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TOWARDS A SOCIAL NICHE ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENT

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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, 2002c:231). However, it is also a conviction that is often not reflected in social work practice (Rose, 2000:405; Saleebey, 2002c: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 workers 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, 2002a: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 (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 (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 article draws on a critical evaluation of the strengths perspective and the social niche construct as well as fieldwork findings (Ryke, 2004) to propose a social niche instrument for assessing the environment. Thus this article has three sections: the first one evaluates environmental assessment from both the traditional and strengths-based perspectives, pointing to the need for new instruments to assess the human environment, while the second section proposes the social niche instrument to assess the human environment. The last section demonstrates and elaborates on the instrument by means of an example of the assessment of the environment of a community of farm dwellers.

Perspectives on assessing the environment

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

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, 2002a:16). Furthermore, the categorising of problems is also problematic. The danger exists that people are reduced to the labels of the categories. In Saleebey's (2002a: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 (Weyers, 2001).

The above assessment systems provide supposedly objective and comprehensive assessments of client systems. They favour 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 the strengths of people and their environments, and how people construct their life-worlds and reconstruct these during the assessment process itself.

Assessment 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. Normalisation is thus part of the assessment process.

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 recognises 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 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 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).

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

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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.

A review of strength-based literature on how to assess peoples' environment (the above examples excluded) revealed that, even though the idea of multidimensional assessment is widely accepted in strength-based literature (Cowger & Snively, 2002:113; Hepworth, Rooney & Larsen, 2002:198), strength-based models are nevertheless 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.

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 neighbourhood 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				

	Cowger & Snively (2002	Rapp (2002)	Fast & Chaplin (2002)	Kirsthadt (2002)	Larson & Dearmont (2002)	Breton (2001)	Graybeal (2001)	Hepworth *et al.* (2002)
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 neighbourhood networks						x		
Local organisations						x		
Geographic centre of community						x		
Social and physical infra-structure						x		
Macro policies						x		
Social environment							x	
Political environment							x	
Economic environment							x	
Social network								X
Personal service providers								X

As illustrated in Table 1, these diverse focal points 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 of 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 to be 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. The lack of detailed practice

guidelines and knowledge of client strengths emphasises the need to develop instruments to assess the human environment.

THE SOCIAL NICHE ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENT

In order to fulfil the need for an instrument to assess the human environment from a specific perspective, the social niche instrument was developed (Ryke, 2004). In this section the concept of social niche is discussed, the goal and assumptions explained, and the structure and process discussed.

Description of the concept of social niche

In the standard view the concept of "environment" refers to everything external to people, physical as well as social, that impact on their social functioning (Cohen, 1985:15; Homan, 1994:364; Karls & Wandrei, 1994:23; Schriver, 2001:502; Sullivan & Rapp, 2002:250). The environment has multiple dimensions, and there are 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 (Kemp, Whittaker & Tracey, 2002:22). The last dimension, the experienced environment, is of particular importance to the social niche instrument. While the other dimensions are usually 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.

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 realised. 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 (Taylor, 1997; Ryke, 2004).

Goal of the social niche instrument

The goal of the social niche assessment instrument 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 as a starting point for intervention, change and growth.

Basic assumptions of the social niche assessment instrument

A social niche assessment is based on the following assumptions.

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 (Saleebey, 2002a:1-11).

People construct knowledge about reality

People do not only interact with their environments, but 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 (Kondrat, 2002:3; Miley, O'Melia & DuBois, 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 as the crucial starting point of social investigation (Houston, 2001). This applies to both the assessed and the assessor.

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.

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, 2002a:16). For the purpose of this instrument, the focus of assessment is on environmental strengths and risks/stressors as experienced by the occupants of that environment.

Central to the process of finding strengths is listening and asking questions. According to Saleebey (2002b: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.

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Questions that could be useful for exploring the environment and the possible strengths contained in it, based on Saleebey (2002b: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 do you want now 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.

Structure and process of the instrument

The structure of the social niche assessment instrument, as adapted from Taylor (1997) Ryke (2004) is illustrated in Figure 1, and the process is subsequently described briefly.

FIGURE 1
SOCIAL NICHE ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENT
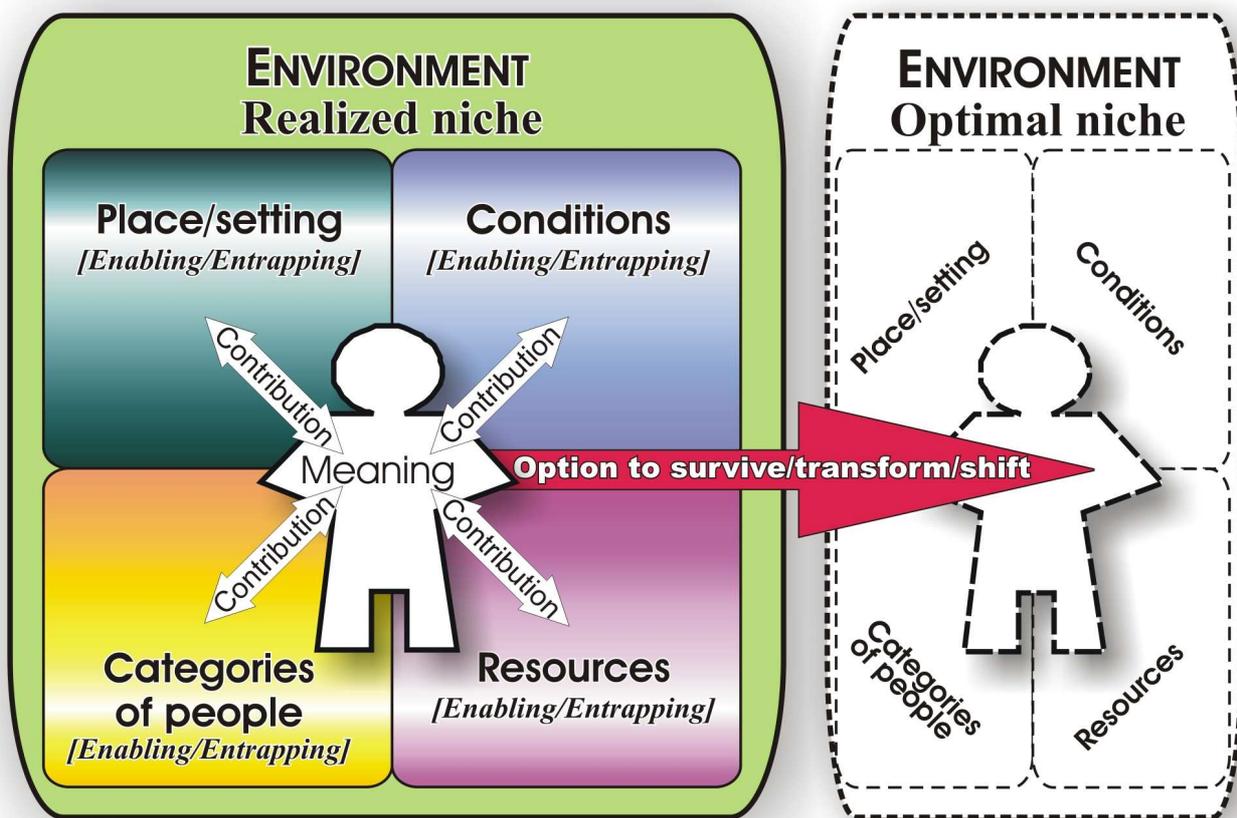
To do the assessment the following process should be followed.

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

Place: This 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: This refers 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?
- Do they consider resources to be available, accessible, adequate and acceptable?
- Do they know how to obtain and use them?

Categories of people: This 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?

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?
- How much power do they demonstrate and experience as available to them?

Meaning: This refers 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 systems 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.

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

By *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 to, 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?

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- 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, 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 (the social worker) 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.

- When things were better, what was different?
- In x years time, when these problems are not problems any more, what will be different?
- What are your dreams and hopes for this niche?

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 who would be involved in the plan of action (e.g. multidisciplinary team).

Step 5: Develop a plan of action

Although the focus of this article 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, on 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 instrument. 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, 2002c: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 (Saleebey, 2002c:241). According to Benard (1997:179), building community and creating belonging are the essence of fostering resilience, and this presents both personal and political challenges.

On the clinical level solution-focused and narrative therapy (Greene & Lee, 2002:187-195 for a summary) would complement the social niche instrument. 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.

CASE EXAMPLE

The following is an example of an assessment done by means of the social niche instrument. 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 (Ryke, 2004). This research was part of a larger project, the FLAGH (Farm Labour, Agriculture and General Health) study, which 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 instrument.

The assessment

Data were 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).

The farm as "place"

The setting is a community of farm dwellers on a commercial farm in the Southern district of the North West Province, approximately 50 km from the nearest town. The farm had cattle, dry land and irrigated land. A dairy was shut down during 2002. Wheat, maize, seed, peanuts, sugar beans and potatoes were produced for the domestic market. Farming is labour intensive and 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, consisting of 67 households. Most were housed in brick houses with electricity, toilet 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, 2003).

Conditions

The farm dwellers for the most part 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 boundaries of the farm, family living elsewhere, the church and health services were mentioned.

Employment is available for healthy men, but unavailable or available only to a limited degree for women and unhealthy or old men. Although at the time of the research farm dwellers' cash wages compared favourably with 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 of it 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 farm dwellers on this farm formed a diverse group. The majority belonged to the Setswana group, which is 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 first language of the farmers (employers).

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 members living elsewhere, however, were often mentioned and were 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 (Kruger, 2003). Different processes seemed to play a role in the low level of connectedness between members of the farm

dweller community. Some farm dwellers kept their social network very small. They reserved social contact for family and carefully selected friends as a way to protect themselves against a community from which they felt alienated. The alienation was due to alcohol abuse and associated fighting, common in the community. Allegedly some farm dwellers were appointed by the farmer to report on who the rowdy ones were. As a result these farm dwellers did not trust each other and only communicated on a superficial level. Another factor they felt disturbed their feeling of being emotionally positively connected was an influx of new people; these new people were sometimes of different cultural groups whom they felt they could not identify with.

Contribution and meaning

The farm dwellers experience their function and contribution in and to the farm setting mainly

in terms of the labour they prov Microsoft Office Word 2003.lnk ide. 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 of paying wages in kind, which is not part of African culture. *Ubuntu* is the traditional norm, namely mutual giving.

Despite the fact that farm dwellers enjoy greater legislative protection in the post-1994 dispensation, they often remain unaware of their rights or uninformed as to how to access these rights, e.g. their right not to be evicted. Furthermore, the formalisation of employment relations is often accompanied by a loss of facilities and services associated with more traditional employment relations – a situation leaving many farm dwellers feeling insecure, vulnerable and powerless. The improved social conditions have not yet been translated to personal and social power. Adapting to structural changes resulting from the politics of the day and the 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 macro level creates changes in micro-level 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, such as 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).

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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, cannot 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 being cared for with limited expectations and opportunities 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 improve their lives, three are definitely a priority for 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 having the power to transform their niche to a more satisfactory environment. Developing personal and social power should be considered in the action plan.

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 environmental 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 instrument 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 instrument 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 instrument 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 instrument 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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