en sosiale bronne asook 'n lae magsbelewing. Die beperkende aard van die plaasbewoners se nis kan egter nie net aan die hand van gebrekkige bronne verstaan word nie. Die betekenis wat die plaasbewoners aan hul omgewing heg voorsien 'n sleutel tot beter begrip van hul lewensomstandighede en die beperkinge wat in hul narratiewe opgesluit lê. Dit het egter ook hul ervaring van enkele instaatstellende elemente in hulle omgewing na vore gebring.

Gegrand op die kritiese analise van 'n sterktebeskouing van die omgewing, die evaluasie en die uitbreiding van die sosialenis-konsep en die empiriese bevindinge van die plaasbewoners se ervaring van hulle omgewing, is 'n sosialenis-benadering vir die assessering van omgewingsterktes en –risiko's voorgestel. Die doel van die sosialenis-assesseringsbenadering is om 'n

raamwerk te bied aan die hand waarvan mense se omgewingsterktes en –risiko's vasgestel kan word, gebaseer op hul eie ervaring en begrip daarvan, in samewerking met iemand buite hul leefomgewing (soos 'n maatskaplike werker) ten einde tesame 'n beskrywing te formuleer van hul menslike omgewing as basis vir relevante intervensie. 'n Skematiese voorstelling en 'n beskrywing van die benadering word aangebied. Hierdie benadering is reeds deur portuurevaluering gevalideer.

SUMMARY

THE SOCIAL NICHE OF FARM DWELLERS: A SOCIAL WORK STRENGTHS APPROACH

Key terms: social niche, farm dwellers, strengths approach, social protective/risk factors, social/human environment, assessment.

Farm dwellers in the North West Province have been identified as an extremely vulnerable group in terms of physical, physiological and mental health. Therefore the North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus (Focus Area 9.1) launched the FLAGH study with the broad aim of gaining reliable information on the reasons for and contributing factors to their poor health status, which could be used to design appropriate intervention programmes. The research formed part of this multidisciplinary study and focused on farm dwellers' experience of the farm as the environment in which they live and work.

While a great deal is already known about the psychological strengths of people that protect them against psychological malfunctioning, far less is known about environmental elements protecting people against adversity. From a social work perspective it is a long-cherished conviction that individual outcomes are the results of a transactional process between personal and environmental influences. However, it is also a conviction that is often not reflected in social work practice. Strength-based assessment models are, for example, overwhelmingly concerned with individual human factors, while practice guidelines and specific practice knowledge about environmental factors are lagging behind. This situation consequently pointed to the need for further theoretical and empirical research. The concept of *social niche* was identified as a possible framework for organising strengths and risks as experienced by a specific group within a specific context (in this case people living on farms). Against this background a research need was identified to develop an approach to assess environmental strengths and risks. This was done by means of a literature study and an empirical investigation.

The strengths perspective and the concept of social niche are described and evaluated as a paradigm and theoretical construct (or perspective) for developing an approach to assess environmental strengths and risks. It is concluded that, from the strengths perspective, an environment can be considered strong when it consists of human beings who are connected to their innate strengths and capacity for healing, where there is community, membership, mutuality and connection among people and the environment, and people who experience the environment as strong and contribute to creating a strong environment. From the social niche perspective, an *optimal niche* refers to conditions and resources that would enable people to function at the best possible level, while a *realised niche* refers to the more limited spectrum of conditions and resources which allows people to survive. These niche types have *enabling* and *entrapping* elements to a greater or lesser degree.

It was found that the *social niche* concept does provide a theoretical approach to assessing the environment in terms of strengths and risks and gives better insight into the result of the transactional process between person and environment. It was also found that the niche construct does not fully reflect the assumptions of the strengths perspective in terms of mainly two points: (1) the belief in the inherent strengths and capacity for healing of people (human agency), and (2) understanding reality as it is subjectively constructed. Based on this evaluation, it was thus endeavoured to broaden both the description of social niche, based on a critical evaluation of the ecological analogy, and to reflect more fully the strengths perspective. A revised definition of social niche is proposed and each of the niche components presented in the definition are discussed, evaluated and in some instances broadened, as indicated earlier.

Farm dwellers' experience of their environment is explored and described, following a qualitative approach in order to promote an understanding of their specific experience from their own viewpoint. The social niche is used, in addition, as a tentative conceptual framework to describe the main dimensions of their experience. Analysis of the farm dwellers' narratives produced six categories (each with several sub-categories), namely:

-
- employment (unhealthy working conditions for men, employment security threatened, grievance procedures unsatisfactory, limited work opportunities and underemployment of women);
 - income and spending (inadequate income and high cost of living, debt trap, a longing for the former practice of 'mahala', and supplementing income);
 - housing (housing security threatened, and availability and access to housing outside the neighbourhood a concern);
 - transportation (distance, means of transport and cost involved are major considerations);
 - community life (the importance of family and friends, lack of connection between residents, community life in the past being better, and ambivalence about the employer as support system); and
 - people, places and services outside the immediate farm environment (importance of extended family, church as a source of strength, and health services a link with the outside world).

It is concluded that numerous entrapping elements are present in the account of farm dwellers of their life on the farm, namely a lack of tangible resources, a lack of social resources and a low sense of power. The entrapping nature of farm dwellers' social niche, however, can not only be understood in terms of lack of social and tangible resources. The experiences and the meanings the farm dwellers attach to their environment provide the key to a better understanding of the living experiences of farm dwellers and the entrapment contained in their narratives. However, it also reveals their experience of a few enabling elements within this environment.

Based on the critical analysis of viewing the environment from a strengths perspective, the evaluation and broadening of the concept of *social niche*, and findings from the fieldwork done with farm dwellers, a social niche approach for assessing environmental strengths and risks is proposed. The goal of the social niche assessment approach is to provide a framework to review people's environmental strengths and risks/stressors, based on their own experience and

understanding, in collaboration with another person (social worker), so as to co-construct a description of their human environment. A diagram and description of the approach is provided. This approach has already been validated through peer evaluation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincere appreciation to every person who contributed in some way or other to create the opportunity for me to complete this study. It is impossible to name everyone, but I would like to give a special word of thanks to the following people:

- My husband and soul mate, Peet – for loving and supporting me.
 - My children, Netanja and Abraham – for being so patient and understanding.
 - The National Research Foundation (NRF) for financial support.
 - The Faculty of Health Sciences that afforded me six months study leave.
 - Marietha Oelofse for conducting my graduate classes during my study leave.
 - Focus Area 9.1: Preventative and Therapeutic Intervention, specifically Annamarie Kruger who efficiently managed the FLAGH study, and for the privilege of being part of the research team.
 - The Ferdinand Postma Library for an excellent service, and more specifically Louise Vos for her professional and friendly help during the literature search.
 - Prof. Herman Strydom, my promoter, and Dr. Karel Botha, my assistant-promoter, for their guidance and support.
 - My colleagues, who willingly carried a heavier load to enable me to finish this study.
 - Emmerentia du Plessis, for co-coding the empirical data, and Adrie Roux, for assisting with the peer evaluation.
 - Johan Blaauw for professional editing of the language.
 - Maria Vilanie for her assistance during the fieldwork visits to the farm.
 - All the people who participated in the peer evaluation of the social niche approach.
 - Mike Weyers, who offered his creative abilities and technical skill to visually conceptualise the social niche approach.
 - The farm dwellers who were willing to share their life world with me.
-

➤ In the final instance I acknowledge that:

**I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.
Ek is tot alles in staat deur Christus wat my krag gee.
Ke ka kgona dilo tsotlhe ka Keresete yo a nthatafatsang.**

Phil.4:13 / Fil.4:13 / Bafil. 4:13

FOREWORD

This manuscript is presented in an article format in accordance with Rules A.11.5.3 and A.11.5.4 that are set out in the *Calendar* of the Potchefstroom University for CHE (2002:17) (currently, the North-West University: Potchefstroom Campus). The content and technical requirements of the *International Journal for the Humanities* (see Appendix 16) and *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* (see Appendix 17) were used as basis to formulate the articles.

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CHAPTER 1

ORIENTATION TO THE RESEARCH

1. CONTEXTUALIZATION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

Farm dwellers in the North West Province have been identified as an extremely vulnerable group in terms of physical, physiological and mental health (Vorster et al., 2000). However, the reasons for this state of affairs are not clear. Therefore the FLAGH study was launched with the broad aim of gaining reliable information on the reasons for and contributory factors to their poor health status, which could be used to design appropriate intervention programmes (Kruger, 2001). The research reported on here forms part of this multi-disciplinary study and focuses on farm dwellers' experience of the farm as the environment where they live and work.

An increased understanding of how people experience their life on a farm can alert social workers to potentially important priorities for intervention. With greater public awareness of this understanding, a more accurate and in-depth appreciation of the issues affecting farm dwellers' life experiences can assist in the creation of better and fairer intervention. As the appropriateness of social work models depend to a great extent on their embeddedness in the cultural environment and local realities in which they evolved and are practised (Osei-Hwedie, 1996:215), the need to develop indigenous knowledge in South Africa motivated the research.

The study focuses on environmental strengths and risks. The decision to focus on environmental strengths and risks is based on the researcher's alliance with the fortogenic paradigm. According to Wissing (2000:7) the fortogenic paradigm assumes, on the meta-theoretical level, that it is important to focus on health, strengths, capacity and wellness. In social work the strengths perspective supports comparable assumptions. According to DuBois and Miley (2002:27) an orientation toward strengths and competence contrasts with the inclination to focus on deficits and maladaptive functioning. The strengths perspective stands in contrast to the pathogenic paradigm with its focus on

illness and vulnerabilities and also assumes that it is important to focus on both the innate resources of a person and those in his or her environment (Cowger, 1994:264; Early & GlenMaye, 2000:122–123).

Much is already known about the psychological strengths of people that protect them against psychological malfunctioning (cf. Wissing, 2000). On the other hand, far less is known about environmental elements protecting people against adversity (cf. Antonovsky, 1979; Van Eeden, 1996:225).

From a social work perspective individual outcomes are the results of a transactional process between self, other and environmental influences. It is a long-cherished conviction in social work that individual troubles and successes must be framed within the larger context of family, community and society (Saleebey, 2002^c:231). However, it is also a conviction that is often not reflected in social work practice (Rose, 2000:405; Saleebey, 2002^c:230; Weick, 2000:398). This situation consequently points to the need for further theoretical and empirical research. The strength perspective and also the renewed emphasis on the community development approach (Bowen et al., 2000:4), once again direct the attention of social work to this unique social work perspective and the need for the development of knowledge in this regard.

An initial overview of the social work literature showed that some environmental strength factors have already been identified. Mutual support and care are, for example, often stressed in the literature as sources of strength in peoples' environment (cf. Benard, 1997; Lewis, 1996; Sullivan, 1997; Walsh-Burke & Scanlon, 2000). From these studies it is deduced, however, that although similarities come to the fore, strengths and risks will depend on the group and context concerned. As far as research done in South Africa is concerned, nothing could be found in social work literature on environmental strengths and risk factors *per se*. Regarding poverty-stricken communities, which include farms and farm workers, the following studies have been done: Du Plessis (2000), Reyneke (2000) and Van Schalkwyk (1997). Although the main focus of all three studies was to develop intervention models, references are made to strengths that were identified by respondents in coping with their circumstances.

Against this background, the question arises how to identify strengths in the environment of farm dwellers. A review of strength-based literature on assessment revealed that, although the idea of multidimensional assessment is widely accepted in strength-based assessment (Cowger & Snively, 2002:113; Hepworth et al., 2002:198), strength-based assessment models are overwhelmingly concerned with individual factors. There is a need to develop models to assess environment factors.

Taylor (1997:218) introduced the concept of *social niche* to shed light on possible sources of strength in the environment of people. The concept of social niche refers to the environment in which a specific category of people is found. This includes the settings typically utilised by those persons, the resources available to and typically used by those persons, and other categories of people commonly found in association with those persons (Taylor, 1997:219). Taylor (1997:223) sees the enabling niche as the environmental analogue of individual strength and also consonant with the more recent conceptions of community building. The concept *social niche* offers a possible framework for developing an approach to identifying strengths and risks as experienced by a specific group within a specific context (in this case people living on farms).

The results of the investigation into environmental strengths and risk factors will contribute to a better understanding of the complex interaction between farm dwellers and their environments. On the basis of this understanding, an indigenous and relevant approach could be developed for assessing environmental strengths and risks, as a basis for planning interventions that build on peoples' capacity to cope with problems and needs in order to improve their quality of life. Developing an approach to assess environmental strengths and risks will contribute to developing contextual practice knowledge in social work.

As a result, this study will attempt to answer the following research questions:

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- To what degree does the strengths perspective and the concept of *social niche* provide a paradigm and theoretical construct (perspective) for developing an approach to assess environmental strengths and risks?
 - How do farm dwellers experience their lives on the farms?
 - How could the assessment of environmental strengths and risks be approached from a social niche perspective?

2. AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The aim of this research is:

- To explore and describe the social niche construct as a framework for assessing the environmental strengths and risks of farm dwellers.

Objectives:

- To describe and evaluate the strengths perspective and the concept of *social niche as a paradigm* and theoretical construct (or perspective) for developing an approach to assess environmental strengths and risks.
- To explore and describe farm dwellers' experience of their environment.
- To propose a *social niche* approach for assessing environmental strengths and risks.

3. SCIENTIFIC PARADIGM

3.1 Theoretical frameworks

The following theoretical frameworks shaped the research questions and were used during the literature control:

- The strengths perspective of Saleebey (2002).
- Strength-based assessment/practice models (in Saleebey, 2002).

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- Ecology (Begon et al., 1990; Boughey, 1975; Hanson, 1961; Miller, 1998; Odum, 1997).
 - The social niche construct of Taylor (1997).
 - Social constructivism (a combination of constructivism and social constructionism) (Greene & Lee, 2002).

Although these theoretical frameworks are found early in the study, they were not used for testing as would be expected in a quantitative study. However, they were used as a tentative conceptual framework to explain the main dimensions of the study. On the other hand, they were further developed in an inductive manner (cf. Creswell, 1994:96–97).

3.2 Description of concepts

The following tentative definitions of terms directed this study:

Assessment is a collaborative process between social worker and client in constructing a coherent picture (formulation) of the client and his or her circumstances that includes individual as well as environmental strengths and risks/stressors (Cowger & Snively, 2002:113; Hepworth et al., 2002:187; Saleebey, 2002^a:16).

Environment refers to the sum total of the natural setting and the human-made circumstances outside of the person that provide resources and opportunities, and activate needs along with creating barriers to their fulfilment (Karls & Wandrei (1994:23), and which affect how people view possibilities, meet goals and fulfil needs (Germain in DuBois & Miley, 2002:16).

Farm dwellers are the collective name for the farm workers and their families living on the farm where the workers are employed.

Risk is a probability describing the likelihood of a future event, given a certain condition or set of conditions (Fraser et al., 1999:131), but is not deterministic on the individual level (Gilgun, 1999:451). Risk factors may be individual characteristics, specific life experiences or events, or contextual factors (Fraser

et al., 1999:132). A related term in social work is *environmental stressor*. An *environmental stressor* is the result of environmental pressure on an individual that creates barriers, problems or difficulties in social functioning (DuBois & Miley, 2002:66).

Social niche is defined as "the places and conditions in which are found a specific category of persons, including the settings typically utilized by those persons, the source of resources available to those persons, the resources typically used by those persons, and other categories of people commonly found in association with those persons" (Taylor, 1997:219).

Strength refers to individual and environmental characteristics (or attribute) and the interaction between patterns of individual characteristics, specific challenging situations and broader characteristics of the overall environment that a person employs in order to adapt and cope optimally within a specific context (McQuaide & Ehrenreich, 1997:204). Related concepts are 'protective factor' and 'assets'. Both are probabilistic concepts associated with adaptive outcomes, but are not deterministic on the individual level; in the field of social work the term strength is used (Gilgun, 1999:451). Another related term is 'resilience', a term used to describe an individual who adapts to extraordinary circumstances, achieving positive and unexpected outcomes in the face of adversity. Although resilience is an individual response, it is not an individual trait, but conditioned by both individual and environmental factors (Fraser et al., 1999:136,138)

3.3 Methodological statements

In this study a qualitative paradigm or constructivist approach (cf. Creswell, 1994:143) is followed. It is acknowledged that although there is a reality independent of a person's thoughts and impressions, people subjectively make sense of this reality and thereby create their own reality. Multiple subjective realities exist in any given situation, but for the purpose of this study, the reality constructed by the research participants was the focus of attention. However, the researcher tried to be sensitive to all other possible interpretations that could influence her understanding of reality as constructed by the research

participant, and to report these where applicable. Inductive reasoning (cf. Creswell, 1994:145) was followed.

4. DEMARCATION OF THE RESEARCH STUDY

Within the broad field of social work this study focuses on the context of human life. More specifically, the focus is on the person-in-environment construct and how to assess environmental strengths and risks. The research was limited to one setting, namely a farm in the Rysmierbult district, North West Province, because it was the initial farm identified for the FLAGH study. On this farm, only farm dwellers that were residents of the settlement on the farm were involved.

5. BASIC THEORETICAL STATEMENT

Insight into farm dwellers' experience of their environment will give an understanding of the environmental strengths and risks in this social environment. It will also make it possible to develop a social niche approach for assessing environmental strengths and risks.

6. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD

The issue that the research wanted to clarify was environmental strengths and risks as experienced by farm dwellers in order to develop a social niche approach for assessing environmental strengths and risks. The research questions are exploratory and descriptive. The strategy to obtain the answers to these questions will be dealt with next.

6.1 Literature study

In this study a systematic library search was conducted by utilising the following databases: OASIS; ISAP; Nexus; Academic Search Primer and WiNSPIR. The literature study was conducted throughout the whole study. The topics that were critically analysed and interpreted included: qualitative research, ecological niche, social niche, the strengths perspective in social work, the farm as a social environment, an overview of theoretical and empirical descriptions

and findings regarding environmental strength and risk factors, and perspectives and approaches to environmental assessment.

6.2 Empirical investigation

The empirical investigation consisted of two parts. Part one covered the investigation into the experiences of farm dwellers regarding their environment and part two covered the peer evaluation of the social niche assessment approach.

6.2.1 Investigating the experiences of farm dwellers of their environment

- **Design**

A qualitative approach was followed, because the researcher wished to explore and describe the meaning and promote an understanding of this specific human experience from the participants' own viewpoint (Bryman, 1995:45; De Vos & Fouché, 1998:80). In order to increase the reliability of observation, theoretical, investigator and methodological triangulation was done (De Vos, 1998:359).

- **Sample**

The participants were selected purposefully (Creswell, 1994:148). All the participants were black farm dwellers from the settlement on the first farm that was identified for the FLAGH study. The sample size was determined by data saturation (Schurink, 1998^a:254). Twenty farm dwellers (six women and 14 men) served as initial informants, and of these 20, 12 (six men and six women) as subsequent informants.

- **Data-gathering methods**

Data was gathered by means of unstructured in-depth interviews, semi-structured interviews and participant observation.

Unstructured in-depth interviews were used in order to assure rich data (Thorn, 1997:118). The unstructured approach is a method that is very useful in exploratory research where the research questions cannot be narrowly defined (Fontana & Frey, 1994:366). This approach is a method of getting respondents

to express their views broadly and expand freely on aspects of their own experiences. The 'grand tour question' (Creswell, 1994:70) in this part of the research was: "Tell me about your life here on the farm."

Unstructured interviews with a schedule (Schurink, 1998^c:299) were conducted later in the study in order to gather more data, as well as to confirm the present findings and to ensure validity. In this part of the data-gathering process, the question was: "How do you manage to go on with your life in the midst of all the problems you told me about?" Sub-questions were used to ensure that all relevant issues were covered (see Appendix 1 and 2). All the questions were under continual review and reformulated if necessary (Creswell, 1994:71).

Participant observation (Schurink, 1998^b:278) was conducted in the settlement during which time informal conversations with community members took place. A fieldworker that was of the same cultural group as the majority of the participants and proficient in Tswana, Xhosa, Afrikaans and English, accompanied the researcher during these visits and served as a cultural and language interpreter (see Appendix 3). These conversations allowed the researcher to confirm observations with participants and to verify tentative patterns or themes. Field notes were kept of these activities.

Methodological triangulation (De Vos, 1998:359) was done by means of comparing qualitative findings with data obtained from two quantitative measures, namely the Sense of Coherence Scale (SOC) (Antonovsky, 1993) and the Quality of Life Inventory (QOLI) (Frisch, 1994), as well as all other relevant FLAGH findings (Kruger, 2003).

- **Data analysis**

Data analysis comprised content analysis and was conducted simultaneously with data collection, data interpretation and report writing (cf. Creswell, 1994:155). Of the 20 initial interviews, 12 (six men and six women) were purposefully selected for analysis. The criteria for selection were interviews that consisted of rich information. The eight remaining interviews, as well as the field notes of the observations, were used for verification purposes. Regular

discussions about the findings and observations of other FLAGH research team members were used to verify this information.

In order to reduce data the five-stage approach of Marshall and Rossman (Poggenpoel, 1998:342–343) was followed. The five stages are: organising data; generating categories, themes and patterns; testing the emerging hypotheses against the data; searching for alternative explanations of the data; and writing the report. Internal validity was ensured by requesting a separate coding of the data and conducting consensus discussions with the co-coder (see Appendix 4).

Trustworthiness was established by means of triangulation of data, member checking, repeated observations at the research site, an audit trail, peer examination, clarification of researcher bias, and dense description (cf. Creswell, 1994:157-158; Krefting, 1991:217).

- **Ethical aspects**

The Ethical Committee of the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher education approved the FLAGH study (Nr. 00M21). For any deviations from the approved protocol, additional approval was obtained (see Appendix 5 and 6). Regarding the study reported here, the following specific ethical aspects were adhered to.

Respondents' voluntary consent was sought (see Appendix 7 and 8). Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly abided by. This was done by carefully explaining the general aim of the study and procedures to be used, such as the use of a tape recorder and a field worker. Consent for the use of the tape recorder was obtained from each respondent. In order to protect respondents against any harm, sensitivity towards emotionality and physical comfort were maintained. Respondents' rights to withdraw from the interview were respected. The researcher kept it in mind that her culture, age and gender might play a role in the acceptability of the researcher to the participants. As a result, a knowledge and understanding of the area (the farm), the approximate age of respondents and their culture, and of how to introduce the topic to them,

were developed. The cultural customs of the respondents were respected at all times (cf. Strydom, 1998:23-36).

6.2.2 The peer evaluation of the social niche assessment approach

Based on the literature study and the empirical investigation a social niche assessment approach was formulated. This social niche assessment approach (see Appendix 9), together with criteria for its evaluation (see Appendix 10), was presented to a group of experts with a request to evaluate the approach individually and then to participate in focus-group discussions (Krueger, 2000) (see Appendix 11, 12 and 13). Three groups were formed, namely (1) social work academics and practitioners, (2) FLAGH research team members, and (3) fourth-year social work students who had recently completed their internship (see Appendix 14 for a list of the participating members). The researcher moderated the group sessions. Data was captured by means of notes taken by an assistant, as well as the individual written notes of the participants. The results of the evaluation were analysed and summarised (see Appendix 15). On the grounds of the findings of the evaluation, the approach was further developed and refined.

7. REPORT LAYOUT

The research report comprises the following chapters:

- Chapter 1: Orientation to the research.
- Chapter 2: Environmental strengths: paradigm and theory.
- Chapter 3: Social niches: the experiences of farm dwellers.
- Chapter 4: Towards a social niche assessment approach.
- Chapter 5: Summary, evaluation, conclusions, implications and recommendations.

Chapters 2, 3 and 4 were written in article format. The author guidelines of *The International Journal of the Humanities* (Chapter 2), and *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* (Chapter 3 and 4) were taken into consideration in

preparation of these chapters (see Appendix 16 and 17 for the different guidelines for authors).

However, for the purpose of this research report, the following deviations were made:

- Headings up to level 3 are numbered.
- The report is typed in 1½ spacing.

CHAPTER 2

ENVIRONMENTAL STRENGTHS: PARADIGM AND THEORY

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Main Description

Understanding the transaction between person and environment is a complex issue that lacks adequate theoretical explanation. In this paper social niche is presented as a promising theoretical concept for framing the environmental strengths and risks of people in transaction with their environment. Adding the strengths perspective to this framing is suggested to lead to a series of positive possibilities. This paper furthermore suggests revisions and modulations to the strengths perspective and the social niche construct to get to a clearer understanding of environmental strengths. As a result an endeavour is made to answer the questions: What kind of environment is assumed to be a strong environment? And, to what degree does the construct social niche provide a related theoretical approach in assessing environmental strengths and risks?

The following conclusions are presented:

An environment can be considered strong when it consists of human beings who are connected to their innate strengths and capacity for healing, where there is community and membership, mutuality and connection between people and the environment, and people who experience the environment as strong. From the social niche perspective the social niche type of the enabling niche is suggested as a way to summarise the elements of a strong environment.

The construct of the social niche does provide a theoretical approach to assess the environment in terms of strengths and risks and gives better insight into the result of the transactional process between person and environment.

It is also concluded that the niche construct does not fully reflect the assumptions of the strengths perspective in terms of mainly two points: (1) the belief in the inherent strengths and capacity for healing of people (human agency), and (2) understanding reality as it is subjectively constructed. Based on this evaluation, it is thus endeavoured to broaden both the description of social niche based on a critical evaluation of the ecological analogy, and fuller reflection of the strengths perspective.

As a result the social niche is redefined as the living environment of people, including the place in which people find themselves and the places typically utilised by them, the circumstances of that place, both social and natural/physical, the resources available to them and typically used by them, the other categories of people who are typically associated with those people, the contribution or initiative of people in it, and the meaning that people construct in regard to their place and purpose.

Each of the niche components presented in the definition were discussed, evaluated and in some instances broadened.

Short Description

Understanding the transaction between person and environment is a complex issue that lacks adequate theoretical explanation. In this paper social niche is presented as a promising theoretical concept for framing environment and transaction between person and environment. Adding the strengths perspective to the framing of the transaction is suggested to lead to a series of positive possibilities. This paper furthermore suggests revisions and modulations to the strengths perspective and the social niche construct to get to a clearer understanding of environmental strengths. As a result an endeavour is made to answer the questions: What kind of environment is assumed to be a strong environment? And, to what degree does the construct social niche provide a related theoretical approach in assessing environmental strengths and risks?

1. INTRODUCTION

Understanding the transaction between person and environment is a complex issue that lacks adequate theoretical explanation in social work. In this article *social niche* is presented as a promising theoretical concept for framing environmental strengths and risks of people in transaction with their environment. Adding the strengths perspective to this framing is suggested to lead to a series of positive possibilities. However, the strengths perspective, like the social niche, is still only an idea, and like Saleebey (2002^a:13–14, 20) warned: "subject to revision and modulation". This article is a modest attempt to describe and evaluate the strengths perspective of Saleebey (2002) and the social niche construct of Taylor (1997) in order to get to a clearer understanding of how to approach the assessment of environmental strengths and risks. As a result an endeavour is made to answer the questions: What kind of environment is assumed to be a *strong environment*? And, to what degree does the construct *social niche* provide a related theoretical approach in assessing environmental strengths and risks?

2. THE CONCEPT OF ENVIRONMENT

As a biological concept, environment refers to all the external conditions and factors, living and nonliving, that affect an organism or other specified system during its lifetime (Miller, 1998:A50). In social work, according to Karls and Wandrei (1994:23), 'environment' refers to the sum total of the natural setting and the human-made circumstances outside of the person that provides resources and opportunities and activates needs, along with creating barriers, to their fulfilment.

The environment has multiple dimensions, and many layers within these dimensions. The typical dimensions in environmental typologies are: the physical environment, both natural and built; the social interactional environment, including personal social networks, family, group, neighbourhood and community; the institutional/organisational environment; the socio-political and cultural environment; and the experienced environment (cf. Kemp et al., 2002:22).

A variety of concepts are used in the social work literature connoting 'environment' in the person-environment construct. The use of these different concepts is indicative of the variety of ways in which the construct 'environment' is approached and what boundaries it is given. Some examples are 'resources' (Kisthardt, 2002:171; Rapp, 2002:126), 'natural helpers' (Fast & Chaplin, 2002:153), 'social network' (Tracey & Whittaker, 1990:462), 'social environment' (McQuaide & Ehrenreich, 1997:204), 'psychosocial environment' (Gilgun, 1999:450), 'neighbourhood' (Breton, 2001; Homan, 1994) and 'sociocultural' (Graybeal, 2001). What can be deduced from this variety of concepts is that these authors each choose to focus on different aspects of the environment.

Community is another concept used in both ecology and social work. In ecology the concept 'community' refers to populations of all species living and interacting in an area at a particular time (Miller, 1998:A48). In social work the concepts 'community' and 'neighbourhood' are commonly used when referring to the more immediate environment of a person or group. Cohen (1985:15) states that: "Community is that entity to which one belongs, greater than kinship but more immediate than the abstraction we call 'society'. It is the arena in which people acquire their most fundamental and most substantial experience of social life outside the confines of the home." Homan (1994:364) describes the neighbourhood in the same manner and states that what goes on there seriously affects its members. According to Germain (cited in DuBois & Miley, 2002:16) the neighbourhood affects how people view possibilities, meet goals, and fulfil needs.

For humans, however, community is not limited to a specific place and could refer to any collective of people with shared interests, regular interaction to fulfil shared interests by informal and formal organised means, and some degree of mutual identification among members as belonging to the collective (Schraver, 2001:502). The boundaries of a community or neighbourhood resist definition, as this will depend on the perspective of the person who does the defining. Homan (1994:364) however rightly states that in the last analysis "it is the residents for whom the concept has most meaning and who ultimately define their boundaries". Homan's description correlates with the 'experienced

environment' dimension of environment, which according to Kemp et al. (2002:22) refers to the ways people make sense of things within the experienced world. It is concluded that, from a social work perspective, the environment of people is mostly approached from the experienced dimension. This would explain the diversity of concepts used by different authors when referring to people's environmental experiences in different contexts.

To summarise, the concept of human environment refers to a person's or a group's definition of everything external to them, physical as well as social, that impact on their social functioning.

3. THE NATURE OF STRENGTHS

In this section the nature of strengths according to the strengths perspective is investigated.

3.1 Innate strengths

From the strengths perspective it is assumed that strengths are inherent in humanity itself. Saleebey (2002^a:1-11) states that the human spirit has innate wisdom, people have the inherent capacity for transformation, an inborn facility of body and mind to regenerate and resist, the capacity for health and healing, and the capacity to know what is right. He refers to it as 'a natural state of affairs' (2002:11). The strengths perspective was developed in reaction to peoples' and societies' enslavement by a pathology paradigm where peoples' social regard and status are determined by psycho-pathological labels (Saleebey, 2002^a:4). The strengths perspective emphasises that in the midst of human pain and suffering, there are locked up strengths, potential and possibilities. Humanity is not necessarily less than it could have been owing to problems and disease, because humanity has strengths with which it can survive problems and disease, even rising above them. The strengths perspective believes that the world in which we live can be transformed. Transformation is possible because human beings can generate their inherent goals and vision for a better quality of life (Saleebey, 2002^a:1-7).

The strengths perspective, via Saleebey and Goldstein, assume a world in which good and evil exist, but in which good will not (necessarily) be overcome by evil. *Good* and *evil* (or 'ill' according to Saleebey, 2002^b:81) always occur jointly. Saleebey (2002^a:7) states it as follows: "But why is the capacity for evil the seeming companion to the urge to the heroic?" It is not spelt out exactly what represents good, only that it is indeed life-affirming. Evil according to Saleebey is anything or anybody that causes alienation, marginalisation and oppression of human beings. He avoids seeing evil in humanity itself and rather places the origin of this type of evil in society, while Goldstein (2002:28) states it more explicitly: 'there is a dark side to being human.' Saleebey (2002^a:1) indeed does agree that inhibitions and misgivings have to be broken through by humanity itself. Yet one could argue that the way in which a society is structured is the result of human decision-making. Consequently it can rightfully be argued that the origin of evil in society is in humanity itself. Both strength and weakness are therefore inherent in humanity.

It is noteworthy that Saleebey, in contrast with a vagueness regarding inherent human evil, has no qualms in stating that humanity has inherent goodness. Humanity becomes cut off (disconnected) from these capacities and must again become 'connected'. Saleebey's view shows similarities with Biestek's natural law perspective, namely that humanity has a purpose in life and, within the limitations of natural law and the common good, humanity itself determines how it is going to achieve this purpose (cf. Ryke, 2000:384,390). However, in contrast with Biestek, Saleebey does not agree that objective (*a priori*) standards exist for human life.

Measured against the aforementioned, the conclusion is drawn that the strengths perspective is based on the assumption that a strong environment is based on human beings that are 'connected' with their innate strengths and who contribute to building a strong environment.

3.2 Strengths in the human environment

According to the strengths perspective strengths are also found within the environment. The environment is seen as the person's 'life world', the 'world of

their experience'. Healing requires a beneficent relationship between the individual and the larger social and physical environment (Saleebey, 2002^a:11). Although Saleebey defines the environment as both physical and social, he mainly focuses his attention on the social environment.

An environment is strong when there is community and membership that provide protection against alienation, marginalisation and oppression (Saleebey, 2002^a:10). The purpose striven for is life affirmation, and for that a democratic society is essential (Saleebey, 2002^a:6,9). Saleebey's view (2002:17) of democracy is based on a care perspective rather than a human rights perspective. In this regard he quotes Stone, who states that caring is the essential democratic act and the most basic form of civic participation. Human beings at first learn civic participation in the family context, and after that in society. Democracy is sustained by civic participation (voting, joining associations, attending meetings, holding office).

The strengths approach declines individualism and regards humankind as a relational being. Relationships are "based in mutuality and connection...the web of institutional and interpersonal relationships in which a person is enmeshed...[that] contribute to, sustain, and shape a person's misery, struggle, mistakes" (Saleebey, 2002^a:5). Humanity is regarded as context-bound, in comparison with the individualistic perspective that places the individual above society (the environment).

With this view of the relationship between the individual and society the strengths perspective touches upon the potential tension that develops between humanity and the environment. Does the strengths perspective offer a solution for this tension by suggesting that a human being can only be a complete individual once there is membership? Furthermore, that true membership is only possible if the human being is prepared to sacrifice his/her individuality in order to be truly part of a group? On the basis hereof it can be argued that a strong human environment depends on human beings that are (at least to a degree) prepared to sacrifice individuality for the collective good.

The strengths perspective is opposed to a view that regards the environment and society to be of instrumental value only to the individual's own interests, and in favour of a view that regards humanity as inseparably related to and interdependent with the environment. Membership is regarded as essential, as "people need to be citizens, responsible and valued members of a community ...entitled to the dignity, respect, and responsibility that comes with such membership" (Saleebey, 2002^a:10). Membership also means that "people must band together to make their voices heard, to get their needs met, to redress inequities, to reach dreams" (Saleebey, 2002^a:10).

With this view the strengths perspective without any qualms can be regarded as part of the life-centred and earth-centred ecological worldviews. This set of worldviews recognises the inherent value of all life-forms and the individual's membership of a community of interdependent parts (Miller, 1998:750). This world view is also logically related to the organic view of humanity that is assumed in the strengths perspective, as can be seen in the use of words and descriptions such as *body and mind, evolve, from cell to self-image, natural state of affairs, human organism, organismic ingenuity, survival* and *species* (Saleebey, 2002^a:12).

The strengths perspective counteracts the danger involved in an organistic view of 'life' and 'environment', namely that it reduces the individual human being (and also less powerful societal contexts such as the family) to a limb or an organ of a greater whole and subordinates all other contexts to the greater whole. For example, in a nationalistic state dispensation, the state is that greater whole, while from the African ubuntu point of view it is the tribe. This is done by a more differentiated view of the environment – an environment with alternative spaces where each person and group can give expression to "life affirmation" and in which these alternative spaces are not parts of or subordinated to a greater whole.

The point of departure of the concept 'life affirmation' in the strengths perspective clearly involves more than a traditionalist recovery of rational dignity as found in *inter alia* Biestek (cf. Ryke,2000), as the emphasis is broader than merely that which is rational and the recovery of the individual to fit in with an

assumed already rational environment. Then again, what would it involve, for example, in the African ideal of *ubuntu* where the 'affirmation of life' is the protection of social harmony by the elimination of those things that disturb harmony, while in the capitalistic individualistic achievement society 'life affirmation' means always to have more power, honour and wealth than others? What is regarded as life-affirming will depend on the values of the particular group within a particular context (cf. Smit,1999), but from a strengths perspective unrestricted equal encounters between people and groups dedicated to healing and empowerment for all are the ultimate value. It implies sacrificing a measure of individuality for the collective good.

3.3 Constructed strengths

The strengths perspective is based on a constructivist epistemology according to which the reality of a persons' life world is constructed by means of language, metaphor, narrative, context and interpretative forestructures (Saleebey, 2002^a:3,13). Saleebey (2002^a:4) refers to Gergen and Paulo Freire to show how labels (psycho-medical as well as political) infiltrate and change people's experience of their identity. Reflective knowledge is rather propounded, with the emphasis on relevance for the particular client in a specific situation, 'making meaning and making sense' (Saleebey, 2002^a:6). Goldstein (2002:27) too proceeds from Gergen's definition of social constructionism and states that the terms in which people explain and define themselves and their world are the products of cultural, symbolic and historical interchanges among people, and that as long as there is consensus about the value of these terms, they will have currency.

The strengths perspective, however, apparently does not accept the ontological assumptions of constructionism and accepts that there are structural impediments in peoples' lives (Saleebey, 2002^d:266-267). Due to these impediments, and dominant beliefs about it in society, environmental strengths, like innate strengths, may lie dormant. People need to be aligned not only to their own innate strengths, but also to those in their environment.

This researcher thus comes to the conclusion that, from a strengths perspective, a strength can be regarded as a strength when people define and recognise it as such.

4. SOCIAL NICHE

This section investigates the social niche concept, its components and the different niche types.

4.1 The concept of social niche

Taylor (1997:219), drawing on ecology, construed the concept of social niche. Social niche also relates to the idea of environment, but is more than environment. Social niche is the result of the transactional process between person and environment. A related idea found in the literature is 'embeddedness in the community' (Gilgun, 1999:452; Tracey & Whittaker, 1990:461–462). According to Gilgun (1999) 'embeddedness in the community' refers to a family or persons' (dis)connection from/with persons and institutions in the wider community, as well as access to material and emotional resources (resource-poor/rich communities).

On the theoretical level, Taylor's (1997:218) concept of social niche offers a possible framework for organising environmental strengths and risks as experienced by a specific group within a specific setting. Taylor (1997:223) observed that although the concept 'niche' is new to social work, its reality has a long and honourable history in it, referring to Jane Adams (1938) and the settlement house movement. Since 1979, when Germain introduced the ecological perspective for social work, the biological paradigm has been a presence in the discipline. Germain (cited in Taylor, 1997:217) used biological ecology as a metaphor for the way in which people and environments influence, change and shape each other. However, Taylor (1997:217) is of the opinion that the biological paradigm has not been well explored in this perspective. The theoretical construct of social niche is Taylor's attempt to take the biological paradigm further. This he does by exploiting the ecological niche concept, a concept which is central to ecological thinking (Begon et al., 1990:75), as an

analogy (metaphor) for clarifying aspects of individual and social strengths and dysfunctions (Taylor, 1997:218).

Taylor (1997:218) states that he developed the concept of social niche drawing directly from biological ecology. Based on Strickberger, Taylor (1997:219) defines social niche as follows:

- "the places and conditions in which are found a specific category of persons,
- including the settings typically utilised by those persons,
- the source of resources available to those persons,
- the resources typically used by those persons, and
- other categories of people commonly found in association with those persons."

Odum (1997:55), however, says that a niche in ecology refers to the role (function) of an organism in society and not to the place where it lives. According to this author habitat refers to place (or the type of environment in which an organism or group of organisms live). According to Hanson (1961:56), defining an organism's habitat is just the beginning in relating an organism, or a population of a certain kind of organisms, to their environment, if accurate knowledge of its niche is the real goal. To describe the ecological niches of organisms, an understanding of the functioning of natural populations is essential, and to do this, all the multifarious activities of organisms that in some way, directly or indirectly, determine their mode of life must be considered.

Niche should therefore not be confused with habitat because niche is more than a physical place. Niche also very clearly implies the contribution that the organism makes within a particular ecological interaction. Owing to the higher quality of human life, this contribution will also include the existing cultural environment established by the cultural-social initiative of humanity. Social niche would in my opinion also refer to place in an abstract or symbolic sense. Begon et al. (1990:78) also emphasise this point. According to them a niche is

not something that one can see, but is rather an abstract concept which represents in a descriptive manner the requirements of an organism. The concept 'life world', as used by Saleebey, in the opinion of this researcher also encapsulates the essence of the social niche.

However, Begon et al. (1990:850) mention that Strickberger's definition is but one of the many alternative definitions of ecological niche. The definition with which these authors work is, "the range of conditions, resource levels and densities of other species allowing for survival, growth and reproduction of an organism or species. Hence, if each condition, resource or other species is seen as a dimension, the niche is an n-dimensional hyper volume." This definition agrees with the definition Taylor works with. Begon et al. (1990:76) do add that two further factors determine whether a species will be able to survive, namely (1) it must be able to reach the location, and this depends in turn on its powers of colonisation and the remoteness of the site, and (2) the actions of individuals of other species which compete with or prey upon it. What strikes one about this definition is its deterministic nature. The older definitions made provision for the organism as an active agent in the interaction, which is a more useful idea for the description of humanity in its environment. What in this researcher's opinion can be added to Taylor's definition of social niche is a reference to the contribution of the person in his/her habitat and community and the meaning that the person gives to his/her place and purpose.

4.2 Social niche components

4.2.1 Place and conditions

As mentioned earlier 'habitat' is an ecological term referring to the place and conditions in the environment where an organism normally lives. According to Taylor (1997:219), for humans the terms 'community' and 'setting' capture the same idea. This researcher would rather say that only 'setting' and 'natural, physical and cultural environment' capture the idea of habitat for humans, as the concept of 'community' in ecology as well as in the human sciences refers to more than place alone. Taylor (1997:219) stresses that his definition of social niche 'preserves the original notion of niche as a slot or space in the

environment that can be filled by some object'. Thus, if the concept community is used in this context, it is specifically meant to refer to 'community as place'.

A particular habitat provides several possible niches for species. A biological species inhabits at most a few niches over time, while humans fill an infinite variety of social niches (Taylor, 1997:218), both at the same time and over their lifespans. Sullivan (1997:193) for example, from a mental health services perspective, distinguishes the following social niches: living arrangement, recreation, work, education and social relationships. However, it is not clear if all of Sullivan's niches could be linked to a slot or space in the environment (e.g. social relationships).

4.2.2 Resources

A species habitat is set by the availability of the resources needed for that species to maintain itself; by the same token, a human habitat is set by the availability of the resources needed for particular categories of people to maintain themselves (Taylor, 1997:219). According to Begon et al. (1990:120-121) the niche concept is at its most powerful when considering problems related to the use of limiting, or potentially limiting, resources. Human groups that function in circumstances with limited resources are not unfamiliar to social work. In human communities, regarded from a human dignity point of view, the adequacy and acceptability of resources, over and above their availability and achievability, are also important (Kisthardt, in Saleebey, 1999:22).

Human groups, like species, differ in the variety of resources they need for survival. This difference is captured by the concept *niche width* (or size) that refers to the sum total of the variety of different resources exploited by an organism. Niche width can be described as either narrow or broad. Species with a narrow niche are considered to be specialised, and species with a wider niche, generalised. In contrast to specialist species, generalist species can live in many different places, eat a variety of foods, and tolerate a wide range of environmental conditions (Miller, 1998:130–131).

Human beings, from a biological viewpoint, are considered generalists. From a social viewpoint it is possible to distinguish differences in niche width for

different people and social groups, and regard them as either generalists or specialists within a specific context. For humans to be regarded as generalists or specialists would be a result more of behaviour patterns and specific needs within a context of certain conditions, than of biologically predetermined behaviour, as would be the case for animals. Disabled groups would for instance have a narrow work niche due to their specific needs within a society that does not make special provision for those needs.

The idea of a 'resource' for an animal is generally a tangible thing like water or food. For humans it is both tangible and social. In the social world tangible resources are mainly acquired by money or barter and access to sources of money (e.g. jobs), and social resources through information-using. Humans need a variety of social resources like social support, help in the construction of social norms and social skills (Taylor, 1997:219). Taylor does not say specifically what he regards as basic needs.

4.2.3 Categories of people

The ecological niche is inhabited by species, a social niche by different categories of people or social categories (e.g. welfare mothers) (Taylor, 1997:218). Taylor thus substitutes 'categories of people' for 'species' in his analogy. This comparison in which every category of human being represents a species does have practical value, but one has to guard against the *as if* relationship becoming an *is* relationship. People, regardless of their social group, after all belong to the same species, namely *Homo sapiens*, although they often differ socially.

Species associate with other species. Social categories of people are found in association with other categories of persons (e.g. pimps with prostitutes). These groups complement each other either as resources for each other, or as competitors for resources (Taylor, 1997:219). Here Taylor refers to positive as well as negative interaction between species in an ecosystem. In nature one finds intra- as well as interspecies interaction patterns. In the same way one finds in human beings similar patterns of interaction within a group and between groups.

The spectrum of conditions and resources available to social groups is, like for biological species, closely related to competition or co-operation. In social work competition for resources is better understood in terms of power relationships. Those groups in society with more power often have greater access to resources than those with less power. According to Cowger (1994:263) two interdependent and interactive dynamics are at play, namely personal and social power. The definitions and characteristics of a person are closely bound up with their context or environment through the process of social involvement. In this regard resources and opportunities in the environment of the person play an important role. The availability of resources and opportunities, however, depends on how society distributes its resources. To take charge and control of one's personal life, to be empowered, assumes that the resources and opportunities for that empowerment are available. However, society and its component parts do not necessarily distribute resources in a equal and just manner. Thus, personal power, the social power endemic to the person's environment, and the relationship between the two, are the core considerations (Cowger, 1994:263–264).

Taylor, in the opinion of this researcher, depends too strongly on the competition hypothesis. To think only in terms of power and competition leads to the danger of lapsing into thinking in terms of pathology, i.e. to thinking of people as victims. Here the Gaia hypothesis, which explains evolution more in terms of co-operation, provides an additional and enriching perspective. According to the Gaia hypothesis evolution is also dependent on the cooperation between organisms and the environment (Schriver, 2001:153). Cooperation between organisms and the environment are better related to the viewpoint of the strengths perspective, that a strong environment presupposes membership.

4.2.4 Function and meaning

Although Taylor (1997:218) correctly distinguishes between humans and animals when he states that biological species transmit information across generations through genes, while social systems do so through symbols, meanings and social forms, he does not include this aspect in his social niche

definition. As a result, he does not consistently apply this important distinction in his conceptualisation of the niche components.

People are defined by their social relationships and cultural traditions, and it is only through an intimate understanding thereof that their response to external impulses can be explained (Burkey, 1993:45). This reality is created and continually recreated by people through their social interaction, by acts of interpretation within, and influenced by the context in which they occur (cf. Cohen, 1985:17). Although Taylor (1997:219) is very definite about the niche being a slot or space in the environment, the reality of social niche in the lives of people and groups is symbolic. To understand social niche, the experience of its inhabitants should be captured.

4.3 Niche types

Hutchinson (in Begon et al., 1990:76) distinguishes between the fundamental and the realised niche. The *fundamental niche* describes the overall potential of a species – in the absence of competition the species could occupy the full range of variables to which it is adapted. However, this is rarely the case in natural communities, because species compete with other species for resources. Therefore the *realised niche* refers to the more limited spectrum of conditions and resources that allows a species to maintain a viable population even in the presence of competitors and predators. Applied to the social niche, it would be suggested that the idea of a *fundamental niche* refers to conditions and resources that would enable a social group to function at an optimal level, while the *realised niche* refers to the more limited spectrum of conditions and resources which allows a group to survive.

Taylor (1997:220–224) distinguishes two niches, namely the enabling and the entrapping niche, which show similarities with (but also differences from) the fundamental and the realised niche. The enabling and entrapping niches are seen as two ideal types which, according to Taylor, at the polar extremes can be either entrapping or enabling. Taylor (1997:222) sees the enabling niche and entrapping niche as almost mirror images of each other.

4.3.1 Enabling niches

Taylor (1997:223) sees the enabling niche as the environmental analogue of individual strength. It is on this particular point that the strengths perspective and the social niche construct are directly linked.

The characteristics of the enabling niche are summarised by Sullivan (1997:192–193) as follows: "Enabling niches offer a range of opportunities and experiences that facilitate growth and achievement. Setting long-term goals are expected and rewarded, and corrective feedback loops are omnipresent. Access to resources and opportunities increases the ability to have meaningful interactions with others who bring different perspectives and expand one's social world. In this environment, growth and development are both expected and encouraged." Stigma is absent in the enabling niche, and this niche has adequate social and tangible resources.

According to Taylor (1997:223) the enabling niche is also consonant with the more recent conceptions of community building. It appears as if the idea of an enabling niche finds expression through a variety of other concepts, such as "personal and social empowerment" (Cowger, 1994), "a nurturing environment" (Weick, 2000:400), "... the capacity of the system to carve out a coherent pattern of interaction with reality..." (Antonovsky, 1987:170) and Tracey and Whittaker's (1990:461–462) description of a social network becoming a social support network. All these descriptive terms are indicative of a niche being enabling.

4.3.2 Entrapping niches

Taylor (1997:221) identifies a niche as entrapping when the people who occupy it find it very hard to move to other niches (e.g. the ex-prisoner on parole). 'Niche entrapment' is the term Taylor uses to describe what people who occupy these niches experience. A related idea is Gilgun's (1999:452) use of the concept 'resource-poor communities' and 'disconnection' from persons and institutions connoting entrapment.

According to Taylor (1997:221) entrapping niches appear to have the following qualities in common:

- **Stigma.** Entrapping niches are highly stigmatised, and people who occupy them are defined by their social category. As a result they are commonly treated as outcasts by important others and not considered to have aspirations and attributes apart from their category.
- **Lack of social resources.** In the entrapping niche there are few expectations of personal progress, few incentives to set longer term goals or work towards such goals, few natural processes that lead people to recognise and correct their own unrealistic perceptions or interpretations, and little chance to learn new skills and expectations that would facilitate escape.
- **Lack of tangible resources.** Economic resources and the tangible resources they can acquire are sparse in the entrapping niche.

As previously indicated a niche is actually seldom ideal. The realised niche represents the niche as it is in reality, with its basic elements present to make functioning possible, although it is not optimal. The realised niche in the opinion of the researcher forms the frontier area between the enabling and the entrapping niche. The point of departure of the strengths perspective, that people survive despite their circumstances (Saleebey, 2002^a:7), of necessity leads to the assumption that the most entrapping niche also has enabling elements which, like individual strengths, lie latent or are present in the background without either the individual or group really being aware of them and which may potentially be developed.

In Taylor's conceptualisation of entrapment (and later escapement) one can detect that he blames the environment for human need, at the cost of that which is outbalanced by how people contribute to the entrapment, whether through their actions and/or the way in which they give or attach meaning to things.

Although the distinction between the enabling and entrapping niches offers practical possibilities, it represents a typically western development view of

society. In emphasising values such as balances of power and access to resources there is great danger of western elitism, with its related preoccupation with power and control. Within a traditional society harmony will for example be regarded more highly than power. That which is experienced as enabling and entrapping will depend totally on the shared value system within a particular context.

This researcher would propose that the realised niche be thought of as the actual situation where a combination of both enabling and entrapping elements are present. The fundamental niche represents the ideal situation where the conditions and resources that would enable a social group to function at an optimal level are present.

4.4 Transformation, liberation, survival, authentication

The above gives rise to the question of what is regarded from the strengths perspective and the social niche perspective as the options for people who find themselves in unfavourable environmental circumstances. In answering this question, the concepts of transformation, liberation, survival and authentication are explored.

From the standpoint of the strengths perspective transformation and liberation are the ultimate goals. Transformation and liberation mean the opportunity of choice, commitment and action "to transcend circumstances, to develop one's own powers, to face adversity down, to stand up and be counted" (Saleebey, 2002^a:7). People have internal and external strengths with which they can transform, but sometimes need to be reconnected to them (Saleebey, 2002^a:4,7). A beneficent relationship between the individual and the larger social and physical environment, however, is required (Saleebey, 2002^a:11). Taylor (1997:224) in turn thinks more in terms of 'escapement': people should escape entrapment.

Which are then the strengths: those that help you survive within specific unfavourable circumstances, or those that help you escape from your negative circumstances? Probably both. Taylor and MacKenzie (1992:248) for example distinguish between two types of 'coping strategies': the development type and

the survival type. Some authors (such as Taylor) see strengths more in terms of the development type, i.e. that which helps you rise above or escape from your circumstances, while other authors (Taylor & Mackenzie, 1992) make out a good case for a place of the latter, the strengths that enable you to continue meaningfully with your life in adverse circumstances.

Here the ecological concepts of *niche compression*, *niche expansion* and *niche shift* (Smith, 1980:599) offer sensible concepts for indicating what persons or groups do (or may do or may be helped to do) in order to improve their functioning within a particular niche. *Niche compression* occurs when resources are limited and the organism is forced to make its habitat smaller and utilise it better, while *release* occurs when resources are suddenly available in abundance and the organism can explore and utilise new habitats for resources. *Niche shift* occurs when totally new behavioural and feeding patterns are assumed and a new niche is established. It may be a short-term response or a long-term evolutionary response. In nature *niche shift* does not occur often.

Thus there are also different options for social groups when unfavourable circumstances prevail or a specific change occurs. A group may decide to compress its niche, i.e. to get along with fewer resources, exploit remaining resources better and/or to exploit other resources in the niche (in a sense to become a specialist). Alternatively the person or group may make a temporary or even a permanent shift. In contrast with other species human beings have the ability (a cultural strategy) to overcome the limitations of a given niche and to create new niches (Boughey, 1975:3).

On the question if and how people escape entrapment, Taylor (1997:224) thinks more along the lines of *niche shift*. He rightly states that although it is not easy, people sometimes do escape entrapment. This often happens when people realise that they themselves are resources, and they discover untapped potential. The role of the support group in this regard is familiar. In a support group a small number of people come together, co-operate, learn from each other and pool tangible resources. It can also happen when larger groups form. Due to the absence of a generic name Taylor (1997:224) suggests that this

larger group that co-operates, pools resources, provides support and shares goals be called a 'support pod'. A support pod is a large reference group that forms spontaneously to push collectively for change and success. As a result this solid group can augment their niche resources in the process of forging new skills, acquiring new strengths, and sharing new opportunities.

If within the social niche viewpoint, in addition to power (empowerment) and access to resources, other positive possibilities are considered, indigenous applications become possible. In Christianity for example things had never gone well when the church had too much power, while pressure (oppression) had brought the authentic strengths to the fore (love, caring, interceding for others). In other words, 'disabling' may be disempowering, but is not thereby necessarily destrengthening. 'Enabling' may effect empowerment, but not necessarily strengthening. Depending on the value system of the group the entrapping may therefore have an authenticating effect. Such a group then reacts according to the value identity of the group. This has two important effects, namely (1) the group's reaction to a negative environment is a positive expression of inner strength from its own identity, and (2) the group becomes a strong environment for others if its authentic value identity is sensitive to others (Venter, 2003).

5. CONCLUSION

In this chapter an attempt was made to describe and evaluate the contribution that the strengths perspective and the social niche construct make to provide a clearer understanding of environmental strengths and risks and how these could possibly be assessed. It was endeavoured to answer the questions: What kind of environment is assumed to be a 'strong environment'? And to what degree does the construct *social niche* provide a related theoretical approach to assessing environmental strengths and risks?

In summary, from the strengths perspective, an environment can be considered strong when it consists of human beings who are connected to their innate strengths and capacity for healing, where there is community and membership, mutuality and connection between people and the environment, and people who

experience the environment as strong, and contribute to making it strong. From the social niche perspective the social niche type of the *enabling niche* is suggested as a way to summarise the elements of a strong environment.

The construct of the *social niche* does provide a theoretical approach to assess the environment in terms of strengths and risks and gives better insight into the result of the transactional process between person and environment. By providing the concepts of *enabling* and *entrapping* niches, it becomes possible to conceptualise an environment in terms of strengths and risks. The descriptive elements of both types of niches also provide a possible way to categorise factors. The niche types enabling and entrapping niche, however, are grounded in only a brief description of the social niche construct as based on the ecological niche analogy. The limitations of the ecology analogy and the implied organismic worldview were not fully considered.

It is also concluded that the niche construct does not fully reflect the assumptions of the strengths perspective in terms of mainly two points: (1) the belief in the inherent strengths and capacity for healing of people (human agency), and (2) understanding reality as it is subjectively constructed. Based on this evaluation, it is thus endeavoured to broaden both the description of social niche, based on a critical evaluation of the ecological analogy, and to reflect more fully the strengths perspective.

As a result the social niche is redefined as the living environment of people, including the *place* in which people find themselves and the places typically utilised by them, the *circumstances* of that place, both social and natural/physical, the *resources* available to them and typically used by them, the other *categories of people* who are typically associated with those people, the *contribution* or initiative of people in it and the *meaning* that people construct in regard to their place and purpose.

Each of the niche components presented in the definition were discussed, evaluated and in some instances broadened, as indicated earlier. The niche components can be summarised as follows:

Place and conditions: social niche refers to a space in the environment, and human beings occupy different spaces at the same time and over the same lifespan. The conditions of a space are both physical and social. How people experience this space and what meaning they attach to it will be subjective and reflect their values.

Resources: humans need both tangible and social resources to maintain themselves. A human's slot in space is not only set by the availability of these resources, but also by their adequacy and acceptability. The variety of resources people need to maintain themselves is captured by the concept of *niche width* (or size), which can be either narrow or broad, depending on the special needs of people or categories of people. What people consider their needs to be, and if they consider resources to be available, *adequate* and *acceptable* will reflect their social and personal opinions and values.

Categories of people: The social niche is inhabited by different categories of people, or social categories. These categories differ socially, but being human, are essentially the same (and all have dignity). Social categories of people are found in association with other categories of persons, and the interaction between them can be described in terms of both competition and co-operation.

Function and meaning: People transmit information across generations through symbols, meanings and social forms. Peoples' response to their external world is grounded in their social relationships and cultural traditions. This reality is created and continually recreated by people through their social interaction, by acts of interpretation, and influenced by the context in which they occur. People are active agents and make a contribution in their niche.

Finally this researcher proposes that differentiated options for people in negative circumstances or in an entrapping niche are available, which include both survival within a niche and escaping that niche altogether. People have the ability to rise above the limitations of a given niche by surviving them or by creating new niches. Both options and combinations thereof presuppose strength. The concepts of *niche compression* and *niche shift* are useful to describe these options. People survive within a limiting niche by finding ways of

doing so. It does not in all instances have to have a negative effect on people and may even be authenticating. People also survive an entrapping niche by escaping from it or by making a niche shift.

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CHAPTER 3

SOCIAL NICHES: THE EXPERIENCES OF FARM DWELLERS

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1. INTRODUCTION

Farm dwellers in the North West Province have been identified as an extremely vulnerable group in terms of physical, physiological and mental health (Vorster et al., 2000). The reasons for this state of affairs, however, are not clear. Therefore the FLAGH study was launched with the broad aim of gaining reliable information on the reasons for and contributory factors to their poor health status which could be used to design appropriate intervention programmes (Kruger, 2001). The research that is reported in this chapter forms part of this multi-disciplinary study and focuses on the farm dwellers' experience of the farm as the setting where they live and work to gain their everyday life experiences.

This chapter begins by describing the social niche as a possible framework for organising the experiences of farm dwellers and presenting background information on the farm as a setting. Then the research methods are explained and the finding of farm dwellers' experience of their environment (farm setting) presented. A discussion, which includes a social niche interpretation of the findings, concludes the chapter.

2. SOCIAL NICHE

The social niche of people reflects what they experience and describe as being (un)available to them in terms of the place or setting they occupy, the physical and social conditions of that place, the resources (both tangible and intangible)

and the categories of people present in this place and with whom they associate. It also reflects peoples' experience and description of the relationship between them and these elements, and between the elements themselves. It also reflects peoples' definition of their function and contribution in and to that setting. Peoples' descriptions also reflect what elements they experience as enabling, limiting and entrapping and what options they regard as possible (see Chapter 2; Sullivan, 1997; Taylor, 1997).

Social niches at the polar extremes can be either entrapping or enabling. Entrapping niches are highly stigmatised, their occupants are defined by their social category, they lack tangible and social resources, they have few expectations of personal progress, few incentives to set longer-term goals or work towards such goals, few natural processes that lead people to recognize and correct their own unrealistic perceptions or interpretations and little chance to learn new skills, and expectations that would facilitate escape. The enabling niche is almost the mirror image of the entrapping niche. In an enabling niche growth and development are both expected and encouraged, it lacks stigma and it has adequate social and tangible resources (see Chapter 2; Taylor, 1997:219–221).

3. BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE FARM AS A SETTING

Farm dwellers are the collective name for the farm workers and their families living on the farm where the workers are employed. Historically farm dwellers are black tenants with a white landlord. The farm in question is a family concern that started in 1960, a time that is depicted as critical for South Africa. In 1961 South Africa became a republic with H.F. Verwoerd as prime minister. The sixties were the heydays of Apartheid and were characterized by increasing international pressure, isolation, sanctions (due to its race discrimination policies) and violent unrest. It was also the period when three neighbouring British protectorates became independent, one of which was Botswana, bordering on the present North West Province.

It was also the time when 'Black spots' in white areas were identified. Black people (also on white-owned farms) were moved to different settlements, and

later also to independent homelands. One of these, Bophuthatswana (independence 1977), is situated near the farm in question. As a result labourers lost their South African citizenship and were only allowed in the country when work was available. Even then, the work was given on a one year contract basis (Cameron & Spies, 1986:291–294; Hellman & Lever, 1979:97,195–197). Whites' national capitalism and national culture, guardianship and supremacy over other communities in South Africa were inherently part of the ideological paradigm of the government of the time (cf. Van Eeden et al., 2000:8).

South Africa experienced economic growth in the sixties, but by 1974 this had weakened appreciably. During this same period farming was in the process of developing from a largely pastoral base to a modernised, mechanised one. South African society was stratified along racial and ethnic lines, and as a result there was great social distance between groups (also between farmer and farm worker) (Cameron & Spies, 1986:303–305; Hellman & Lever, 1979:224–225). This former system was interspersed with old-fashioned and rigid ideas and practices that affected the farming communities in a profound way (cf. Steinberg, 2002; Van Onselen, 1996).

At present farming finds itself in a process of renewal, in which various attempts are made to renovate the former system. Farms are now commercialised and managed as businesses. Promulgation of land reform laws, labour laws, and the Security of Tenure Act changed the relationship between farmer and labourer to a wage relationship. Forced removals are regulated, farm workers have gained certain land rights, and a minimum wage is guaranteed (cf. Auret, 2001; Steinberg, 2002:67-69). The reaction of farmers to these new laws, due to the uncertainty of its possible effects, include attempts to remove workers from farms, and to close farm schools. Some farmers, however, do become involved in various attempts to empower farm workers. Unions target farms, and this leads to unrest and troubled relationships between workers and farmers (Auret, 2001). The agricultural sector is a major source of jobs, and important for the development of rural areas. With unemployment estimated at 41% for black South Africans (Schlemmer & Moller, 1997:28), the job options of

mostly marginally skilled and illiterate farm workers are limited. It is against this general background that farm dwellers' response to their external world could be understood more fully.

At the time of the fieldwork, two sons of the original farmer as well as a grandson were managing the farm in question. The farm had cattle, dry land and irrigated land. The dairy was shut down during 2002. Wheat, maize, seed, peanuts, sugar beans and potatoes were produced. Farming is labour intensive and therefore 62 permanent employees, 70 seasonal workers (five months of the year) and in peak seasons, a number of occasional workers were employed. Permanent employees and their families numbered about 300. Most were housed in brick houses with electricity, toilets and bathroom facilities. Some occupied single quarters and self-built shelters. Housing and water were available free of charge, while electricity was available on a pre-paid basis. Facilities available on the farm were a nursery school, a primary school, a public phone and a small store. An unqualified local resident ran the nursery school and three qualified teachers the primary school. The small store was the initiative of the farmer's wife (Anon, 2001; Kruger, 2001).

The farm dwellers on this farm formed a diverse group. The majority belonged to the Setswana group, which is one of the black South African ethnic groups and the main indigenous group of the North West Province. Most farm dwellers are Setswana-speaking, and most understand and speak Afrikaans (some better than others), which is the language the farmers (employers) speak.

4. RESEARCH METHODS

Qualitative methods (Bryman, 1995:45; Schurink, 1998:252) were used in this study. Interviews (Fontana & Frey, 1994:366; Thorn, 1997:118) and participant observation (Schurink, 1998^b:278) were conducted with farm dwellers from the settlement on the farm. The participants were selected purposefully (Creswell, 1994:148). All the participants were farm dwellers of this particular farm, which was the initial farm identified for the FLAGH study. Initial data collection took place during the period when the multi-disciplinary research team collected

data. Subsequent data collection was done individually with the assistance of a fieldworker.

The fieldwork was conducted between December 2001 and April 2003. The researcher's membership of the FLAGH research team facilitated entry into the setting. Multiple methods of data collection were used. First, unstructured interviews were used to get participants to broadly express their views on living in a farm village and to expand freely on their lives on the farm. Twenty farm dwellers (six women and 14 men) served as initial informants. Regular discussions about the findings and observations of other research team members were used to verify this information. Secondly, participant observation was conducted in the settlements during which time informal conversations with community members took place. A black fieldworker – proficient in Afrikaans, English, Xhosa and Setswana – accompanied the researcher during these visits and served as a cultural and language interpreter. These conversations allowed the researcher to confirm observations with participants and to verify tentative patterns or themes. Field notes were kept of these activities. Thirdly, unstructured interviews with a schedule (Schurink, 1998^c:299) were conducted later in the study in order to gather more data, to confirm the present findings and to ensure validity.

Initial observations and findings were evaluated, and this analysis directed the subsequent research process. As the research progressed, relevant events were compiled, compared and continuously evaluated. Methodological triangulation (De Vos, 1998:359) was done by means of comparing these qualitative findings with data obtained from two quantitative measures, namely the Sense of Coherence Scale (SOC) (Antonovsky, 1993) and the Quality of Life Inventory (QOLI) (Frisch, 1994), as well as all other relevant FLAGH findings (Kruger, 2003).

All interviews were conducted on the farm, either in the hall used for worker meetings, in a classroom at the school on the farm or at the participant's home. All informal discussions were held in the settlement at the participants' homes. The initial interviews were conducted in Afrikaans. All subsequent interviews were conducted in Afrikaans and Setswana. The fieldworker acted as

translator. Formal interviews were tape recorded and transcribed for coding and analysis. The Setswana transcriptions were translated.

Of the 20 initial interviews, 12 (six men and six women) were selected for analysis. The eight remaining interviews, as well as the field notes, were used for verification purposes. In order to reduce data the five-stage approach of Marshall and Rossman (Poggenpoel, 1998:342–343) was followed. To ensure validity, data were co-coded by another researcher and findings discussed until consensus was reached. The strength perspective of Saleebey (2002), the social niche construct of Taylor (1997) and social constructivism formed the theoretical framework for the discussion of the findings.

Due to the cultural and language difference between the researcher and the participants, the possible effect of ethnocentrism, and the fact that the researcher was deeply touched by the workers' experiences, the trustworthiness of findings was very carefully considered. Optimum trustworthiness was established by means of triangulation of data, member checking, repeated observations at the research site, an audit trail, peer examination, clarification of researcher bias, and dense description (cf. Creswell, 1994:157-158; Krefting, 1991:217).

5. FINDINGS

Analysis of the farm dwellers' narratives produced six categories. See Figure 1 for an outline of these categories and the subsequent sub-categories. A discussion of these categories follows.

FIGURE 1: OUTLINE OF THE FINDINGS ON THE EXPERIENCE OF FARM DWELLERS OF THEIR LIFE ON THE FARM

❑ Employment • Unhealthy working conditions for men • Employment security threatened • Grievance procedures unsatisfactory • Limited work opportunities and under-employment of women ❑ Income and spending • Inadequate income and high cost of living • A debt trap • A longing for the former practice of 'mahala' • Supplementing income ❑ Housing • Housing security threatened • Availability and access to housing outside the neighbourhood a concern	❑ Transportation • Distance, means of transport and cost involved are major considerations ❑ Community life on the farm • The importance of family and friends • Lack of connection between residents • Community life in the past was better • Ambivalence about the employer as support system ❑ People, places and services outside the farm • Importance of extended family • Church as a source of strength • Health services a link with the outside world
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5.1 Employment

Employment issues were spoken about most by the participants. The sub-categories that are a result of the analysis of this category are the unhealthy working conditions for men, the threat they experience to their employment security, their frustration with the grievance procedure in the work situation and the limited opportunities for and underemployment of women.

Farm dwellers believe that **the working conditions of male labourers are unhealthy**. They believe these conditions are the cause of many of their illnesses. *"...we work in the dust, we work with insecticides..."* Farm workers often complained that the work was too taxing and that they were tired. This seemed to be more than a physical tiredness: *"If I'm with friends, we chat, we*

banter, we laugh. But when I think about work tomorrow, I become sad, then I am already tired for tomorrow's work."

Labourers are reluctant, even scared to talk about their frustrations due to the threat to their **employment security**. One participant even sought confirmation that what he told me would be considered confidential, because *"...we are scared ... if my name comes up, the boss will catch me.."* When they do talk, they feel that it does not help. *"If it rain and we ask for raincoats, because ours are old and finished, he says, no we tear our coats on purpose. If I ask for new boots, because the blades cut my old boots, he says, no, I did it on purpose."* It is under these circumstances that money is deducted from a worker's salary. Workers experience this practice as unfair and very frustrating.

A **grievance procedure** for labourers does exist. According to their understanding they first have to discuss a concern with each other and then with the foreman. The foreman is the intermediary between the labourers and the farmer. The men do not experience this procedure as effective, though. They feel the foreman does not take their concerns seriously or sometimes advises them to discuss their issues directly with the farmer. Sometimes they do go to the farmer as an individual. It is mostly the younger labourers that are willing to take the risk. However, they experience the farmer's reaction to an individual complain as unsympathetic. *"If you complain as an individual, the boss says nobody else is complaining. It is only you?"*

Most of the time they are scared to go as an individual because of the threat of being fired, but also because it is against the rules. *"The rule on the farm is to first talk to the foreman, the foreman talks to the boss. You don't go by yourself. Sometimes the foreman says 'I don't work for you, if you are unhappy, talk to the boss yourself.' You see, this is not satisfactory."* Young labourers feel that it is the older generation that is scared to talk, the older generation sees the young ones as troublemakers.

In the past there had been a committee system that was remembered to had worked well, but is at present a point of contention. *"...when I was small, my father discussed matters with the boss. The boss listened. My father discussed*

issues with the people. We were together then. But my father died long ago. Now they are scared to form a committee..." It again seems to be the clash between the generations that played a role in its demise. *"...the older don't listen to us (the youth). It doesn't help to have a meeting. The foreman does not listen to our complaints."* According to the men their best option is to keep quiet and to endure, because there are few other work opportunities.

The **employment situation of women** is noticeably different from that of men. Most women do not have permanent jobs. Those that do are employed as domestic workers in local farm owners' homes. The unemployed women do seasonal work to supplement household income. They are very aware of the scarcity of job opportunities for women. However, women express the need to work. *"It was better when I worked, because now I do not get money for staying at home."* The women take responsibility for managing the household and raising the children, but are generally bored. *"When I rise I cook porridge. Then I prepare the children for school. When they are gone, I clean the house...and when I am finished with that (laugh) I sleep."* The researcher noticed that the houses and stands are kept very tidy, and that the women finish their household tasks early in the day.

5.2 Income and spending

Farm dwellers experience their **income as inadequate** to meet the demands of the **high cost of living**. Inadequate income was generally attributed to low wages of farm workers (men) and underemployment of women.

An additional circumstance that contributes to their difficulty to survive financially, according to their experience and understanding, is the practice of the employer to deduct money from their salaries due to credit at the local store, damage to equipment, and penalties when there was unrest in the community. As a result, when salaries are paid out at the end of the month, farm dwellers often find themselves in a position of only receiving a small amount of money. The practice at the local farm store is to sell on credit. Store wares are not visibly priced. When a farm dweller buys, the purchases are written up and they

only know by the end of the month how much they owe. They lack control of how much they spend and have available for further spending.

Efforts on their side to advocate for a change in these practices have been to no avail. As a result they experience themselves as being at the mercy of the shop owners and powerless to do anything about it. Of course, they realise they are dependent on these shops for subsistence. Farm dwellers are aware that they are caught in a **debt trap**. Starting the month with only a small amount of money to work with leads to another month of buying on credit and borrowing from others. *"We get R500, but due to various deductions – for milk, maize meal, meat and credit at the shop, you get maybe R123 at the end of the month."* A general feeling of despondency is conveyed, *"What will we do? We can do nothing."* *"...when I work, I cannot work with my whole heart. When I think of my salary, and how little I am going to be paid in cash, it is difficult for me."*

The general perception of outsiders (but also farm dwellers themselves) is that farm dwellers do not have the know-how or even the will to manage their money properly. This perception is heightened by the high incidence of alcohol abuse by farm dwellers. *"Yes, they are going to booze again. They know nothing about money. If they get paid higher salaries, they will only play with it!"* In spite of this, some farm dwellers struggle with the idea of budgeting and saving, and even have some success in their endeavours. They are fully aware that money does not have its former buying power. *"...Today's money is not like yesterday's money...today's money doesn't buy much."* There is consensus among farm dwellers (both men and women), however, that the only real solution to their money problem is an increase in salaries. *"I think the boss should increase the salaries to at least R800 or R700, that would improve my life."* Farm dwellers also conveyed fear to discuss their dissatisfaction about salaries, based on threats that they will lose their jobs if they press the issue of money. *"If you convey dissatisfaction about your salary, they say you are a bad person. They could give you the sack!"*

Farm dwellers spoke with a sense of longing about the **former practice of 'mahala'**; the time when they received part of their wages in kind, e.g. mealy

meal or meat. *"Things have changed. We did not buy maize meal in the past. Now we have to. And meat. Everything. Even electricity!"* Another one said, *"Yes, if the people can receive mahala again, it will be better."*

Farm dwellers conveyed an assortment of ways in which they **supplement household income**. For those that do have the means to travel to town, buying and selling is a much-preferred way to make extra money. They buy products in town and sell it to the community members at a profit. Borrowing money is also a general occurrence. Farm dwellers borrow from each other and buy each other's products on credit on a daily basis. They also borrow from the farmer, but only if they need to make a big outlay, and for funerals. The farmer also has a saving system going whereby farm dwellers can save and earn interest. Some farm dwellers make use of this system to save for bigger outlays. Some women practise a tradition named 'stokvel' where they agree to pool an amount of money on a regular basis, which then goes in turn to each member of the stokvel. This enables them to buy more expensive items.

5.3 Housing

The farmer provides housing for workers and their immediate family. Their right to live on the farm and to have a roof over their heads is directly linked to at least one family member being a labourer on the farm. If for any reason a worker cannot continue his or her labour, the family lose their housing on the farm. However, it is not only a job and housing but also a whole way of life that is lost. As a result, becoming too ill or too old to work is a constant **threat to their housing security**. *"My husband is sickly. If he is too sick to work, and I want to keep him home, he says 'I may not be sick, I must work! When the boss comes he only complains! 'You don't want to work! If you don't want to work, you should go!' He won't ask about your circumstances and be sympathetic."* Farm dwellers also remember instances where people had to leave the farm. Some were as children were part of a family that had to leave. *"My father become ill and he chased us away, even when we tried the other farm. He controls everything!"*

As soon as there is no one left in a family to work on the farm, due to sickness, death or termination of employment, the people involved lose their right to stay on the farm. Although this state of affairs affects everybody's housing security, the aged are of special concern to them. *"They are old. They cannot work anymore, but they did work here for a very long time. Now they have to go to the township where nobody knows them. Life is difficult there. They should stay here!"* This is not an acceptable situation to them.

Another threat is the possibility of being fired (chased away) if one complains about work, housing or anything else that dissatisfies the farmer. *"...if I ask the boss why does he think we are so sick, or we talk about salaries, he says we can look for work somewhere else if we are not happy with how things work here."*

The above-mentioned farm dwellers experience limitations regarding **availability and access to housing outside the farm** settlement, and older children need to attend secondary schools in town. Relatives in towns are a source of help, but sometimes that option is not open to them. Some people hire rooms or space to erect a shanty. Sometimes children even need to live on their own, in order to access schools. Most children, however, end up never going back to school. *"My sister and I are going to hire a shanty in Ventersdorp in order to attend high school. We need a high school here, because a lot of children do not have a place to stay in town and then they do not complete their schooling. As a result a lot of us are semi-literate."* The lack availability of and access to shelter away from the farm is a serious concern for the farm dwellers.

5.4 Transportation

When farm dwellers have to go somewhere outside the boundaries of the farm, distance, how to get there and transport costs are major considerations. Farm dwellers lack personal and public transport and depend on different means of transport. Walking, hiking, taxis and getting a lift with the farmer are the most common ways people on the farm get around. *"The boss transports us to the doctor and back home. If he can't, I have to find transport via a taxi."*

Getting around is time consuming. For example, a woman told this researcher that she had to go to town every end of the month to pay their burial society contributions. Every month she walks to the main road (4 km away) and waits to get a lift. Sometimes it takes several days before she has any luck. In financial terms the cheapest means of transport are walking, hiking and getting a lift with the farmer. However, in terms of time and safety it is expensive. Transport by taxi is costly and only used if it is absolutely necessary and if money is available. *"It is difficult. The doctor's fee is R90, transport from here to Carltonville is R12 and again R12 to come home."* This constitutes 23% of a R500 salary.

In terms of retail services, the local store on the farm property, as well as two stores on neighbouring farms, 1 and 5 km away respectively, are the most accessible sources for buying household necessities. The nearest other stores are in town about 50 km away and due to transport limitations, difficult to access. The farm dwellers identified transport as one of their main needs on the farm. Having access to regular affordable transport would make a significant positive change to their lives.

All the farm dwellers have the same restrictions, but it affects men and women differently. Most men work and can only move around outside working hours. They have Sundays off, as well as every second Saturday – not much free time is available. The men with bicycles are more mobile if distances are not too great. Women, because they do not have formal jobs, can hitch-hike to where they wish to go any time of the week. Sometimes they hitch a ride with the farmer when he goes to town for business.

5.5 Community life on the farm

The researcher's first impression in the settlement was that the community lacked a sense of connection to each other. This impression was strengthened repeatedly, through the interviews and the researcher's observations during consecutive field visits. *"I don't see them, because I don't go there."* It was only later on that the researcher realised that this observation excludes the very strong connection between family members.

Family and friends are an important source of support to farm dwellers. Although concern about family members in general is a basic part of social life, support is given especially between husband and wife. It was mainly the female participants who gave accounts of support between husband and wife. *"If we have a problem we discuss it amongst each other. We are close. We plan the future together, how to solve problems, how to manage finances. This makes us feel better."* Family members living in the settlement are also very important. One's welfare and sense of belonging in the community is influenced to a large degree by having or not having other family members living in the settlement. *"It is through my mother that I came here. My parents had marital problems and my mother came to stay with her sister here on this farm when I was still a little boy."* Another participant said *"You just keep quiet if you don't have family in this place. A lot of people here are related."*

Different processes seem to play a role in the **low level of connection between community members**. Some farm dwellers keep their social network very small. They reserve social contact for family and carefully selected friends, as a way to protect themselves against a community from which they feel alienated. The alienation is due to alcohol abuse and associated fighting, common in the community. Those who did socialize and drink with neighbours in the past, suffered negative consequences. *"Say for instance I visit a friend, we drink, others join us. We all become loud. Monday at work the boss calls us in and says: 'I am deducting money from your pay – because you were drunk and rowdy'. That is why I don't want to socialize anymore. I don't want my money to be deducted."* As a result these neighbours start to avoid social contact. Some farm dwellers are appointed by the farmer to report on who the rowdy ones are. As a result these farm dwellers do not trust each other and only communicate on a superficial level. *"No, for me it is better to keep my distance. There are no real friends – friends betray you. You cannot trust people here. I will rather make friends with people elsewhere..."*

Those farm dwellers who had been living on the farm for a long time recall times when **community life had been more positive**. They tell about a community that was more stable and a time when the relationship with the farmer and his

family more positive. *"A lot of people here are new. In the past it was better, we did everything together. Now it is difficult, it is not nice anymore. Everyone is doing his own thing in his house."* Apart from a stable community that is disrupted by an influx of new people, these new people are sometimes of different cultural groups. *"We share a house with a man. He is from the Eastern Cape. He is a bushman (also Afrikaans-speaking) and has a good relationship with the boss. If you do or say anything, he tells the boss. It is better to just keep quiet!"* It seems that the farmer exploits the man's marginalized position by making him an informant. *"It was nice in the past, but not anymore. In the past we played with the boss's children. Not anymore. We took photos. They don't do that anymore...."*

Apart from being the employer **the farmer is also a source of support** to farm dwellers. He provides lifts into town, lends money if anyone needs to go to the doctor and sometimes provides items for free. It is often with mixed feeling that the farm dwellers accept this support. The farmer decides if and when he is going to help. A farm dweller cannot depend on being helped. *"They will first wait to see if you cope on your own and then give you money to go to the doctor."* It sometimes seems to be a question of 'I will help you, if you obey me'. *"If the boss helps you, you should respond by following his rules. Don't talk back, because he is your boss and his wife your mother. The boss helps you when you need help."* Their longing for the former practice of 'mahala' was discussed previously. It seems, however, that the 'mahala' they do receive is experienced as not given in a spirit of giving, but with ulterior motives. *"They give us meat, but not for the sake of giving, because I know there is a surplus. There is not enough storing space. Then we know we will receive something."*

5.6 People, places and services outside the farm

Farm dweller's contact outside the farm setting is very limited. Extended family, the church and health services are mentioned most by farm dwellers as contact points outside their immediate living environment.

Contact with or needs for contact with the **extended family** who are not living on the farm are often mentioned by farm dwellers. They are sources of support,

social contact and identity. Actual contact depends on family living in close proximity to the farm. The more distant your family, the less contact there is. Telephones are also not freely available in the settlement. However, distance is relative – what they experience as far, is in real terms not far if you have access to transport or can afford to travel.

The **church** is an important source of strength to farm dwellers. Farm dwellers attend different churches in the surrounding area and for some it is their main link to the outside world. *"The only place we go is to church."* For others church is about more than getting out. *"I like my church a lot. When we sing, my hart becomes more open and I feel better."* This participant, however, stated in no uncertain terms: *"The church does not solve our money problems."*

Health services are an important link to the outside world. Visits to the clinic, town doctors and the hospital are often mentioned. I suspect the need for health services is important for more than medical reasons – it is a way to get off the farm for a while. Illness is a good reason to be absent and to go to town. If this has something to do with your job, so much the better. The FLAGH report mentions a high incidence of psychosomatic complaints (Kruger, 2003). According to the farm dwellers, the farmer often accuses them of feigning illness. It is hypothesised that the farm dwellers' isolation and need to occasionally get out of their deadly routine impel them to take chances. The men profit most from this because they are the employed.

6. DISCUSSION

The first phase of the research focused on the farm dwellers' experience of the farm as the setting where they live and work to gain their everyday living experiences. From this exploration it was found that the farm dwellers experience their living world mostly in terms of problems. The problems they singled out centred on basic needs and social support issues. In contrast to this researcher's initial expectations, not many strengths issues were talked about. Any probes about strengths were met with resistance, an experience that is supported by a statement by Saleebey (2002^b:90) that there is often great resistance to acknowledging strengths. As a result the researcher decided for

the time being to acknowledge their need to reconstruct their lives in terms of all the problems they face and experience. Based on the premise that strengths are both those factors that help groups survive difficult circumstances and those that help them escape it, the researcher needed to know how the people negotiated their way through their problems in order to survive or escape entrapment. The researcher wanted to understand something about their resourcefulness. A second part of the research was introduced a year after the initial data collection with the aim of exploring how farm dwellers manage to continue with their lives in the midst of the problems that are an integral part of their everyday living experiences. The researcher wanted to know how they negotiated their way through their many challenges. In this second set of interviews the initial findings were validated, and data about strengths gathered. However, an important difference was noted during this phase of the data gathering process. The manner in which the farm dwellers spoke about their experiences was more positive. As they related their strategies to cope, an atmosphere of hope and pride was noted.

Interpreting their experiences against the social niche concept, the following emerge:

Regarding **the farm as place and the conditions there** the farm dwellers only talked about one aspect, namely working conditions and their negative effects on the workers' health. The poor health status of farm dwellers is supported by the finding that a large proportion of labourers presented with a reduced respiratory capacity due to an obstructed respiratory system, but also that the overall dietary intake, especially of men and children, was low, with micronutrient intake for many nutrients below 80% of the RDA. The SOC and QOLI showed a high prevalence of physical symptoms associated with stress, as well as high anger levels, internalised and managed by self-control, which could contribute to their physical symptoms and psychological stress (Kruger, 2003). It thus appears that the reasons for their poor health could be attributed to more than their working conditions, but their understanding is that the working conditions are the cause. Any intervention should take this understanding in consideration.

The bulk of the farm dwellers' accounts relate to the **resources** they need and the difficulties they experience mainly because of the inadequacy/insufficiency and inaccessibility of the resources both on the farm and outside the boundaries of the farm. The resources on the farm they talked about were employment, the grievance procedure, income, housing, transportation, family and friends, and the farmer. Outside the farm, resources mentioned were family living elsewhere, the church and health services.

Employment is available for the able-bodied men – for women and the 'disabled', it is unavailable or only available to a limited degree. Although at the time of the research farm dwellers' cash wages compared favourably to the national average of R544 per month, they experienced it as inadequate. Nationally farm dwellers, however, are considered the poorest group in the formal sector (De Lange, 2001:14). A grievance procedure is available, but is experienced as inadequate. The housing available to farm dwellers could certainly be regarded as a resource, but their experience thereof is dominated by their uncertainty about its longer-term retainability and what their options are if they should lose their housing on the farm. Access to resources outside the farm is limited due to a lack of transport. The experience of not having secure and sustainable access to these resources is captured in the concept of *vulnerability*, which refers, according to May and Norton (1997:113), to potential circumstances rather than to concrete conditions and addresses the prevailing insecurity of the livelihoods of poor people.

The farm dweller's experiences regarding acquiring the resources they need could also be explained in terms of their limited personal and social power: deductions against their wages, constant debt, fear of being fired ('*wegjaag*', literally 'chased away'), which is central in their Afrikaans vocabulary and living experience, the lack of job security and security of housing, power issues between farmer and farm dwellers, but also between the different groups of farm dwellers, especially the younger versus older generation and older residents versus newcomers, and the matter of 'mahala', which captures the dependency relationship that came into existence between farmer and farm dweller.

The categories of people that came out in the farm dwellers' accounts were other family living on the farm, friends, the other residents in the settlement, teenagers not attending school, the elderly, the farmer and family living elsewhere. Although some of these categories were experienced as sources of strength, the farm dwellers mostly gave accounts of these groups of people as sources of stress.

The researcher's first impression that this was a community that lacked connectedness was supported by the farm dwellers' accounts of community life. It was also supported by the low sense of coherence within the community, found on the SOC (cf. Kruger, 2003). The myth of simplicity of the 'face-to-face' society (Cohen, 1985:28) and the harmony model of community development (Burkey, 1993:43) explained the researcher's impression. Researchers (like the researcher in this study) and community developers often expect small, closed, traditional communities to be closely connected and living in harmony – something that is often not the case, also not for this community. The researcher was struck by the absence of a general spirit of *ubuntu* commonly associated with African culture – the spirit of sharing and caring, the belief of being a person through other people (cf. Mbambo, 2002:7). According to Breton (2001:23-26) the properties of a resilient neighbourhood include networks of individuals who identify themselves as neighbours, feel emotionally positively connected, and engage in neighbourly behaviour. These networks are considered important, especially in economically deprived/poor neighbourhoods, but depend on a minimal sense of personal power – something that to a large degree seems to be lacking in this settlement.

The farm dwellers experience their **function** and contribution in and to the farm setting in terms of the labour they provide. The **meanings** they attach to their experiences can be explained against the background of the limited cultural understanding between the farm dwellers and the farmer/employer, as well as the matter of adapting to social change. *Mahala* is one example in terms of cultural understanding. According to Zerwick (2003) *mahala* came with the white people as part of paternalism and the custom of paying wages in kind,

and is not part of the African culture. *Ubuntu* is the traditional norm, namely mutual giving.

In terms of social change, understanding what is happening and adapting to it is painful. For example, it brought about change in the nature of the relationship between the farmer and the farm dweller, a relationship that changed from that of a landlord and his serfs to a wage relationship. The farm dwellers experienced it as a loss of something familiar and secure to them. Farms became businesses and farm dwellers employees that are now responsible for things that were previously regarded as the responsibility of the farmer. On the other hand, farm dwellers now have rights that they did not have previously, for example security of tenure.

Exactly what these rights entail and how they can be claimed give rise to all kinds of confusion. Adapting to structural changes due to the politics of the day and accompanying laws is hurting people on a personal level. The diversity issues that were mentioned could be a reason for the poor level of connection between community members. People are not used to a heterogeneous community. Farmers who use newcomers to check on others complicate issues. Transformation on the macrolevel creates changes in microlevel relationships without people's realising and understanding the process, which contributes to their vulnerability, but not yet to personal and social power.

Although the farm dwellers described their experiences on the farm mostly in terms of that which limited and entrapped them, some positive experiences did emerge. Some farm dwellers experienced income as something that needs to be managed and, regardless of their difficult circumstances, could relate success in their endeavours in financial planning and strategies to supplement their household income. Having family, both in the settlements and outside, is a definite source of support and strength. Places to go outside the farm, like the church and health services, are a link to the outside world and thus a source of strength and support. Of the many things that they think should change on the farm to improve their lives, three are definitely a priority: salaries should increase, affordable transport should be made available and access to affordable outside housing provided. From this the researcher deduced the

following: (1) they want a better life on the farm and do not necessarily want to leave, and (2) they focus on what should be provided and not on what they can do themselves to transform their circumstances.

7. CONCLUSION

From a social niche perspective numerous entrapping elements are present in the accounts of farm dwellers of their life on the farm, namely a lack of tangible resources, a lack of social resources and stigma. The entrapping nature of farm dwellers' social niche however can not only be understood in terms of lack of social and tangible resources. The experiences and the meanings the farm dwellers attach to their environment provide the key to better understanding of the living experiences of farm dwellers and the entrapment contained in their narratives. However, it also reveals their experience of enabling elements within this environment. Taking into consideration cultural, ecological, transactional and co-constructing processes, sheds new light on and leads to a better understanding of their entrapment and also stimulates new thoughts on what is necessary to transform entrapment to enabling factors. Although the farm environment can be regarded as entrapping, not all farm dwellers' social niches could be regarded as such. Some people have succeeded in carving out a moderately enabling niche for themselves. This ability could be explained by the personal strengths of some people to cope in difficult circumstances, but also the fact that some have relatively more social power than others (e.g. being a family member of the foreman).

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CHAPTER 4

TOWARDS A SOCIAL NICHE ASSESSMENT APPROACH

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1. INTRODUCTION

From a social work perspective individual outcomes are the results of a transactional process between personal and environmental influences. It is a long-cherished conviction in social work that individual problems and successes must be framed within the larger context of family, community and society (Saleebey, 2002^c:231). However, it is also a conviction that is often not reflected in social work practice (Rose, 2000:405; Saleebey, 2002^c:230; Weick, 2000:398). Clinical practice tends to focus on personal factors, and community practice on environmental factors, while the transactional dimension is often not accounted for. The tendency is also to focus on deficits and problems in these systems and not on strengths or potential strengths.

The strength-perspective movement made social work aware of this gap, namely the tendency to focus on the pathology or deficits, and being relatively blind to strengths. However, the environmental aspect of the multidimensional equation seems to be less well developed in strength-based assessment as well, even though one of its stated principles is that the environment is full of resources (Saleebey, 2002^a:16). Strength-based models are also overwhelmingly concerned with individual human factors. In this, the strengths movement follows the same pattern of development as the traditional movement, namely placing more emphasis on the individual than on the environment (cf. Tracy & Whittaker, 1990:461). This could be ascribed to the fact that much is already known about the psychological strengths of people (Wissing, 2000), yet far less is known about environmental elements protecting

people against adversity (cf. Antonovsky, 1979; Van Eeden, 1996:225). This situation consequently points to the need for further theoretical and empirical research regarding the assessment of environmental strengths and risks.

This chapter draws on a critical evaluation of the strengths perspective and the social niche construct (see Chapter 2), as well as fieldwork findings (see Chapter 3) to propose a social niche approach for assessing the environment. The approach was further validated through peer evaluation (see Appendix 9-15). Thus this chapter has three sections: the first one evaluates environmental assessment from both the traditional and strengths-based perspectives, pointing to the need for new approaches to assess the human environment, while the second section proposes the social niche approach to assessing the human environment. The last section demonstrates and elaborates the approach by means of an example of the assessment of a community of farm dwellers' environment.

2. PERSPECTIVES ON ASSESSING THE ENVIRONMENT

This section considers traditional assessment and assessing from a strengths perspective when assessing the environment.

2.1 Traditional assessment

The Person-in-Environment System (PIE) describes, classifies and codes social functioning problems. It is a comprehensive assessment tool for collecting and ordering information regarding the person (Factor 1) and the environment of the person (Factor 2). Factor 2 categorises environmental problems in six subsystems, namely (1) economic and basic needs, (2) education and training, (3) judicial and legal, (4) health, safety, and social services, (5) voluntary association, and (6) affective support (Karls & Wandrei, 1994:23–24). Although this system attempts to include strengths, it is predominantly based on a deficit paradigm. It is also clear from its general guideline number 5 (which states that the problem should be recorded in terms of the social worker's assessment even if the client disagrees) that this system is based on the belief in power inequality between social worker and client. This belief is contrary to the

principle of the strengths perspective that we best serve clients by collaborating with them (Saleebey, 2002^a:16). Furthermore, the categorizing of problems is also problematic. The danger exists that people are reduced to the labels of the categories. In Saleebey's (2002^a:4) words: "...these labels have the insidious potential, repeated over time, to alter how individuals see themselves and how others see them. In the long run, these changes seep into the individual's identity." Graybeal (2001:237) adds, "Labels have the power not only to explain, but to confine and constrict, to objectify the client in ways that reduce the meaningful facts of their lives to secondary trivia."

In contrast to clinical assessments such as the PIE, community profiles and needs assessments, as products of community development and community work, exclusively assess the environment of people. The goal of a community profile is to analyse context and produce comprehensive, hard/objective data about a community, while the goal of a needs assessment is to establish both the nature and the context of a community's impediments, its felt needs. The main focus of assessment is on assessing environmental impediments (cf. Weyers, 2001).

The above assessment systems provide supposedly objective and comprehensive assessments of client systems. It favours external expert observation, but the danger exists that these assessments could be far removed from people's lived experience. These assessments are also not geared towards strengths of people and their environments, and how people construct their lifeworlds and reconstruct these during the assessment process itself.

2.2 Assessing from a strengths perspective

Saleebey (1999:17) points out that strengths-based assessment emphasises knowing client systems in a more holistic way: "...acknowledging their hopes and dreams, their needs, their resources and the resources around them, their accomplishments, their capacities and gifts." Problems are viewed, in part, as attempts to meet needs and realise possibilities. Normalization is thus part of the assessment process.

A review of strength-based literature on how to assess peoples' environment revealed that the idea of multidimensional assessment is widely accepted in strength-based literature (Cowger & Snively, 2002:113; Hepworth et al., 2002:198), but that strength-based models are overwhelmingly concerned with individual human factors. The assessment of environment is either omitted, or given scant attention, or is very diverse in what is assumed to be part of the environment. It was also clear that the models were designed with a developed context in mind and that underdeveloped or developing environments such as in South Africa were not taken into account. It is also obvious that what was considered 'environment' differed from author to author. What's more, in spite of a new theoretical interest in environmental factors, practice guidelines and specific practice knowledge is lagging behind (Cowger & Snively, 2002:117). This is further illustrated by an imprecise demarcation when attempting to assess the environment. See Table 1 for this researcher's analysis of a selection of texts within the strengths literature on how 'environment' as a broad and complex concept, is focused on.

As illustrated in Table 1, these diverse focuses in the assessment of the environment point towards the different attempts to give structure to a complex concept, each of which will be meaningful within a specific context. How 'environment' is defined will give an indication what aspects of the environment will be assessed. The authors mentioned in Table 1 alert us to the fact that a useful assessment considers the environmental dimension as important as the personal one, but unfortunately they do not provide the same detailed practice guidelines and specific practice knowledge as in the case of client strengths.

TABLE 1: DIVERSE ASPECTS OF ENVIRONMENT

	Cowger & Snively (2002)	Rapp (2002)	Fast & Chaplin (2002)	Kirsthadt (2002)	Larson & Dearmont (2002)	Breton (2001)	Graybeal (2001)	Hepworth et al. (2002)
Family/Family networks/ clan	x				x		x	x
Significant others/ friends	x						x	
Voluntary groups/Local neighbour networks	x					x		
Community/Community groups	x				x		x	
Public institutions	x							x
Formal resources/ services		x	x					
Informal resources/ Natural helpers		x	x					
Housing/sense of home				x				
Transportation				x				
Financial				x				
Vocational/Educational				x				
Social support, intimacy, spirituality/Religious/spiritual belief system				x				x
Health				x				
Leisure time, talents skills				x				
Cultural factors/Ethnicity					x	x		
Local neighbour networks						x		
Local organizations						x		
Geographic centre of community						x		
Social and physical infrastructure						x		
Macro policies						x		
Social environment							x	
Political environment							x	
Economic environment							x	
Social network								x
Personal service providers								x

The environment concept refers to everything external to people, physical as well as social, that impact on their social functioning (cf. Cohen, 1985:15; Homan, 1994:364; Karls & Wandrei, 1994:23; Schriver, 2001:502; Sullivan & Rapp, 2002:250). The environment has multiple dimensions, and many layers within these dimensions. The typical dimensions in environmental typologies are: the physical environment, both natural and built; the social interactional environment, including personal social networks, family, group, neighbourhood and community; the institutional/organisational environment; the socio-political and cultural environment; and the experienced environment (cf. Kemp et al.,

2002:22). The last dimension, the experienced environment, is of particular importance to the researcher. While the other dimensions usually are taken to refer to the objective world, the experienced environment refers to the ways people make meaning within the experienced world. It is this dimension that links people directly with their environment and where insight into the transactional process can be uncovered. The experienced environment is the pathway to uncovering strengths and to developing relevant and sustainable intervention.

Cowger (1994:263) add an insightful perspective on environmental assessment from a strengths perspective. According to her, environmental assessment deals with two interdependent and interactive dynamics: personal and social empowerment. It recognizes that the definitions and characteristics of people are closely bound with their context or environment, through the process of social involvement. In this regard resources and opportunity in the environment of the person play an important role. The availability of resources and opportunity, however, depends on how society distributes its resources. To take charge and control of one's personal life, to be empowered, assumes that the resources and opportunities for that empowerment are available. However, society and its component parts do not necessarily distribute resources in an equal and just manner. Thus, personal power, the social power endemic to the person's environment, and the relationship between the two are the core of assessment from a strengths perspective (Cowger, 1994:263–264).

Central to the process of finding strengths is listening and asking questions. According to Saleebey (2002^b:88), listening to the stories and narratives of clients and asking specific kinds of questions, rather than zipping through an assessment protocol, are the basic elements of uncovering strengths.

Questions that could be useful for exploring the environment and the possible strengths contained in it, based on Saleebey (2002^b:89), are survival questions (e.g. how have you managed to survive thus far, given all the challenges you have had to face?), support questions (e.g. what associations, organisations, or groups have been especially helpful to you in the past?), exception questions (e.g. when things were going well in this community (life), what was different?),

possibility questions (e.g. what now do you want out of this community (life)?), and esteem questions (e.g. what is it about your community and its accomplishments that give you real pride?). According to De Jongh and Miller (1995:731–732) coping questions (which are similar to Saleebey's survival questions) are especially useful when a client is stuck in a problem and risks-orientated narrative, due to feelings of hopelessness or an acute crisis.

Graybeal (2001:237) developed the ROPES model for identifying and utilising personal and environmental resources and strengths. ROPES is an acronym for Resources, Opportunities, Possibilities, Exceptions, and Solutions. It is a useful tool that summarises the general perspective and specific questions that a practitioner can use for guidance in the process of finding strengths. These more general types of questions can be supported by more specific questions, such as suggested in the Person-Centred Strengths Assessment developed by Kisthardt (2002:177-181), which explicitly covers environmental aspects of clients' lives. Housing, transport, finances, vocation/education, social support, intimacy, spirituality, health and leisure time are covered by this assessment protocol. Each aspect is supported by several questions designed to uncover people's aspirations and desires for their environment and their place within that environment.

3. THE SOCIAL NICHE ASSESSMENT APPROACH

In this section the concept of social niche is discussed, the goal and assumptions explained and the structure and process discussed.

3.1 Description of the concept of social niche

The social niche refers to the living environment that people occupy - their experienced environment. The social niche of people reflects what they experience and describe as being available to them in terms of the place and different settings they inhabit, the conditions of that place, the resources (both tangible and intangible) and the categories of people present in this place. It also reflects people's experience and description about the relationship between them and these elements, and between the elements themselves. It

also reflects the people's definition of their function and contribution in and to that setting. These descriptions also reflect what elements people experience as enabling, limiting and entrapping, and what options they regard as possible. A niche can be regarded as optimal or realized. An optimal niche refers to conditions and resources that would enable people to function at the best possible level (the ideal situation), while a realised niche refers to the more limited spectrum of conditions and resources which allows people to make a life (the actual situation). All niches have, to a greater or lesser degree, enabling *and* entrapping elements (cf. Taylor, 1997, Chapter 2).

3.2 Goal of the social niche approach

The goal of the social niche assessment approach is to provide a framework to review people's environmental strengths and risks/stressors based on their own experience and understanding, in collaboration with another person (social worker), so as to co-construct a description of their experienced environment and their active role in that environment.

3.3 Basic assumptions of the social niche assessment approach

A social niche assessment is based on the following assumptions.

3.3.1 Strengths are inherent to both humanity and the environment

All people have innate wisdom and capacity for transformation, even in the midst of conditions of pain and suffering. Human beings can generate their inherent goals and vision for a better quality of life, and in so doing transform their world. A strong environment depends on human beings who are 'connected' with their innate strengths and who contribute to building a strong environment. An environment is strong when there are community and membership that provide protection against alienation, marginalisation and oppression, resources to fulfil needs and a beneficent relationship between the individual and the larger social and physical environment (cf. Saleebey, 2002^a:1-11).

3.3.2 *People construct knowledge about reality*

People do not only interact with their environments, they also co-construct the social world (Kondrat, 2002:1). Constructivism focuses on the meaning-making activity of a person, and points out the unique experiences of each person. It suggests that each one's way of making sense of the world is as valid and worthy of respect as any other. People construct knowledge about reality (their human world) and these constructions have implications for their lives and interactions with others. People not only construct these realities as individuals, but also as social groups, and are in turn shaped by these constructed realities – society and its structures. Thus, people are seen as active agents in constructing and maintaining their larger contexts, but are at the same time constrained or enabled by aspects of their social context (cf. Kondrat, 2002:3; Miley et al., 2001:29-30).

However, it is also assumed that people, although active agents, are also subjected to an empirical material world – a reality independent of human thoughts and impressions that affects them. On the ontological level the effect of an objective/external reality is accepted. Yet, people's accounts of their world are regarded the crucial starting point of social investigation (cf. Houston, 2001). This applies to both the assessed and the assessor.

3.3.3 *A differentiated experienced environment*

The *experienced environment* refers to the environment people create through the ways they make sense of the world. This environment is assumed to be differentiated by alternative spaces. These alternative spaces are connected but not subordinated to a greater whole. In these spaces various categories of people are found who all participate in creating the reality of that environment. The environment will reflect both the strong and the weak characteristics of humanity, and these reflections produce messages that reinforce the ways people experience their place in the world.

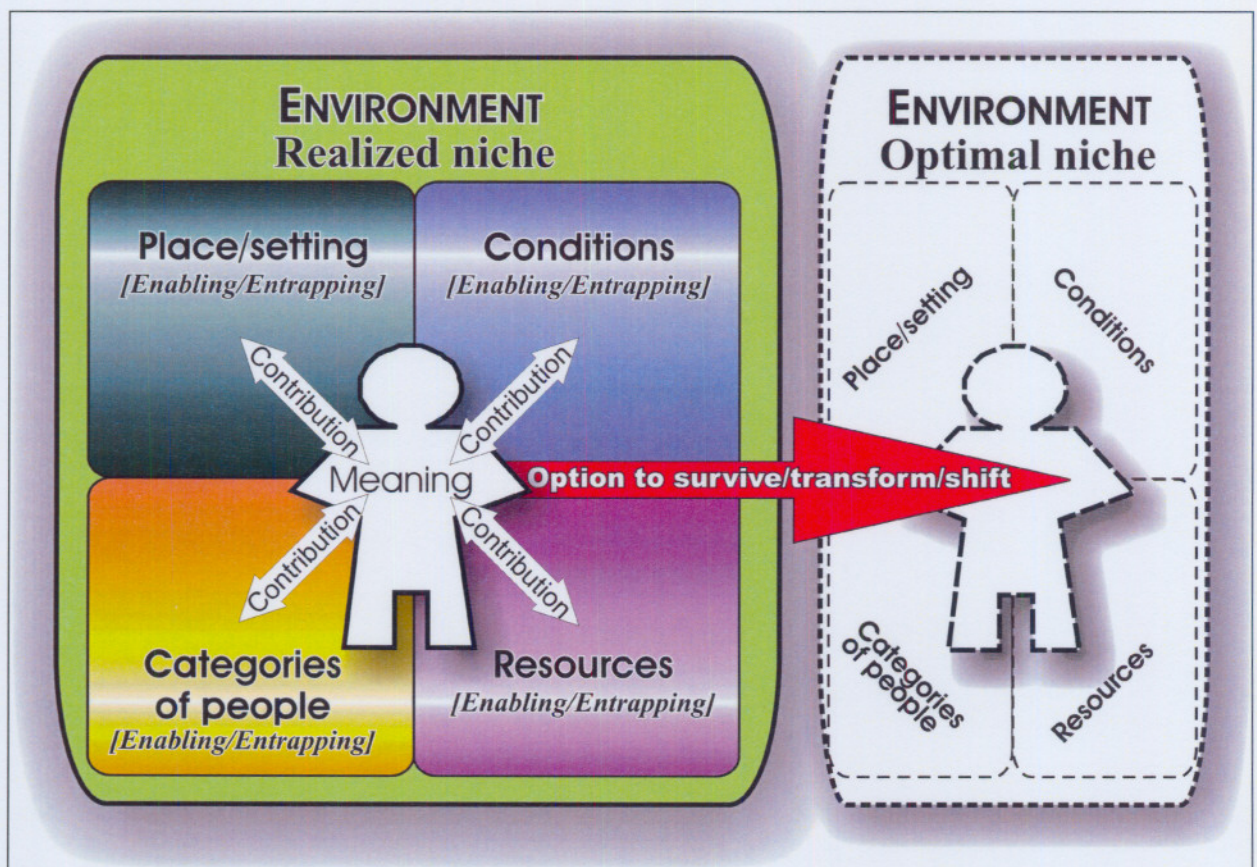
3.3.4 Assessment is a collaborative meaning-making process

People's accounts of their world are the crucial starting point of assessment. Assessment is seen as a collaborative process between a social worker and a client, in constructing a coherent description of a client system and its circumstances that include system as well as environmental strengths and risks/stressors (Cowger & Snively, 2002:113; Hepworth et al, 2002:187; Saleebey, 2002^a:16). For the purpose of this approach the focus of assessment is on environmental strengths and risks/stressors as experienced by the occupants of that environment.

3.4 Structure and process of the approach

The structure of the social niche assessment approach, as adapted from Taylor (1997) (see Chapter 2) is illustrated in Figure 2, and the process is subsequently described briefly.

FIGURE 2: SOCIAL NICHE ASSESSMENT APPROACH



To do the assessment the following process should be followed:

Step 1: Explore the realized niche in terms of the main elements

Meaning: refer to the language and unique explanatory frameworks people use to transmit information. People's response to their external world is grounded in their social relationships, cultural traditions and values. The dominant perspective about them and their circumstances also influences it. People create and continually recreate their reality through their social interaction, by acts of interpretation, and through the influence of the context in which they occur. They attach meaning to their environmental experiences. These meaning system contain the attitudes, assumptions and interpretations of other people in their niche. Ask people to describe how they make a living in this environment and carefully listen, learn and use their language and explanatory frameworks.

Contribution: people are socially involved in their niche, and contribute to shaping their niche. At the same time they are in turn shaped by it. How do people describe themselves in terms of their involvement and how much power do they demonstrate and experience as available to them?

Place: refers to the physical place and different settings in the environment that people occupy, which can also be different places at the same time and over the same lifespan. How do people experience this place? What settings do they frequent and describe as meaningful to them?

Conditions: The conditions of a place are both physical and social. How do people experience the conditions of this place and its different settings?

Resources: refer to the tangible and social resources people need to maintain themselves. It takes into account not only the availability of resources, but also their accessibility, adequacy and acceptability. The variety of resources people need to maintain themselves is captured by the concept of *niche width* (or size), which can be either narrow or broad, depending on the special needs of people. What do people consider their needs to be, and do they consider resources to

be available, accessible, adequate and acceptable? Do they know how to obtain and use them?

Categories of people: refers to the different categories of people that are present in their niche, and the social categories of people found in association with them. The interaction between them can be described in terms of competition and co-operation. These categories of people contribute to maintaining and transforming their human environment and are thus all considered co-constructors. What categories of people do they refer to? How do they describe the nature of the relationship between these categories and themselves? How do they experience these categories of peoples' involvement in their niche?

Step 2: Identify the enabling and entrapping elements of the realized niche

With *enabling elements* is meant resources, opportunities and experiences that facilitate growth and achievement, access to adequate social and tangible resources, and opportunities that increase the ability to have meaningful interactions with others who bring different perspectives and expand one's social world. Entrapping elements include anything that people experience as limiting, such as a lack of social and tangible resources. What do people regard as appropriate, desirable and healthy regarding their niche? What do people regard as inappropriate, undesirable and unhealthy? What elements do they experience as enabling, and what as entrapping?

Step 3: Explore and prioritise people's options and choices as how to optimise their niche

People have different options regarding their niche, which range from surviving within a niche, transforming that niche, and to shifting to a different niche altogether. People have the ability to rise above the limitations of a given niche and gain control over circumstances, thus surviving them. Being in a limiting niche could even be authenticating – bringing forth inherent strength. People also have the ability to transform or, alternatively create new niches for themselves. All options and combinations thereof presuppose inherent

strength. Draw on these strengths while exploring their options and choices regarding optimising their niche. Take into account that peoples' agency (energy, motivation) will be affected by how much personal and social power they feel they have. Their choices will also be influenced by their expectations of you and what they perceive you can do for them. Although their options and choices should be carefully and continually explored, whatever they identify should be the starting point of any further actions. It should never be disregarded.

Step 4: Consider supplementing information from other assessments (e.g. PIE, community profile and needs assessment) together with the client

These assessments influence the social construction of the reality of peoples' niches. Introduce information from these other assessments and continue the collaborating assessment process until a basis for consensus is reached about a valid description of their niche and their possible choices. This continued collaborating process should include all significant people that would be involved in the plan of action (e.g. multi-disciplinary team).

Step 5: Develop a plan of action

Although the focus of this chapter is assessment and not intervention, assessment establishes the framework for intervention (Kemp et al., 2002:183). Thus a few general pointers regarding intervention will be discussed with the understanding that these guidelines will need to be operationalised and tested for specific contexts.

The goal of intervention following a social niche assessment will be social empowerment (which presupposes personal empowerment) to enable and assist people to be involved in optimising their niches. Realising this goal already starts with the manner in which the assessment is conducted. The following suggestions regarding intervention are consistent with the social niche approach. Intervention should include processes of transforming peoples' individual and collective perspectives through critical analysis of the impact of environmental conditions, and enhance peoples' ecological competencies in

navigating the external world (Kemp et al., 2002:30-31). Intervention should encourage participation and connect people with other people, as well as with the resources in their environment "through the bartering of their capacities and resources, strengths, and competencies for mutual benefit" (Saleebey, 2002^c:237), replacing the idea that they are exclusively dependent on professional help, with the belief that they *do* have the strengths in themselves and in their environment that can be employed and developed to optimise their social niche (cf. Saleebey, 2002^c:241). According to Benard (1997:179), building community and creating belonging are the essence of fostering resilience, and it presents both personal and political challenges.

On the clinical level solution-focused and narrative therapy (see Greene & Lee, 2002:187-195 for a summary) would complement the social niche approach. On the community level the narrative approach to community development developed by Du Plessis (2000) and Reyneke (2000) and the participatory partnership model for social work in informal settlements developed by Van Schalkwyk (1997) provide complementary intervention strategies.

4. CASE EXAMPLE

The following is an example of an assessment done by means of the social niche approach. This assessment is based on the findings of research that was undertaken with the aim to explore and describe farm dwellers' experience of their environment (see Chapter 3). This research was part of a larger project, the FLAGH study, that examined the contributory factors to the poor health status of farm dwellers, which could be used to design appropriate intervention programmes (Kruger, 2001). The aim in what follows is not to present a full account of the research, but is rather a more focused practical aim of elaborating the social niche approach.

4.1 Background

Prior to the investigation the following information was available:

The setting is a community of farm dwellers on a farm in the North West Province, approximately 50 km from the nearest town. The farm consists of

pasture, dry land and irrigated land. Cattle, wheat, maize, seed, peanuts, sugar beans and potatoes are produced. Farming is labour intensive and therefore 62 permanent employees, 70 seasonal workers (five months of the year) and a number of occasional workers are employed for peak seasons. Permanent employees and their families come to 300 individuals consisting of 67 households. Most are housed in brick houses with electricity, toilet and bathroom facilities. Some occupy single quarters and self-built shelters. Housing and water are available free of charge, while electricity is available on a pre-paid basis. Other facilities available on the farm are a nursery school, a primary school, a public phone and a small store. An unqualified local resident runs the nursery school and three qualified teachers the primary school. The small store is the initiative of the farmer's wife (Anon, 2001; Kruger, 2003). The majority of the farm dwellers on this farm belong to the Setswana group, which is one of the black South African ethnic groups and the main indigenous group of the North West Province.

Data was collected by means of interviews and participant observation. The two core questions that directed the interviews were "Tell me about your life here on the farm" and "What do you do to go on with and manage your lives here on the farm, regardless of all the problems you told me about"? These qualitative findings were compared with data obtained from two quantitative measures, namely the Sense of Coherence Scale (SOC) (Antonovsky, 1993) and the Quality of Life Inventory (QOLI) (Frisch, 1994) as well as all other relevant FLAGH findings (Kruger, 2003).

4.2 The assessment

The farm as "place", and its conditions

The farm dwellers only talked about one set of conditions, namely work and its negative effects on their health. Their concern about health was supported by the findings that a large proportion of labourers presented with a reduced respiratory capacity due to obstructed respiratory systems. Also, the overall dietary intake, especially of men and children, was low: micronutrient intake for many nutrients was below 80% of the RDA. On the SOC and QOLI, a high

prevalence of physical symptoms associated with stress and internalised high anger levels, managed by self-control, presented that could contribute to farm dwellers' physical symptoms and psychological stress (Kruger, 2003). It thus appears that the reasons for their poor health could be attributed to more than their working conditions, but their perception is that the working conditions are the central issue. Any intervention should take this understanding into consideration.

Resources

The bulk of the farm dwellers' accounts relate to the resources they need and the difficulties they experience because of the inadequacy/insufficiency and inaccessibility of the resources on the farm and outside the boundaries of the farm. The resources they referred to were employment opportunities, the grievance procedure, income, housing, transportation, family and friends, and the farmer himself. Outside the farm, family living elsewhere, the church and health services were mentioned.

Employment is available for healthy men, but unavailable or only available to a limited degree for women and unhealthy or old men. Although at the time of the research farm dwellers' cash wages compared favourably to the national average of R544 per month for farm workers, they experienced it as inadequate. Nationally, however, farm dwellers are considered the poorest group in the formal sector (De Lange, 2001:14). A grievance procedure was available, but the workers experienced it as inadequate. The housing available to farm dwellers could certainly be regarded as a resource, but their experiences thereof are dominated by their uncertainty about its longer term retainability and what their options are if they should lose their housing on the farm. Access to resources outside the farm is limited due to a lack of transport.

Their experience of not having secure and sustainable access to these resources places farm dwellers in an extremely vulnerable and insecure position. The farm dwellers' experiences regarding resources they need could also be explained in terms of their limited personal and social power: deductions from their wages; constant debt; fear of being fired; lack of security

regarding work and housing; unequal power between farmer and farm dwellers, but also between the different groups of farm dwellers, especially the younger versus older generation and older residents versus newcomers; *mahala* (receiving items for free), which symbolises the dependency relationship that came into existence between farmer and farm dweller in the past.

The categories of people

The categories of people living on the farm, identified by the farm dwellers, were: other family members, friends, the other residents in the settlement, teenagers not attending school, the elderly and the farmer. Family living elsewhere, however, was often mentioned and was obviously 'present' in a symbolic sense to the farm dwellers. Although some of these categories were experienced as sources of strength (especially the family living on the farm as well as elsewhere), the farm dwellers mostly gave accounts of these groups of people as sources of stress.

This researcher's first impression that this was a community lacking connectedness, was supported by the farm dwellers' accounts of community life. It was also supported by the low sense of coherence within the community, depicted on the SOC (cf. Kruger, 2003). The myth of the simplicity of the 'face-to-face' society (Cohen, 1985:28) and the harmony model of community development (Burkey, 1993:43) explains this researcher's impression. Researchers (like this one) and community developers often expect small, closed, traditional communities to be closely connected and living in harmony – something that is often not the case, certainly not this community. This researcher was struck by the absence of a general spirit of *ubuntu* commonly associated with African culture – the spirit of sharing and caring, the belief of being a person through other people (cf. Mbambo, 2002:7). According to Breton (2001:23-26) properties of a resilient neighbourhood include networks of individuals who identify themselves as neighbours, feel emotionally positively connected, and engage in neighbourly behaviour. These networks are considered important, especially in economically deprived poor neighbourhoods, but depend on a minimal sense of personal power – something that seems to be lacking to a large degree in this settlement.

Contribution and meaning

The farm dwellers experience their function and contribution in and to the farm setting mainly in terms of the labour they provide. The meanings they attach to their experiences can be explained against the background of the limited cultural understanding between the farm dwellers and the farmer/employer, as well as the role of adaptation to social change. *Mahala* is one example in terms of cultural understanding: according to Zerwick (2003) *mahala* was introduced by white people as part of a paternalistic system, i.e. the custom to pay wages in kind, and is not part of the African culture. *Ubuntu* is the traditional norm, namely mutual giving.

In terms of social change, understanding what is happening and adapting to this is painful. For example, far-reaching changes on farms since 1994 brought about change in the nature of the relationship between the farmer and the farm dweller - a relationship that changed from a landlord and his serfs to a wage relationship. The farm dwellers experience it as a loss of something familiar and secure to them. Farms became businesses and farm dwellers employees, who are now responsible for things that previously were seen as the responsibilities of the farmer. On the other hand, farm dwellers now have rights which they did not have previously, for example residential rights. Exactly what these rights entail and how they can be claimed, give rise to all kinds of confusion. The improved social conditions have not yet been translated to personal and social power. Adapting to structural changes due to the politics of the day and accompanying laws are hurting people on a personal level. The diversity issues that the dwellers mentioned could be a reason for the poor level of connection between community members. People are not used to a heterogeneous community. Transformation on the macrolevel creates changes in microlevel relationships without people realising and understanding the process, which contributes to their vulnerability.

Enabling and entrapping elements

Although the farm dwellers described their experiences on the farm mostly in terms of that which limits and entraps them, some positive experiences did

emerge. Some farm dwellers recognised income as something that needs to be managed and, regardless of their difficult circumstances, could relate success in their endeavours in financial planning and strategies to supplement their household income. Having a family, both in the settlement and outside, is a definite source of support and strength. Places to go outside the farm, like the church and health services providers, are a link to the outside world and thus sources of strength and support, as well as an opportunity to broaden their experienced environment. Some people succeeded in carving out a moderately enabling niche for themselves. This ability could be explained by the personal strengths of some people to cope in difficult circumstances, but also the fact that some have relatively more social power than others (e.g. being a family member of the foreman).

Although numerous entrapping elements are present in farm dwellers' accounts of their life on the farm, the entrapping nature of farm dwellers' social niche, however, can not be understood in terms of lack of social and tangible resources only. The meanings farm dwellers attach to their environment – an environment in which they were used to be cared for with limited expectations and opportunity for self-responsibility and the present pressure for self-responsibility – provide a key to better understanding the life experiences of farm dwellers and the entrapment contained in their narratives. There is a discrepancy between expectation and actual condition.

Options towards an optimal niche

Of the many things that farm dwellers mentioned that should change on the farm to make their lives better, three are definitely a priority to them: salaries should increase, affordable transport should be made available and access to affordable outside housing provided. However, it is important to remember that these were their initial priorities and that these priorities might have changed in a continued process of exploring and prioritising their choices.

Although they identified many limiting and entrapping elements in their niche, they did not expect or even want to escape their niche. The farm dwellers opted to survive within their niche, but do not experience themselves to have

the power to transform their niche to a more satisfactory environment. Developing personal and social power should be considered in the action plan.

5. CONCLUSION

The social niche is that place that people create for themselves as a result of their transaction with the environment. Through the interplay of their personal qualities, the qualities of their environment and their active involvement, people embed themselves in the environment - they create a social niche for themselves. Understanding this social niche is essential to understanding human functioning. The pathway to appreciating the social niche is human experience – individually as well as collectively. People translate their experiences through language and unique meaning systems.

The social niche assessment approach is developed to provide a framework and tentative method to explore and describe peoples' living environment from the inside out. Human experience and meaning are considered the vital starting point of investigating the social niche. The niche as it is at present and how it developed – the realised niche – against the niche people consider as appropriate, desirable and healthy – the optimal niche – is explored. It considers people's involvement in their niche, how they contribute to shaping the niche and how they are shaped by it. It considers the physical place and its different settings which people occupy, as well as its conditions. It realises that place and setting have symbolic meaning for people. It also considers the resources – tangible and social – and the categories of people in their niche. It takes into account the relationship between all these niche elements. The approach facilitates the identification and recognition of enabling and entrapping elements in their niche, and connects these to their expectations, choices and priorities for optimising their niche. The approach takes account of personal and social power, and aims to conduct the assessment in an empowering manner. Intervention starts with the manner in which the assessment is done.

With the social niche approach an attempt has been made to contribute towards the development of multidimensional assessment and contextual practice. A social niche assessment should thus be done in combination with individual

assessment, and is regarded as an essential part of any comprehensive assessment that endeavours to understand people in their environments.

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CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, EVALUATION, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. INTRODUCTION

Chapter 5 summarises and evaluates the research, draws conclusions and makes recommendations regarding theory, practice, education and training, as well as for further research. First a summary and evaluation of the research are presented, implications for theory, practice and education and training outlined, and then a number of conclusions drawn. The chapter concludes with recommendations and a final summary comment.

2. SUMMARY

The FLAGH study was launched by the North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus (Focus Area 9.1) with the broad aim of gaining reliable information on the reasons for and contributing factors to the poor health status of farm dwellers in the North West Province, which could be used to design appropriate intervention programmes. The research formed part of this study and focused on farm dwellers' experience of the farm as the environment where they live and work.

While a great deal is already known about the psychological strengths of people that protect them against psychological malfunctioning, far less is known about environmental elements protecting people against adversity. From a social-work perspective it is a long-cherished conviction that individual outcomes are the results of a transactional process between personal and environmental influences. However, it is also a conviction that is often not reflected in social-work practice. Strengths-based assessment models, for example, are overwhelmingly concerned with individual human factors, while practice guidelines and specific practice knowledge about environmental factors are lagging behind. This situation consequently pointed to the need for further theoretical and empirical research. The concept *social niche* was identified as a

possible framework for organising the strengths and risks as experienced by a specific group within a specific context (in this case people living on farms). Against this background a research need was identified to develop an approach to assess environmental strengths and risks. This was done by means of a literature study and an empirical investigation.

3. EVALUATION

This study is unique in the sense that it develops and describes an approach to assess the environment of people. Apart from the fact that it is a new approach, it also fills a gap regarding the assessment of the environment of people. It endeavours to apply practically the belief in the importance of multidimensional assessment by providing an approach for assessing peoples' environment. The study is also unique in the sense that it tries to find coherence between the strengths perspective and the ecological analogy by means of the social niche concept. It also undertakes to build on previous theoretical work done on social niche. If used as a supplement to more comprehensive/objective environmental assessments such as the PIE, the community profile and needs assessment, the distinctive contribution of the social niche assessment approach will be an essential, holistic-, and in-depth understanding of the environment seen from the perspective of the people living in that environment, as well as their desires and hopes.

Additional strong points of the study are:

- A presentation proposal based on Chapter 2 has been accepted for the Second International Conference on New Directions in the Humanities to be held at the Monash University Centre in Prato, Italy from 20-23 July 2004.
- Chapter 2, as an article, has been submitted for review to the International Journal of the Humanities.
- A presentation proposal based on Chapter 3 has been submitted to the National Conference for Social Service Professions on Dialogue Across Disciplines – Partnership in Development, to be held in Pretoria, 24-27

October 2004. It will be hosted by the South African Council for Social Service Professions and the Department of Social Development.

- A conceptual form of the social niche approach and its assumptions, with illustrations of the field work and empirical findings, was presented at a workshop for social work practitioners on The Strengths Perspective and Empowerment in Social Work held at the Potchefstroom Campus of the North-West University on 9 May 2003.
- The social niche assessment approach was also formally validated by peer evaluation.

The following are considered deficiencies and limitations of the research:

- Problems versus strengths

It was difficult to move from a problem-oriented narrative to a strengths-oriented one. Although resistance to acknowledging strengths could be expected, as pointed out by Saleebey (2002^b:90), other factors also played a role. The researcher's own inexperience regarding getting a strengths narrative going played a role. The context of the research, however, was also an important influence. Initial data collection took place during the period when the multi-disciplinary research team collected data on the farm. The presence of an entire research team on the farm could have created the impression that "it is now the opportunity to talk about all that is wrong, because these people can possibly help us" – strategically it was thus possibly not a good time to talk about strengths. The relationship between black people (farm dwellers in this instance) and white people (research team members) is historically paternalistic in South Africa (and even more so in the farming communities). As a result ideal circumstances were present for a relationship pattern that could be described as: 'we are blacks with problems, help us', complemented by 'we are white and experts that can help'. This, seen against the Apartheid backdrop, created a subtext of 'and you are to blame' complemented by 'we are guilty by association'.

The researcher thus decided to focus on the farm dwellers' problem-oriented narratives and, at a later stage, supplement the data with a second, more private data-gathering exercise with the aim of exploring strengths. It was successful, but the context, as described above, could not be escaped entirely.

- Diversity issues

The cultural and language differences between the researcher and the research participants, the researcher's own and the research team's ethnocentrism, political correctness and the fact that the researcher was deeply touched by the experiences of the farm dwellers and at times struggled to separate being a social worker from being a researcher, are all factors that need to be considered and bracketed on a continuous basis in order to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings.

- Possible limits in participation

Loyalty to the employer and discomfort that what they share may affect their work position may have limited the farm workers to some extent in participating freely in this study.

- Generalisability

The empirical investigation was conducted on one farm only, in a particular time slot and within the particular circumstances discussed previously. Limited generalisation of the empirical findings is thus warranted. However, it should be kept clearly in mind that the intention of qualitative research is to form unique interpretations, and not to generalise findings. Thus, several strategies were followed to ensure the external validity and reliability of findings (see Chapter 1 points 6.2.1 and 6.2.3).

- Peer evaluation

Only local experts participated in the evaluation of the social niche assessment approach, although there were three different groups, consisting of practitioners/academics, members of the FLAGH team and fourth-year students.

- **Incomplete theory**

The initial goal of this study was to explore and describe environmental strength and risk factors. In the search for an appropriate approach to explore the environment of farm dwellers, none could be found that was sufficient for the specific circumstances of the research setting. It was found that existing models were designed with a developed context in mind and that underdeveloped or developing environments such as in South Africa were not taken into account. As a result, the research goal shifted to developing an approach while following the same research method as initially planned, with only minor additions. If this research were to be repeated, grounded theory or intervention research may have been considered a more appropriate way of conducting the research. A limitation of the research is, thus, that the research product, namely the social niche approach, could at most be considered tentative and in need of additional development and testing.

4. CONCLUSIONS

4.1 Conclusions regarding the meta-theoretical and theoretical framework of the study

The first objective of the research was to describe and evaluate the strengths perspective and the concept of *social niche* as a paradigm and theoretical construct (or perspective) for developing an approach to assess environmental strengths and risks. This objective was achieved by means of a critical analysis of the literature. The strengths perspective of Saleebey (2002) and the social niche concept proposed by Taylor (1997) were the main focus of the analysis.

It is concluded that, from the strengths perspective, an environment may be considered strong when it consists of human beings who are connected to their innate strengths and capacity for healing, where there is community, membership, mutuality and connection between people and the environment, as well as people who experience the environment as strong, and contribute to creating a strong environment. From the social-niche perspective, an optimal niche refers to an ideal situation where people are enabled to function at the

best possible level, while a realised niche refers to the actual here and now situation with its more limited spectrum of conditions and resources which allow people to survive. A social niche has elements that are enabling and/or entrapping to a greater or lesser degree.

It was found that the social niche concept does provide a theoretical approach to assess the environment in terms of strengths and risks and gives better insight into the result of the transactional process between person and environment. It was also found that the niche construct does not fully reflect the assumptions of the strengths perspective in terms of mainly two points: (1) the belief in the inherent strengths and capacity for healing of people (human agency), and (2) understanding reality as it is subjectively constructed. Based on this evaluation, and a critical evaluation of the ecological analogy, it was endeavoured to broaden the social niche concept. A revised definition of social niche was proposed and each of the niche components presented in the definition were discussed.

4.2 Conclusions regarding farm dwellers' experience of their environment

The second objective of the research was to explore and describe farm dwellers' experience of their environment. This was done by means of an empirical study following a qualitative approach in order to promote an understanding of their specific experiences as seen from their viewpoint. In addition, social niche was used as a tentative conceptual framework to describe the main dimensions of their experience.

Analysis of the farm dwellers' narratives produced six categories (each with several sub-categories), namely

- employment (unhealthy working conditions for men, employment security threatened, grievance procedures unsatisfactory, limited work opportunities and underemployment of women);

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- income and spending (inadequate income and high cost of living, a debt trap, a longing for the former practice of 'mahala', and supplementing income);
 - housing (housing security threatened, and availability and access to housing outside the neighbourhood a concern);
 - transportation (distance, means of transport and cost involved are major considerations);
 - community life (the importance of family and friends, lack of connection between residents, community life in the past being better and ambivalence about the employer as support system); and
 - people, places and services outside the immediate farm environment (importance of extended family, church as a source of strength, and health services a link with the outside world).

The concept of social niche was used as a tentative conceptual framework to describe and interpret the main dimensions of the farm dwellers' experience of the farm environment. It was concluded that the realised niche of farm dwellers presented with numerous entrapping elements, mainly a lack of tangible and social resources, but also a low sense of power. The entrapping nature of farm dwellers' social niche, however, could not only be understood in terms of lack of social and tangible resources. The experiences and the meanings the farm dwellers attach to their environment provide the key to a better understanding of the living experiences of farm dwellers and the entrapment manifest in their narratives. However, these aspects also reveal their experience of a few enabling elements within this environment and a possible starting point for optimising their niche.

This description and interpretation served as a basis for the further development of the social niche, in an inductive manner. It is concluded that the empirical findings and the social-niche interpretation contributed to the inductive process of developing the social niche assessment approach.

4.3 Conclusions regarding the social niche assessment approach

The third and last objective of the research was to propose a social niche-approach for assessing environmental strengths and risks. This was done against the background of the findings from the critical analysis of viewing the environment from a strengths perspective, the evaluation and broadening of the concept of social niche, and the field work done with farm dwellers.

It is concluded that people embed themselves in the environment through the interplay of their personal qualities, the qualities of their environment, as well as their active involvement in that environment. The social niche concept captures the idea that people create a place for themselves as a result of their transaction with the environment – people create a social niche for themselves. Understanding the social niche is essential to understanding human functioning. The pathway to appreciating the social niche is human experience – individually as well as collectively. People translate their experiences through language and unique meaning systems.

The social niche assessment approach provides a framework and tentative method to explore and describe peoples' living environment from the inside out. Human experience and meaning are considered the vital starting point of investigating social niche. The niche as it is at the present time and how it develops – the realised niche – compared to the niche people consider as appropriate, desirable and healthy – the optimal niche – is explored. The assessment considers people's involvement in their niche, how they contribute to shaping the niche and how they are in turn shaped by it. It considers the physical place and its different settings which people occupy, as well as its conditions. It realises that place and setting have symbolic meaning for people. It also considers the resources – tangible and social – and the categories of people in their niche. It also takes into account the relationship between all these niche elements. The approach facilitates the identification and recognition of enabling and entrapping elements in their niche, and connects these to their expectations, choices and priorities for optimising their niche. It takes into account personal and social power, and aims to conduct the

assessment in an empowering manner. Intervention starts with the manner in which the assessment is done.

Although an attempt was made to operationalise the approach in terms of intervention, it must be stressed that the social niche approach is still in a conceptual form and needs to be subjected to a strict process of theory development and testing. However, it is concluded that the approach, even in its primary stages of development, makes a worthwhile contribution towards the development of multidimensional assessment and contextual practice.

4.4 Additional conclusions

Knowledge of the person/environment is regarded as a foundational knowledge area for social work. Yet this assumption lacks adequate theoretical explanation. Clinical practice tends to focus on personal factors, and community practice on environmental factors, while the transactional dimension is often not accounted for; or alternatively, the environment is demarcated and approached in very diverse ways. Although a new theoretical interest in environmental factors seems to be coming to the fore in literature, practice guidelines and specific practice knowledge remain in abeyance.

When the environment is considered in literature, an array of diverse dimensions is considered. However, it is concluded, from a consideration of these dimensions, that the **experienced** environment of people provides a useful point of entry to developing understanding and perspective regarding how people embed themselves in their environments.

A further conclusion regarding the person/environment transaction is that its recursive effect is easily overlooked. Rather than viewing people as victims of or victors over their environment, people should be viewed as, simultaneously, the product **and** the shaper of their environment. Therefore, in a sense people (personally and socially) contribute towards shaping their victim/victor position in the environment. Social constructivism, tempered by a healthy dose of realism, as well as the strengths perspective, provides the necessary theoretical tools to explain and describe this phenomenon.

4.5 Conclusions regarding the objectives

It is concluded that the objectives of this study were achieved, since:

- The strengths perspective and the concept of social niche were described and evaluated as a paradigm and theoretical construct (or perspective) for developing an approach to assess environmental strengths and risks (see Chapter 2);
- Farm dwellers' experience of their environment was explored and described (see Chapter 3); and
- A social niche approach for assessing environmental strengths and risks was proposed (see Chapter 4).

4.6 Conclusion regarding the theoretical statement

The central theoretical statement has been confirmed, since the researcher was able to draw insight from farm dwellers' experience of their environment and develop an understanding of the environmental strengths and risks in this social environment. It also contributed to the development of a social niche approach for assessing environmental strengths and risks.

4.7 Conclusion regarding the research aim

The aim of this research, namely to explore and describe the social niche construct as a framework for assessing the environmental strengths and risks of farm dwellers, has been achieved.

5. IMPLICATIONS

The implications of the research for theory, practice and education and training are pointed out against the background of the preceding conclusions and evaluation.

5.1 Theory

Regarding theoretical knowledge within the social-work discipline, the following are implied:

- The discipline is in need of an environment theory which should include an explanation of the nature of environmental strengths, as well as a typology of environmental strengths.
- Theoretical perspectives such as the strengths perspective, ecology and social constructivism are important points of departure for the development of practice knowledge and guidelines regarding the transaction between people and their environment.
- The social niche concept is an example of a theoretical concept for framing the result of the transaction between people and their environment that can be incorporated into existing practice models.
- The social niche assessment approach provides a method to investigate the person/environment transaction and therefore social workers should take note of this approach, specifically because it includes the identification of environmental strengths. It could be regarded as a strengths-based assessment approach.

5.2 Practice

Regarding social work practice and more specifically the assessment of the environment of client systems, the following are noted:

- Social workers should take note of developments in the discipline such as the strengths perspective and social constructivism, especially because these developments complement the national developmental welfare framework.
- Exploring the experiences and meaning systems of people is integral to developmental work, but may be considered time-consuming. The funders and quality control bodies of welfare services should take the

time framework involved in these types of approaches into consideration when the outcomes of business plans are evaluated.

- Social workers need to be made aware of how people create meaning – as individuals and as social groups – and how they as social workers create meaning.
- Social workers should examine their perspectives on person/environment and the surrounding strengths and entrapments. Without a perspective grounded in a belief in strengths and the potential of empowerment, intervention will have no effect. The fundamental social-work beliefs should be embodied in practice to a greater degree if the profession wishes to maintain credibility with client groups and with the community in general.
- In the view of the fact that the professional expert position is not beneficial within a strengths and empowerment approach to practice, social workers should examine their beliefs about and the reality of their power in relation to people and be sensitive about the possible influence thereof. Skill in collaborative work needs to be developed.
- In order to understand peoples' experiences within their socio-cultural context the services of a person who is knowledgeable about the community should be utilised to support the social worker in becoming familiar with the environment and its people. A full- or part-time auxiliary worker could be considered for this purpose.
- Agencies should create an opportunity and atmosphere that promote a spirit of continuous learning for social workers in their service.
- This approach should be marketed to social workers, preferably through the management structures of organisations to increase the probability of implementation.
- In the light of the fact that assessment creates the framework for intervention, assessment should be regarded as the onset of

intervention. If done in the correct manner, assessment can be considered a form of intervention.

- The social niche assessment approach described in Chapter 4 can be utilised in combination with all the social work methods when exploring and assessing the environment.
- The social niche assessment approach should be utilised as an essential part of any comprehensive assessment of people in their environments.

5.3 Education and training

The following recommendations regarding the training of social work students as well as continuing education of social work practitioners are made:

- Social-work education should emphasise education regarding theoretical perspectives such as the ecological and strengths perspectives, as well as social constructivism, because they promote understanding of the transaction between person and environment and provide a manner to appreciate both strengths and risks.
- Social work education should emphasise education regarding application possibilities of the ecology metaphor, of which the social niche is a good example.
- The social niche assessment approach should be included as core content in the social work curriculum.
- Social work education should emphasise using perspectives such as the strengths perspective and ecology as a basis for developing personal practice approaches.
- The social niche assessment approach should be disseminated to practitioners by means of short courses.
- The social niche assessment approach should also be disseminated to members of a multidisciplinary team who work in developmental projects.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

It is recommended that the following action be taken regarding future research:

- Due to the explorative and descriptive nature of the study, ongoing exploration, hypothesis formulation and testing are necessary in order to strengthen the theoretical grounding of the social niche assessment approach.
- The social niche assessment approach should be operationalised as an assessment tool.
- A social niche intervention approach should be developed.
- Different application possibilities of the social niche assessment approach should be investigated.
- The social niche assessment approach should be developed as a generic approach that other disciplines may use when investigating people in their environments.
- The social niche assessment approach should be developed for use by a multi-disciplinary team doing developmental research.

The following hypotheses were generated as a result of the research and can be tested by future research:

- If peoples' low sense of power is addressed, development work will have a greater chance of success.
- If the assessment is done in an empowering manner, change is already effected and the setting prepared for empowering intervention.
- The client systems' experience of the manner in which the social worker enters the need/problem context will influence the assessment and intervention outcome accordingly.

-
- The nature of progress in social development in South Africa is significantly negatively influenced if the different indigenous groups involved do not give specific attention to the influence of their socio-political history on their perceptions and expectations of each other.
 - If research outcome products such as practice knowledge and practice guidelines are subjected to evaluation by practitioners, their accessibility and interpretability could be significantly improved.
 - A social niche assessment will give a significant perspective on people in transaction with the environment.
 - If a social niche assessment is done, it will be possible to identify environmental strengths and risks.
 - If a social niche assessment is done as a component of broader external assessments, it will lead to a more comprehensive assessment and more relevant intervention.

7. SUMMARY STATEMENT

To summarise, insights were drawn from the experience farm dwellers shared regarding their environment. It contributed towards understanding their transaction with their environment and the strengths and risks that are their reality. Together with the theoretical perspective provided by the strengths approach and the social niche concept it was possible to develop a social niche assessment approach. Because this approach is grounded in peoples' subjective experience and illuminates not only their vulnerabilities, but also their hopes and dreams, energy for the intervention process is generated.

It is hoped that with this approach a significant step is taken towards understanding people in transaction with the environment and towards incorporating this understanding into social work practice.

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APPENDIX 1:

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE (ENGLISH)

Previously you told me that there are many matters that make life on the farm difficult. As I understood: *your income is too little and things are expensive, the working conditions are not always good, you do not have your own transport and it is difficult to get around, you are not sure about housing on the farm in the longer term as well as where to stay when you need to leave the farm. I also understood that, except for your own family, things are not as it should be between members of this community: people do not support each other and the farmer also does not help as he did in the past. Things have changed here on the farm.* Did I understand correctly?

What amazes me is that people nevertheless somehow manage to go on with their lives. It could not be easy, I suppose, but they still survive their difficult circumstances. I wonder how they do it? Please help me understand by telling me how people manage.

What do you do to go on with and manage your lives here on the farm, regardless of all the problems you told me about?

Regarding:

- Low income and high costs.
- Working conditions.
- Transport and getting around.
- Housing on the farm and elsewhere.
- Support and getting along with your neighbours and other community members.

✓ Of everything we talked about, what do you regard as the most important thing people do to survive and manage their lives?

APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE (TSWANA)

TSAMAISO YA POTSOLOSO: LEMOGA DITHATA

Lo mpoleletse gore go na le dikgang tse dintsi tse di thatafatsang bophelo mo polaseng. Madi a mannye, bophelo bo a tura, tiro ga e monate nako tsotlhe, thwalo e a tlhokega mme ga le kgone go tsamaya kwa ntle ga polase mme mano a tlisa dimakatso ka gore ga le itse gore le ka dula kae fa le ka se dule mo polaseng. Le boleletse le gore kwa ntle ga balosika nako e ngwe ga go monate go dula le batho ba bangwe mo polaseng, batho ga ba emane nokeng mme le molemi ga a tlhole a thusa jaaka pele. Dilo di fetogile ka mo polaseng. A ke tlhalogantshe sentle?

Selo se se mmakatsang ke gore batho ba kgona go tswela ka maphelo a bone le fa go ntse go na le mathata a. Ga ke dumele gore go ka bonolo mme go mmakatsa gore le kgona go phela. Ke ipotsa gore le dira eng gore le kgone? A o ka nthusa gore ke tlhaloganye se ke sa se itseng se?

Le dira jang ka e ngwe le e ngwe ya mathata a a mo tlase mo go ka tswela ka bophelo.

Madi a mannye, bophelo bo a tura.

Tiro ga e monate nako tsotlhe.

Thwalo e a tlhokega mme ga le kgone go tsamaya kwa ntle ga polase.

Mano a tlisa dimakatso ka gore ga le itse gore le ka dula kae fa le ka se dule mo polaseng.

Le boleletse le gore kwa ntle ga balosika nako e ngwe ga go monate go dula le batho ba bangwe mo polaseng, batho ga ba emane nokeng.

Molemi ga a tlhole a thusa jaaka pele.

✓ Fa o nagana ka ga se re buileng ka ga sone gore batho ba kgona jang go phela ka mathata, ke eng se botlhokwa go feta tsotlhe se se dirang gore o kgone go tswela ka bophelo?
--

APPENDIX 3:

LETTER TO FIELD WORKER

2003-04-03

Dear Maria

I am currently doing research on the role the environment play in peoples' day-to-day managing of life issues. I need your help to complete my research. It will involve discussions with a selected group of farm dwellers from the farm we previously visited.

I need you to be my cultural and language interpreter. The discussions will take place at the farm at a place and time as agreed with the participating farm dwellers. I invited 12 people to participate and the number of appointments will depend on how many agree to participate. All discussions will be tape-recorded and each participating farm dweller will receive R30. All information has to be regarded as highly confidential. I offer to pay you R30 per discussion as well as R30 per day that we need to go out to the farm. I hope to do all discussions within a period of two weeks.

Your assistance with these discussions will be highly appreciated. Please fill out the attached agreement form if you agree to the above. I am looking forward to working with you.

Kind regards

Mrs Elma Ryke
(Researcher)

CONSENT FORM

Hereby I, **MARIA VILANE** avow that:

- ✓ I agree to assist with the cultural and language interpretation during discussions with farm dwellers as part of the research of Elma Ryke.
- ✓ I will make notes after each day's visit to the farm of my impressions about the farm dwellers' management and experience of their day-to-day living and the role of their environment.
- ✓ I am aware that all discussions will be tape-recorded and that an external translator will check all translations.
- ✓ I will treat all information shared by the farm dwellers as confidential.
- ✓ I will receive R30 per discussion as well as R30 for each day we spend on the farm.

SIGNATURE PARTICIPANT

SIGNATURE RESEARCHER

APPENDIX 4:

LETTER TO THE CO-CODER OF DATA

Elma Ryke
Internal Box 78
PU for CHE
294 6217

083 3880364

2003-01-23

Emmerentia du Plessis
Internal Box 520
PU for CHE

Dear Emmerentia

PROTOCOL FOR THE CO-CODING OF TRANSCRIPTIONS FOR ELMA RYKE

Thank you that you agreed to serve as a co-coder in this study, thereby helping me to ensure internal validity.

The aim and objectives of the research are as follows:

The aim is:

- To explore and describe the social niche construct as a model for assessing environmental strengths and risks of farm dwellers.

Objectives:

- To describe and evaluate the strengths perspective and the concept of *social niche as a paradigm* and theoretical construct (or perspective) for developing an approach to assess environmental strengths and risks.
- To explore and describe farm dwellers' experience of their environment.
- To propose a *social niche* approach for assessing environmental strengths and risks.

The transcriptions bear reference to objective 2. The interviews were conducted with 20 farm dwellers (6 women and 14 men). As agreed, we will be using only 12 interviews for coding (6 women and 6 men). The remaining interviews will be used for verification purposes.

The core question that directed the interviews was: "Tell me about your life here on the farm."

Secondary questions were:

- Their bio-psycho-social welfare. What welfare means to them, what factors foster and limit their welfare, who they deem responsible for their welfare.
- What they believe will make their life better.

Please follow the guideline suggested by Marshall and Rossman for the coding of the transcriptions. My field notes are attached. As agreed we will have our consensus discussion on 20 February 2003.

Thanks again.

Warm regards

Elma Ryke

APPENDIX 5:

LETTER TO THE ETHICAL COMMITTEE

EH (Elma) Ryke
Internal Box 78
PU for CHE
Tel no. 294 6217
2003-02-27

The Ethical Committee
Internal Box 144
PU for CHE

Dear Prof Nico Malan

Hereby I request permission to make a slight deviation from the FLAGH protocol (oom21). This deviation will entail that research participants will be offered a small fee if they agree to grant me a second interview. My motivation for this request is as follows:

The data collected during December 2001 and April 2002 was not enough to answer all my research questions. Present data also needs to be validated. A further phase of data collection is necessary in order to add value to my research data. Attached is my research proposal with the particulars of my study. However, I expect resistance from the farm dwellers on the grounds that other members of the research team encountered a decrease in their willingness to participate.

My dilemma is that my data-collection instrument (qualitative methods) is sensitive to contextual factors as mentioned. I consulted the literature and a few experts (Mike Weyers, Herman Strydom en Karel Botha) on my options. It appears to be well documented that an incentive be offered to research participants for the information they provide, especially if they are poor. I want to conduct interviews with 12 specific persons who were part of the group who participated in my previous interviews, and pay each person R30 per interview. I also require permission to identify these participants as I only have their first

names and research numbers. The persons are: Men: 44147 Jeki, 4539 Martiens, 02133 Johannes, 0218 Harry, 701 Martiens, 25134 Shadrack. Women: 0835 Frieda, 0102 Willemina, 1206 Dorcas, 5455 Dorah, 1159 Diana, 4414 Sarah.

Thank you for your willingness to consider my request.

Yours sincerely

Elma Ryke

APPENDIX 6:
LETTER FROM ETHICAL COMMITTEE



Potchefstroomse Universiteit
vir Christelike Hoër Onderwys

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13 Maart 2003

Geagte mev Ryke

GOEDKEURING VAN VERSOEK

U skrywe gedateer 27 Februarie 2003, gerig aan prof Nico Malan, Voorsitter van die Etiekkomitee, verwys.

Dit is vir my aangenaam om u mee te deel dat u versoek om effens af te wyk van die Flagh-protokol onder nommer 00M21 goedgekeur is.

Vriendelike groete

ZITA PRINSLOO
SENIOR ADMINISTRATIEWE BEAMPTTE: ETIEKKOMITEE

APPENDIX 7

LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS (ENGLISH)

Dear _____

I was part of the research team that visited your community during December 2001 and had discussions with you and other members of the community. I asked you to tell me about your life on the farm. I also regularly visited your community during 2002 in order to gain an understanding of your circumstances and experiences on the farm. From these discussions and visits it became clear to me that there are many issues that contribute to a difficult life, especially income and spending, working conditions, transportation, housing and community life were often talked about.

I am currently doing research into the role the environment plays in peoples' day-to-day managing of life issues. I need your help to complete my research. It will involve another discussion with you about what you do to go on with and manage your lives here on the farm, regardless of all the problems you told me about.

I have already asked permission from your employer to be present on the farm and do these discussions with willing candidates. All discussions will take place on a time and at a place that are convenient to both you and me. A lady who speaks both Setswana and Xhosa will come with me to help with any language difficulty. As you know I speak Afrikaans and English. You are welcome to speak the language most comfortable to you.

The interview will be tape-recorded. Nobody else will have access to the tape-recorded information, but me. Everything you tell me will be strictly confidential and will only be reported in a general manner.

If you do decide on participating, it will give you the opportunity to share your opinion about the role of the environment in your day-to-day living, especially regarding income and spending, working conditions, transportation, housing, and community life (family, friends, neighbours and contact with the world beyond the farm). Your ideas and experiences will make a valuable contribution to the research in the sense that it will help develop better appreciation of farm dwellers' circumstances on farms and the types of input needed to improve life on farms.

I will have R30 for you at the end of the interview, to thank you for giving me your time and ideas. The discussion should take about 1½ hours.

Your participation will be highly appreciated. Please complete the attached form if you agree to participate. Do not sign the form unless you are absolutely sure that you understand what is expected of you. If you do agree to

participate, please hand in the signed form when I come to arrange for a time and place for the discussion.

I am looking forward to seeing you again.

Kind regards

Mrs Elma Ryke

(Researcher)

CONSENT FORM

Hereby I confirm that I _____ (name):

- ✓ Voluntarily participate in discussions with Elma Ryke for the purpose of her research.
- ✓ Give permission for the tape-recording of the discussion.
- ✓ Understand that my identity will not be made known.
- ✓ Understand that I have the right to withdraw from discussions at any time.
- ✓ Will receive R30 per 1½ hour discussion.

SIGNATURE PARTICIPANT

SIGNATURE RESEARCHER

APPENDIX 8: LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS (TSWANA)

TIRISANO MO PATLISISONG

_____ yo o tlotlegileng.

Ke ne ke le mongwe wa setlhopa sa patlisiso ya Flagh se se neng se botsa dipotso mo go wena le morafe wa lona ka Sedimonthole 2001. Re ile ra le botsa dipotso ka ga bophelo mo polaseng. Le ka kgwedi ya Moranang 2003 ke ne ke le etetse morafe wa lona kwa polaseng gore ke tlhaloganye bophelo mo polaseng botoka go feta sentle. Go tswa mo dipotsolosong le ka maeto go bonwe gore go na le mabaka a a dirang bophelo jwa mo polaseng bokete. Thata lotseno le tiriso ya madi, mabaka a tiro, thwalo, matlo le bophelo jwa morafe(bolosika le ditsala mo polaseng le tirisano-mmogo le baagisani le kamano go ya kwa ntle ga polase) mo polaseng di tlhageletse gantsi.

Gona jaanong ke dira patlisiso ya gore tikologo ya motho e na le tiragalo e e jang mo tharabololong ya mathata a letsatsi le letsatsi. Ke tlhoka thuso ya lona go ka fetsa patlisiso. Go ka tlhokega gore ke tle go dira potsoloso gape gore o ikutlwa jang mo tikologong ya gago go tsamaya le mathata a le ntlhalositseng ka one.

Ke setse ke amogetse tumelelo ya mothapi go ka ikatumetsa le lona gore ke amogele le jwa lona gore ke dire potsoloso. Dipotsoloso di tla diragala mo polaseng mo lefelong le mo nakong e e le siametseng. Ke tla tla le motho yo a buang Setswana fa re sa tlhaloganyane sentle. Ke bua Seaferikanse(kgotsa Seêsimane), mme go botoka gore o itlhalose ka puo ya gago.

Dipotsoloso tsotlhe di tla gatiswa ka teipi mme leina la gago ga le kitla le itsisiwa ope. Ke tlhomamisa gore gotlhe se o se mpolelelang se tla tshwariwa e le sephiri sa me le wena mme se ka tshegediwa jalo.

Mosola wa tirisanommogo ya gago mo potsolosong ke gore o na le tshono ya go ka utlwa mathata a gago go ya ka lotseno le tiriso ya madi, mabaka a tiro, thwalo, matlo le bophelo jwa morafe (bolosika le ditsala mo polaseng le tirisano-mmogo le baagisani le kamano go ya kwa ntle ga polase) mo polaseng. Ka tirisano o tla fa thuso e kgolo ya mo patlisisong e e ka dirang gore botlhe ba ba dirang ka batho ba ba dirang mo dipolaseng ba kgone go ba tlhaloganya. Ke dumela mo patlisisong gongwe go ka tswa thuso le ditirelo tse di rileng.

Ke tla duela batho ba ba tsenang mo potsolosong R30 e e ka tlatsang madi a a ka senyegelwang fa o ka senyetswa nako ya tiro. Potsoloso e ka ja gongwe ura le halafo.

Tirisano ya gago e ka itumelelwa gagolo. Tlatsa foromo e e tshwarisitsweng fa o dumela go dirisana. Se saene fa o sa tlhaloganye sentle se se kopiwang mo go wena. Fa e le gore o a dumela o mphe lekwalo la tumelo fa ke tla go rulaganya nako le lefelo la potsoloso le wena.

Ka boitumelo

Ke nna

Moh. Elma Ryke

(Mmatlisisi)

Moprof Herman Strydom

(Moeteledipele wa thuto)

FOROMO YA TUMELELO

Ka se, nna _____ ke itsisa gore:

- ✓ Ke dumetse ka bo-nna kwa ntle ga go gatelelwa go dira potsoloso le moh. Elma Ryke ka ga patlisiso ya gagwe.
- ✓ Ke dumelela gore potsoloso e gatisiwe ka teipi.
- ✓ Leina la me ga le kake la itsisiwa gope kgotsa ope.
- ✓ Ke tla amogela R30 ka potsoloso ka lebaka la tiro ya ura le halafo (1½) e e ka senyegelang.

TSHAENO YA MOARABI

TSHAENO YA MMATLISISI

APPENDIX 9: INFORMATION DOCUMENT ON THE SOCIAL NICHE ASSESSMENT APPROACH PRESENTED FOR PEER EVALUATION

THE SOCIAL NICHE ASSESSMENT APPROACH

Description of the social niche

The social niche refers to the living environment of people. The social niche of people reflects what they experience and describe as being available to them in terms of the place or setting they occupy, the conditions of that place, the resources (both tangible and intangible) and the categories people present in this place. It also reflects people's experience and description about the relationship between them and these elements, and between the elements themselves. It also reflects the people's definition of their function and contribution in and to that setting. These descriptions also reflect what elements people experience as enabling, limiting and entrapping, and what options they regard as possible (cf. Taylor, 1997; Chapter 2).

Goal of the social niche assessment approach

The goal of the social niche assessment approach is to provide a framework to review people's environmental strengths and risks/stressors based on their own experience and understanding, in collaboration with another person (social worker), so as to co-construct a description of their human environment.

Basic assumptions/presuppositions of the approach

A social niche assessment is based on the following assumptions.

Strengths are inherent to humanity

From the strengths perspective it is assumed that strengths are inherent in humanity itself. Saleebey (2002^a:1-11) states that people have innate wisdom and capacity for transformation. The strengths perspective emphasises that in the midst of human pain and suffering there are locked up strengths, potential

and possibilities. The strengths perspective believes that a transformed world is possible, because human beings can generate their inherent goals and vision for a better quality of life (Saleebey, 2002^a:1-7). A strong environment is based on human beings that are 'connected' with their innate strengths and who contribute to building a strong environment.

According to the strengths perspective, strengths are also found within the environment. The environment is seen as the person's 'life world', the 'world of their experience'. Healing requires a beneficent relationship between the individual and the larger social and physical environment (Saleebey, 2002^a:11). An environment is strong when there are community and membership that provide protection against alienation, marginalisation and oppression (Saleebey, 2002^a:10). Membership is regarded as essential, as "people need to be citizens, responsible and valued members of a community ...entitled to the dignity, respect, and responsibility that comes with such membership" (Saleebey, 2002^a:10). Membership also means "people must band together to make their voices heard, to get their needs met, to redress inequities, to reach dreams" (Saleebey, 2002^a:10). The purpose striven for is life affirmation (Saleebey, 2002^a:6,9). However, what is regarded as life affirming will depend on the values of the particular group.

People construct knowledge about reality

People do not only interact with their environments, they also co-construct the social world (Kondrat, 2002:1). Constructivism focuses on the meaning-making activity of a person, and points out the unique experiences of each person. It suggests that each one's way of making sense of the world is as valid and worthy of respect as any other. People construct knowledge about reality (their human world) and these constructions have implications for their lives and interactions with others. People not only construct these realities as individuals, but also as social groups, and are in turn shaped by these constructed realities – society and its structures. Thus, people are seen as active agents in constructing and maintaining their larger contexts, but are at the same time constrained or enabled by aspects of their social context (cf. Kondrat, 2002:3; Miley et al., 2001:29-30).

However, it is also assumed that people as human agents are subjected to an empirical material world – a reality independent of our thoughts and impressions that affects people. On the ontological level the effect of an objective reality is accepted. Yet, people's accounts of their world are the crucial starting point of social investigation (cf. Houston, 2001). This applies to both the assessed and the assessor.

A differentiated human environment

The concept of human environment refers to people's definition of everything external to them, physical as well as social, that impact on their social functioning (cf. Cohen, 1985:15; Homan, 1994:364; Karls & Wandrei, 1994:23; Schriver, 2001:502; Sullivan & Rapp, 2002:250). The human environment is assumed to be differentiated by alternative spaces where expression can be given to "life affirmation" and in which these alternative spaces are not parts of or subordinated to a greater whole. In these spaces various categories of people are found who differ socially but, being human, are essentially the same (and all have dignity). The human environment will reflect both the strong and the weak characteristics of humanity.

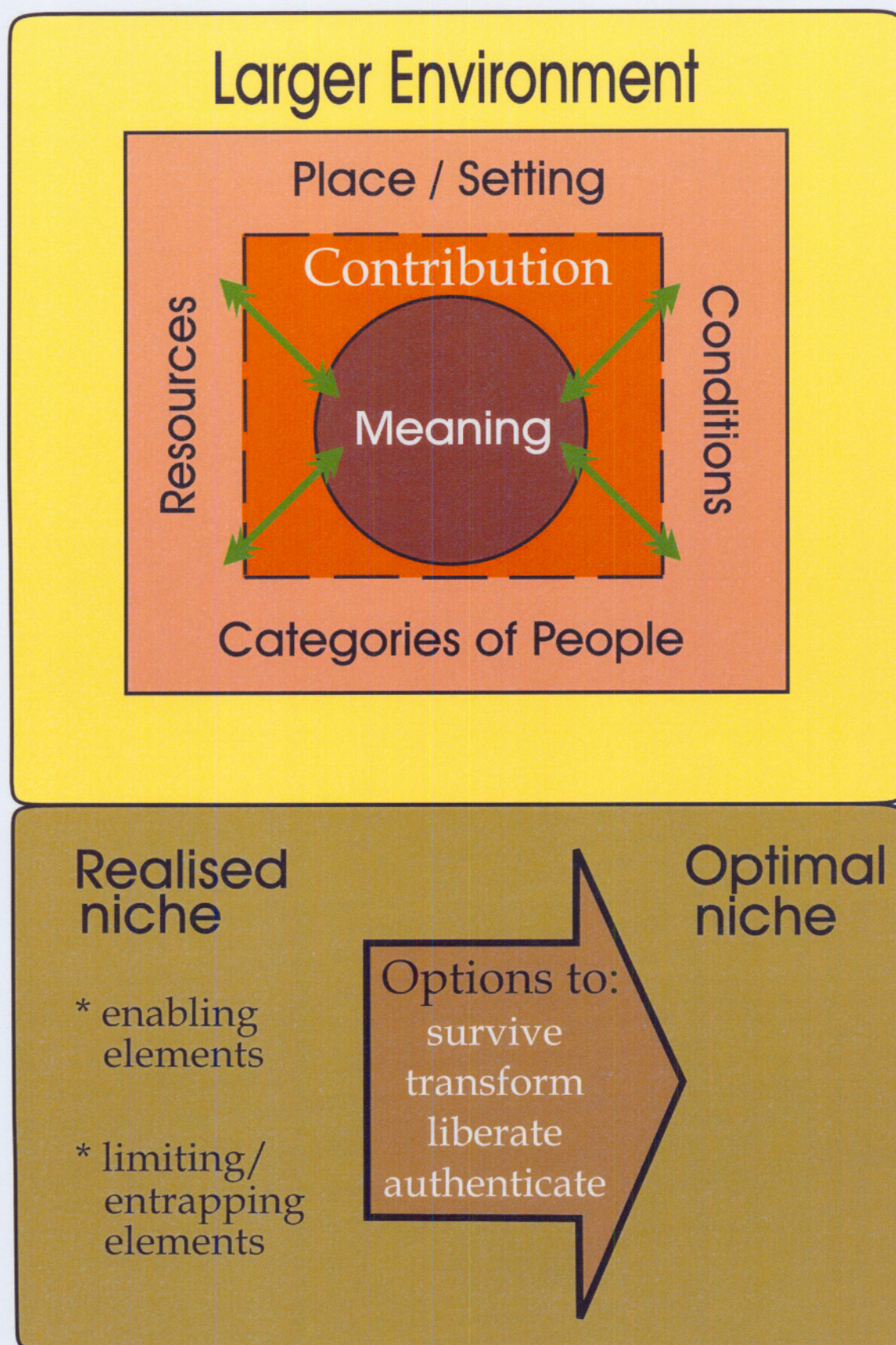
Assessment is a collaborative meaning-making process

Assessment is seen as a collaborative process between a social worker and a client, in constructing a coherent description of a client system and its circumstances that include system as well as environmental strengths and risks/stressors (Cowger & Snively, 2002:113; Hepworth et al., 2002:187; Saleebey, 2002^a:16). For the purpose of this approach the focus of assessment is on environmental strengths and risks/stressors.

Structure of the approach

The structure of the social niche assessment approach, as adapted from Taylor (1997) (see Chapter 2) is illustrated in Figure 1, and is subsequently described briefly.

FIGURE 1: SOCIAL NICHE ASSESSMENT APPROACH



Contribution and meaning: refer to the information people transmit across generations through symbols, meanings and social forms. Peoples' response to their external world is grounded in their social relationships and cultural traditions. This reality is created and continually recreated by people through their social interaction and by acts of interpretation, and influenced by the context in which they occur. People are active agents, make a contribution in their niche, and are at the same time in turn shaped by it.

Place and conditions: refer to the physical space or setting in the environment that people occupy, which can also be different spaces at the same time and over the same lifespan. The conditions of a space are both physical and social. How people experience this space and its conditions, and what meaning they attach to it, will be subjective, and reflective of their values.

Resources: refer to the tangible and social resources people need to maintain themselves. It takes into account not only the availability of resources, but also their accessibility, adequacy and acceptability. The variety of resources people need to maintain themselves is captured by the concept of *niche width* (or size), which can be either narrow or broad, depending on the special needs of people. What people consider their needs to be, and if they consider resources to be available, accessible, adequate and acceptable, will reflect their social and personal opinions and values.

Categories of people: refer to the different categories of people that are present in a setting, and the social categories of people found in association with them. The interaction between them can be described in terms of competition and co-operation. These categories of people contribute to maintaining and transforming their human environment and are thus all considered co-constructors.

Niche types: A niche can be regarded as optimal or realized. An optimal niche refers to conditions and resources that would enable people to function at the best possible level, while a realised niche refers to the more limited spectrum of conditions and resources which allows people to survive. These niche types have *enabling* and *entrapping* elements. By enabling elements is meant

opportunities and experiences that facilitate growth and achievement, access to adequate social and tangible resources, and opportunities that increase the ability to have meaningful interactions with others who bring different perspectives and expand one's social world. Entrapping elements include anything that people experience as limiting, such as a lack of social and tangible resources.

Options: People have different options regarding their niche, which range from surviving within a niche, and escaping that niche altogether. People have the ability to rise above the limitations of a given niche by surviving them or by creating new niches. Both options and combinations thereof presuppose strength. The concepts of *niche compression* and *niche shift* are useful to describe these options. People survive within a limiting niche by finding ways of doing so. Being in a limiting niche does not in all instances presuppose a negative effect on people and may even be authenticating – bringing forth inherent strength. People also survive an entrapping niche by escaping from it or by making a niche shift.

CASE EXAMPLE

The following is an example of an assessment done by means of the social niche approach. This assessment is based on the findings of research that was undertaken with the aim to explore and describe farm dwellers' experience of their environment (see Chapter 3). This research was part of a larger project, the FLAGH study, that examined the contributory factors to the poor health status of farm dwellers, which could be used to design appropriate intervention programmes (Kruger, 2001). The aim, in what follows is not to present a full account of the research, but rather a more focused practical aim of elaborating the social niche approach.

Background

Prior to the investigation the following information was available:

The setting is a community of farm dwellers on a farm in the North West Province, approximately 50 km from the nearest town. The farm consists of

pasture, dry land and irrigated land. Cattle, wheat, maize, seed, peanuts, sugar beans and potatoes are produced. Farming is labour intensive and therefore 62 permanent employees, 70 seasonal workers (five months of the year) and a number of occasional workers are employed for peak seasons. Permanent employees and their families come to 300 individuals, consisting of 67 households. Most are housed in brick houses with electricity, toilet and bathroom facilities. Some occupy single quarters and self-built shelters. Housing and water are available free of charge, while electricity is available on a pre-paid basis. Other facilities available on the farm are a nursery school, a primary school, a public phone and a small store. An unqualified local resident runs the nursery school and three qualified teachers the primary school. The small store is the initiative of the farmer's wife (Anon, 2001; Kruger, 2003). The majority of the farm dwellers on this farm belong to the Setswana group, which is one of the black South African ethnic groups and the main indigenous group of the North West Province. Data was collected by means of interviews and participant observation. The two core questions that directed the interviews were "Tell me about your life here on the farm" and "What do you do to go on with and manage your lives on the farm, regardless of all the problems you told me about"? These qualitative findings were compared with data obtained from two quantitative measures, namely the Sense of Coherence Scale (SOC) (Antonovsky, 1993) and the Quality of Life Inventory (QOLI) (Frisch, 1994) as well as all other relevant FLAGH findings (Kruger, 2003).

The assessment

The farm as "place", and its conditions

The farm dwellers only talked about one set of conditions, namely work and its negative effects on their health. Their concern about health was supported by the findings that a large proportion of labourers presented with a reduced respiratory capacity due to obstructed respiratory systems. Also, the overall dietary intake, especially of men and children, was low: micronutrient intake for many nutrients was below 80% of the RDA. On the SOC and QOLI, a high prevalence of physical symptoms associated with stress and internalised high anger levels, managed by self-control, presented that could contribute to farm

dwellers' physical symptoms and psychological stress (Kruger, 2003). It thus appears that the reasons for their poor health could be attributed to more than their working conditions, but their perception is that the working conditions are the central issue. Any intervention should take this understanding into consideration.

Resources

The bulk of the farm dwellers' accounts relate to the resources they need and the difficulties they experience because of the inadequacy/insufficiency and inaccessibility of the resources on the farm and outside the boundaries of the farm. The resources they referred to were employment opportunities, the grievance procedure, income, housing, transportation, family and friends, and the farmer himself. Outside the farm, family living elsewhere, the church and health services were mentioned.

Employment is available for healthy men, but unavailable or only available to a limited degree for women and the unhealthy, or old men. Although at the time of the research farm dwellers' cash wages compared favourably to the national average of R544 per month for farm workers, they experienced it as inadequate. Nationally, however, farm dwellers are considered the poorest group in the formal sector (De Lange, 2001:14). A grievance procedure was available, but the workers experienced it as inadequate. The housing available to farm dwellers could certainly be regarded as a resource, but their experiences thereof are dominated by their uncertainty about its longer term retainability and what their options are if they should lose their housing on the farm. Access to resources outside the farm is limited due to a lack of transport.

Their experience of not having secure and sustainable access to these resources places farm dwellers in an extremely vulnerable position. According to May and Norton (1997:113), the concept of vulnerability refers to potential circumstances rather than to concrete conditions and addresses the prevailing insecurity of the livelihoods of poor people. The farm dwellers' experiences regarding resources they need could also be explained in terms of their limited personal and social power: deductions from their wages; constant debt; fear

of being fired; lack of security regarding work and housing; power issues between farmer and farm dweller, but also between the different groups of farm dwellers, especially the younger versus older generation and older residents versus newcomers; 'mahala' (receiving items for free), which captures the dependency relationship that came into existence between farmer and farm dweller.

The categories of people

The categories of people living on the farm, identified by the farm dwellers, were: other family, friends, the other residents in the settlement, teenagers not attending school, the elderly and the farmer. Family living elsewhere, however, was often mentioned and was obviously 'present' in a symbolic sense to the farm dwellers. Although some of these categories were experienced as sources of strength (especially the family living on the farm as well as elsewhere), the farm dwellers mostly gave accounts of these groups of people as sources of stress.

This researcher's first impression that this was a community lacking connectedness was supported by the farm dwellers' accounts of community life. It was also supported by the low sense of coherence within the community, depicted on the SOC (cf. Kruger, 2003). The myth of the simplicity of the 'face-to-face' society (Cohen, 1985:28) and the harmony model of community development (Burkey, 1993:43) explain this researcher's impression. Researchers (like this one) and community developers often expect small, closed, traditional communities to be closely connected and living in harmony – something that is often not the case, certainly not for this community. This researcher was struck by the absence of a general spirit of *ubuntu* commonly associated with African culture – the spirit of sharing and caring, the belief of being a person through other people (cf. Mbambo, 2002:7). According to Breton (2001:23-26) properties of a resilient neighbourhood include networks of individuals who identify themselves as neighbours, feeling emotionally positively connected, and engaging in neighbourly behaviour. These networks are considered important, especially in economically deprived poor neighbour-

hoods, but depend on a minimal sense of personal power – something that seems to be lacking to a large degree in this settlement.

Contribution and meaning

The farm dwellers experience their function and contribution in and to the farm setting mainly in terms of the labour they provide. The meanings they attach to their experiences can also be explained against the background of the limited cultural understanding between the farm dwellers and the farmer/employer, as well as the role of adaptation to social change. *Mahala* is one example in terms of cultural understanding: according to Zerwick (2003) *mahala* was introduced by white people as part of a paternalistic system, i.e. the custom to pay wages in kind, and is not part of the African culture. *Ubuntu* is the traditional norm, namely mutual giving.

In terms of social change, understanding what is happening and adapting to this, is painful. For example, far-reaching changes on farms since 1994 brought about change in the nature of the relationship between the farmer and the farm dweller, a relationship that changed from a landlord and his serfs to a wage relationship. The farm dwellers experience it as a loss of something familiar and secure to them. Farms became businesses and farm dwellers employees, who are now responsible for things that previously were seen as the responsibilities of the farmer. On the other hand, farm dwellers now have rights which they did not have previously, for example residential rights. Exactly what these rights entail and how they can be claimed, give rise to all kinds of confusion. Adapting to structural changes due to the politics of the day and accompanying laws is hurting people on a personal level. The diversity issues that the dwellers mentioned could be a reason for the poor level of connection between community members. People are not used to a heterogeneous community. Transformation on the macrolevel creates changes in microlevel relationships without people realising and understanding the process, which contributes to their vulnerability.

Realized niche

Although the farm dwellers described their experiences on the farm mostly in terms of that which limits and entraps them, some positive experiences did emerge. Some farm dwellers recognised income as something that needs to be managed and, regardless of their difficult circumstances, could relate success in their endeavours in financial planning and strategies to supplement their household income. Having a family, both in the settlements and outside, is a definite source of support and strength. Places to go outside the farm, like the church and health services providers, are a link to the outside world and thus sources of strength and support. Some people succeeded in carving out a moderately enabling niche for themselves. This ability could be explained by the personal strengths of some people to cope in difficult circumstances.

Although all the elements of an entrapping niche are present in farm dwellers' account of their life on the farm, the entrapping nature of farm dwellers' social niche, however, could not be understood in terms of lack of social and tangible resources only. The meanings farm dwellers attach to their environment – an environment in which they were used to be cared for with limited expectations and opportunity for self-responsibility – provide a key to better understanding of the life experiences of farm dwellers and the entrapment contained in their narratives.

Options towards an optimal niche

Of the many things that farm dwellers think should change on the farm to make their lives better, three are definitely a priority to them: salaries should increase, affordable transport should be made available and access to affordable outside housing provided. Although they identified many limiting and entrapping elements in their niche, they did not expect or even want to escape their niche. The farm dwellers opted to survive within their niche, but do not experience themselves to have the power to change their niche to a more satisfactory environment.

APPENDIX 10:

CRITERIA FOR THE PEER EVALUATION

EVALUATION CRITERIA	EVALUATOR'S NOTES
Does the approach make sense and is it clear?	
☐ Are the major elements appropriately described? ☐ Is the diagram meaningful? ☐ Is the case example meaningful? ☐ Are the assumptions consistent with each other and with the description of the approach?	
How useful is the approach?	
☐ Does it impart understanding and create meaning? ☐ How applicable is the approach in other settings/contexts? ☐ Does the approach help or hinder the social work profession in any way?	
General conclusions and recommendations	

APPENDIX 11:
LETTER TO THE SOCIAL WORK ACADEMICS AND
PRACTITIONERS

Mev. E.H Ryke
Hoffmanstr 81
POTCHEFSTROOM
2531
Tel. (018) 294 6216 (h) 299 1687 (w)

Beste

Dankie dat jy die uitnodiging aanvaar het om deel te neem aan 'n evalueringsgesprek oor die sosiale nis assesseringsbenadering. Ek benodig terugvoer oor die sinvolheid en bruikbaarheid van die benadering. Jou betrokkenheid by die maatskaplikewerk-praktyk in verskillende kontekste maak jou besonder geskik om 'n sinvolle bydrae te lewer tot die gesprek. Die benadering is aangeheg asook die evalueringsvrae. Lees dit asseblief voor die tyd deur en maak kort aantekeninge oor jou mening.

Die groep word gehou:

Vrydag, 16 April 04
10:00 – 12:00
PUK-kampus, J Chris Coetzeegebou E8
Kamer 239 (Leeskamer van Maatskaplike Werk)

Tee/koffie en verversings sal voorsien word. Indien jy om een of ander rede nie teenwoordig kan wees nie, laat my asseblief weet. Indien jy enige vrae het, skakel my by 2991687(w), 294 6217(h) of 0833880364(sel).

Ek sien daarna uit om jou Vrydag te sien!

Groete

Mev. Elma Ryke

APPENDIX 12:

LETTER TO THE FLAGH RESEARCH TEAM MEMBERS

Mrs. E.H Ryke
81 Hoffman Street
POTCHEFSTROOM
2531
Tel. (018) 294 6216 (h) 299 1687 (w)

April 2004

Dear

Thank you for accepting my invitation to participate in an evaluation discussion about the social niche assessment approach. I need feedback on how sensible, clear and useful this approach is. Your involvement in the FLAGH study and farm setting would make your contribution to the discussion extremely valuable. I include a document on the approach as well as the evaluation questions. Please read it before the group session and make notes on your evaluation.

The focus group will be held:

Thursday, 22 April 04

16:00 – 18:00

JCC building (E8), room 239 (reading room at Social Work)

It will be a small group of about eight people. Tea/coffee and snacks will be served. If for some reason you will not be able to join us, please phone as soon as possible so that I can invite someone else. If you have any questions, give me a call at X1687.

I am looking forward to meeting you next Thursday!

Regards

Elma Ryke

APPENDIX 13:

LETTER TO THE FOURTH YEAR SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS

Mev. E.H Ryke
Hoffmanstr 81
POTCHEFSTROOM
2531
Tel. (018) 294 6216 (h) 299 1687 (w)

Beste

Dankie dat jy die uitnodiging aanvaar het om deel te neem aan 'n evalueringsgesprek oor die sosiale nis assesseringsbenadering. Ek benodig terugvoer oor die sinvolheid en bruikbaarheid van die benadering. Jou betrokkenheid by die maatskaplikewerk-praktyk in verskillende kontekste tydens die prakties maak jou besonder geskik om 'n sinvolle bydrae te lewer tot die gesprek. Die benadering is aangeheg asook die evalueringsvrae. Lees dit asseblief voor die tyd deur en maak kort aantekeninge oor jou mening.

Die groep word gehou:

Woensdag, 28 April 04

14:30 – 16:00

PUK-kampus, J Chris Coetzeegebou E8

Kamer 239 (Leeskamer van Maatskaplike Werk)

Tee/koffie en verversings sal voorsien word. Indien jy om een of ander rede nie teenwoordig kan wees nie, laat my asseblief weet. Indien jy enige vrae het, skakel my by 2991687(w), 2946217(h) of 0833880364(sel).

Ek sien daarna uit om jou Vrydag te sien!

Groete

Mev. Ryke

APPENDIX 14:

PEER EVALUATION PARTICIPANTS

Group 1: Social Work academics and practitioners

- Prof Mike Weyers
- Dr Pedro Rankin
- Mrs Heleen Scholtz
- Mrs Miranda Visagie
- Ms Jeanetta Reyneke
- Mrs Anet Venter

Group 2: FLAGH research team members

- Dr Annamarie Kruger
- Dr Anita Pienaar
- Mr Nico van Aarde
- Mrs Marietjie Venter
- Mrs Ment Lamey
- Mrs Mars Phometsi

Group 3: Fourth year social work students

- Ms Sonnika Coetzer
- Ms Tarina Mocke
- Ms Isabel Rademan
- Ms Yolanda Lönn
- Ms Leana Nongueira

Assistant moderator: Dr Adrie Roux

APPENDIX 15:

RESULTS OF PEER EVALUATION OF THE SOCIAL NICHE APPROACH

CRITERIA	PRACTITIONERS	FLAGH MEMBERS	STUDENTS
Does the approach make sense and is it clear?			
☐ Are the major elements appropriately described?	Mostly clear. The unclear aspects are: the link between the niche and the environment and if all the concepts are on the same level.	Mostly clear, but not clear how concepts are linked. Need an additional process description.	Very clear and systematic.
☐ Is the figure meaningful?	No. The link between concepts is unclear. Concepts on the figure and descriptive text differ and do not follow the same order	No. The link between concepts is unclear. Concepts on the figure and descriptive text differ and do not follow the same order.	Like the simplicity and colour of the figure. The bottom part of the diagram is a bit confusing.
☐ Is the case example meaningful?	Contributes hugely to clarifying the approach.	Contributes hugely to clarifying the approach.	Contributes hugely to clarifying the approach.
☐ Are the assumptions consistent?	As units, yes, but it is not clear how they link with each other.	They are clear and make sense.	They are clear and make sense.
How useful is the approach?			
☐ Does it impart understanding and create meaning?	Definitely, it gives a name for what practitioners do and would contribute towards more relevant assessments. However, it does not indicate how this approach fits in with other environmental assessments such as the community profile. It is also not suggesting possible interventions following the assessment.	It gives a broad overview of peoples' living worlds, but does not indicate how it fits in with other environmental assessments such as developmental assessments. It is also not suggesting possible interventions following the assessment.	More relevant interventions would follow from this kind of assessment.
☐ How applicable is the approach in other settings/ contexts?	Would enrich clinical assessments. Applicable in smaller community, but could be difficult in larger communities. Could be used in other sectors, like industry (EAP). Would be helpful for NGO's in their needs-assessments for business plans.	Would be useful in the consumer sciences. Could be useful in multi-disciplinary developmental and/or research teams.	Has a generic usefulness, because all people depend on their environments. Applicable in empowerment practice. Applicable to clinical assessment – provides a manner to integrate the environment with individual assessment.

☐ Does the approach help or hinder the social work profession in any way?	Find the concept niche stimulating and the idea very useful for social work. Represents the paradigm shift social work needs so dearly. Makes a huge contribution regarding the potential effectiveness of programmes, relevance of assessments, enrichment of existing assessment frameworks.	N.a.	A definite contribution to modern/contemporary social work.
Recommendations.			
	• Market this approach to social workers. Market through management structures of organisations to increase the probability of implementation. • Investigate different application possibilities. • Develop a social niche intervention approach. • Operationalise the approach as an assessment tool. • This approach could be time-consuming. It should be investigated. • The concept 'relative deprivation' could be considered to explain the focus of the approach.	• Indicate how this approach fits in with other environmental assessments. • Develop a social niche intervention approach. • Develop as a generic approach that other disciplines can use when investigating people in their environments. • Develop for use by a multi-disciplinary team doing developmental research.	• Include as core content in the social work curriculum.

APPENDIX 16:

AUTHOR GUIDELINES FOR THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR THE HUMANITIES

The International Journal For The Humanities – Proceedings of the Humanities Conference provides the following instructions to authors:

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

Papers should be approximately 2,000-5,000 words in length. They should be written as continuous expository narrative in a chapter or article style - not as lists of points or a PowerPoint presentation.

The papers are to be published in a fully refereed academic journal. This means that the style and structure of the text should be relatively formal. For instance, the paper should not be a verbatim transcript of an oral presentation, such as 'Today I want to speak to you about ...'.

Authors may use any referencing style they choose, as long as it is used consistently and to the appropriate standards. Spelling can vary according to national useage, but should be internally consistent. Papers should be thoroughly checked and proof-read before submission, both by the author and a critical editorial friend.

Papers are assessed by referees against ten criteria - or fewer if some criteria do not apply to a particular kind of paper.

We require authors to use Common Ground's Microsoft Word authoring template. This is available on the Conference Website in two versions:

1. The Simplified Template - for straightforward text, and
2. The Full Template - which includes more elaborate instructions in cases where the paper includes images, tables and diagrams.

We are not able to accept papers that have not used the template.

APPENDIX 17:

AUTHOR GUIDELINES FOR SOCIAL WORK/ MAATSKAPLIKE WERK

The South African journal for social work "*Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*" (ISSN – 0037-8054) provides the following instructions to authors:

INSTRUCTIONS TO AUTHORS	VOORSKRIFTE AAN OUTEURS
<i>The Journal publishes articles, short communications, book reviews and commentary on articles already published from any field of social work. Contributions relevant to social work from other disciplines will also be considered. Contributions may be written in English or Afrikaans. All contributions will be critically reviewed by at least two referees on whose advice contributions will be accepted or rejected by the editorial committee. All refereeing is strictly confidential. Manuscripts may be returned to the authors if extensive revision is required or if the style or presentation does not conform to the Journal practice. Commentary on articles already published in the Journal must be submitted with appropriate captions, the name(s) and addressees of the author(s) and preferably not exceed 5 pages. The whole manuscript plus one clear copy as well as a diskette with all the text, preferably in MS Windows (Word or WordPerfect) or ASCII must be submitted. Manuscripts must be typed double spaced on one side of A4 paper only. Use the Harvard system for references. Short references in the text: When word-for-word quotations, facts or arguments from other sources are cited, the surname(s) of the author(s), year of publication and page number(s) must appear in parenthesis in the text, e.g. "... (Berger 1967:12). More details about sources referred to in the text should appear at the end of the manuscript under the caption "References". The sources must be arranged alphabetically according to the surnames of the authors. Note the use of capitals and punctuation marks in the following examples.</i>	Die Tydskrif publiseer artikels, kort mededelings, boekbesprekings en kommentaar op reeds gepubliseerde artikels uit enige gebied van die maatskaplike werk asook relevante bydraes uit ander dissiplines. Bydraes mag in Afrikaans of Engels geskryf word. Artikels in Afrikaans moet vergesel wees van 'n Engelse opsomming van ongeveer 200 woorde. Alle bydraes sal krities deur ten minste twee keurders beoordeel word. Beoordeling is streng vertroulik. Manuskripte sal na die outeurs teruggestuur word indien ingrypende hersiening vereis word of indien die styl nie ooreenstem met die tydskrif se standaard nie. Kommentaar op artikels wat in die Tydskrif gepubliseer is, moet van toepaslike titels, die naam(name) en adres(se) van die outeur(s) voorsien wees en verkieslik nie langer as 5 bladsye wees nie. 'n Disket met die hele teks, verkieslik in MS Windows of ASCII moet die hele manuskrip en een duidelike kopie daarvan vergesel. Manuskripte moet slegs op een kant van die bladsy in dubbel-spasiëring getik word. Verwysings moet volgens die Harvard-stelsel geskied. Verwysings in die teks: Wanneer woordelike sitate, feite of argumente uit ander bronne gesiteer word, moet die van(ne) van die outeur(s), jaar van publikasie, en bladsynommers tussen hakies in die teks verskyn, bv. "... (Berger, 1967:12). Meer besonderhede omtrent bronne moet alfabeties volgens die vanne van die outeurs aan die einde van die manuskrip onder die opskrif "Bibliografie" verskyn. Let op die gebruik van hoofletters en leestekens by die volgende voorbeelde.