

Elma Ryke

The daily experience of farm dwellers on a commercial farm in the North-West Province

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Farm dwellers' daily experiences on a commercial farm in the North-West Province are qualitatively explored and described with the aim of arriving at an understanding of their specific experience. It is concluded that they experience their environment as entrapping. Numerous forces structure this experience, such as a lack of tangible and social resources, their geographical and social isolation, the uneven transformation of traditional employment relations and a sense of powerlessness (an inability to influence their circumstances). However, they also experience it as including some enabling elements.

Die daaglikse leefervaring van plaasbewoners op 'n kommersiële plaas in die Noordwes-provinsie

Plaasbewoners se daaglikse leefervaring op 'n kommersiële plaas in die Noordwes-provinsie word ondersoek en beskryf aan die hand van 'n kwalitatiewe benadering ten einde 'n begrip te vorm van hul spesifieke ervaring. Daar word tot die gevolgtrekking gekom dat plaasbewoners hul leefomgewing as inperkend ervaar. Talle kragte struktureer hulle ervaring, onder meer 'n gebrek aan tasbare en sosiale bronne, hul geografiese en sosiale isolasie, die ongelyke transformasie van tradisionele indiensnemingsverhoudinge, asook 'n lae magsbeleving ('n onvermoë om hulle omstandighede te beïnvloed). Dit het egter ook hul ervaring van enkele bevorderlike elemente in hulle omgewing na vore gebring.

Dr E H Ryke, School for Psychosocial Behavioural Sciences (Social Work), North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus, Private Bag X6001, 2520 Potchefstroom; E-mail: mwehr@puk.ac.za

Farm dwellers in the North-West Province have been identified as an extremely vulnerable group in terms of their physical, physiological and mental health (Vorster *et al* 2000). The reasons for this are as yet not clear. The Farm Labour, Agriculture and General Health (FLAGH) study was consequently launched by the North-West University with the broad aim of gaining reliable information on the factors contributing to their poor health status, which could be used to design appropriate intervention programmes (Kruger 2001). The research reported in this article forms part of the pilot study for a multi-disciplinary investigation and focuses on the farm dwellers' experience in the setting where they live and work, with a view to gaining insight into their everyday life.

The article presents background information on one particular farm setting. The research methods are explained and the findings pertaining to farm dwellers' experience of this environment are presented and discussed.

1. Background information on the farm setting

Farm dwellers' response to their external world can be understood more fully against the backdrop of what is happening in agriculture throughout the North-West Province as well as the specific conditions on the farm where the fieldwork was done. This section examines factors shaping farming arrangements in the North-West Province, efforts to restructure the former system and, in particular, present conditions on the farm.

The term "farm dwellers" refers to farm workers and their families living on a farm where the workers are employed. Historically, farm dwellers are black tenants with a white landlord, with great social distance between them (cf Cameron & Spies 1986: 303-5, Hellman & Lever 1979: 224-5). Former farming practices, interspersed with old-fashioned, rigid ideas and practices, profoundly affected farming communities (cf Steinberg 2002, Van Onselen 1996). The relationship between farmer and farm dweller was, and mostly still is, paternalistic in nature (Du Toit 1998: 151).

At present farming is in a process of restructuring, with various attempts being made to transform the former system. Farms have now been commercialised and are managed as business enterprises. The

promulgation of land reform and labour laws as well as the Security of Tenure Act have all contributed to the formalisation of the relationship between farmer and labourer. Forced removals are now being regulated, farm workers have gained certain land rights, and a minimum wage is guaranteed (cf Auret 2001, Steinberg 2002: 67-9). This amounts to a restructuring of many of the central relationships that have existed on farms, as well as to a potential challenge to some of the fundamental assumptions of paternalism (Du Toit 1993: 6).

With unemployment estimated at 37.8% for the North-West Province, job options are limited for the mostly marginally skilled and illiterate farm workers. Although agriculture is the second most important economic activity in the North-West Province and thus a major source of employment, the income derived from this sector is very low and, due to low education levels, there is very little upward mobility (Mangold *et al* 2002).

The fieldwork for this study was done on a commercial farm in a southern district of the North-West Province. Two sons and a grandson of the original farmer were managing this farm. The farm had cattle, dry land and irrigated land. A dairy had been closed down during 2002. Wheat, maize, seed, peanuts, sugar beans and potatoes were produced for the domestic market. Farming was labour intensive, employing 62 permanent workers, 70 seasonal workers (five months of the year), and a number of occasional workers in peak seasons. The permanent employees and their families numbered about 300. Most of them were accommodated in brick houses with electricity, toilets and bathroom facilities. Some occupied single quarters and self-built shelters. Housing and water were provided free of charge, while electricity was available on a pre-paid basis. Facilities on the farm included a nursery school, a primary school, a public telephone and a small store. An unqualified local resident ran the nursery school and three qualified teachers were in charge of the primary school. The small store was the initiative of the farmer's wife (Anon 2001, Kruger 2001).

The farm dwellers formed a diverse group. The majority belonged to the Setswana group, which is the main indigenous group of the North-West Province. The mother tongue of most farm dwellers was Setswana, and most of them understood and spoke Afrikaans (some better than others), which was the first language of the farmers (employers).

2. Research methods

Qualitative methods (Bryman 1995: 45, Schurink 1998a: 252) were used to obtain data on the views and experiences of farm dwellers. These included interviews (Fontana & Frey 1994: 366, Thorn 1997: 118) as well as participant observation (Schurink 1998b: 278). This particular farm was initially negotiated by the FLAGH project leader with the relevant stakeholders in agriculture for the pilot study, and it is considered a typical commercial farm in the province. The views and experiences of the farm dwellers were investigated as a case study, however, and cannot be considered as representative of all farm dwellers in the province. The fieldwork was conducted between December 2001 and April 2003. The researcher's membership of the FLAGH research team facilitated entry into the setting.

Initial data collection took place during the period when the multi-disciplinary research team conducted its research. An availability sample of twenty farm dwellers (six women and 14 men) served as the initial informants. Subsequent data were collected with a purposive sample (Creswell 1994: 148) of 12 (six men and six women), drawn from the previous sample and selected on the basis that they provided rich data. The farmers were not interviewed.

Multiple methods of data collection were employed. First, unstructured interviews were used to get participants to express their overall views on living in a farm village and to expand freely on their lives on the farm. Regular discussions about the findings and observations of other research team members were used to verify this information. Secondly, participant observation was done in the settlements during which 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 linguistic interpreter. These conversations allowed the researcher to confirm observations with participants and to verify tentative patterns or themes. Field notes of these activities were kept. Thirdly, unstructured interviews with a schedule (Schurink 1998c: 299) were conducted later in the study in order to gather more data, to confirm the earlier 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 comparing these qualitative findings with data obtained from other relevant FLAGH findings (Kruger 2003).

All interviews were conducted on the farm, either in the hall used for workers' meetings, in a classroom at the school on the farm, or at the participants' homes. All informal discussions were held in the settlement at the participants' homes. The initial interviews were conducted in Afrikaans, while subsequent interviews were conducted in Afrikaans and Setswana, with the fieldworker acting as translator. Formal interviews were tape recorded and transcribed for coding and analysis, and the Setswana and Afrikaans transcriptions were translated into English.

Of the 20 participants initially interviewed, 12 (six men and six women) were selected for analysis (see Table 1 for a profile of the participants). 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 & Rossman (Poggenpoel 1998: 342-3) was adopted. To ensure validity, data were co-coded by another researcher and findings discussed until consensus was reached.

Given the cultural and linguistic differences 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 the 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 potential researcher bias, and dense description (cf Creswell 1994: 157-8, Krefling 1991: 217).

Table 1: Profile of participants

Participant	Gender	Age in years	Employment status	Residence status
1	male	44	farmworker	new
2	male	36	farmworker	old
3	male	26	farmworker	old
4	male	61	farmworker	new
5	male	30	farmworker	old
6	male	28	farmworker	old
7	female	32	unemployed	new
8	female	34	unemployed	old
9	female	38	domestic worker	old
10	female	25	unemployed	old
11	female	18	unemployed	old
12	female	44	domestic worker	old

3. Findings

An analysis of the farm dwellers’ narratives produced six categories. See Figure 1 for an outline of these categories and resultant sub-categories.

3.1 Employment

The participants spoke mostly about employment issues. The sub-categories that resulted from the analysis of this category are the unhealthy working conditions of men, the threat experienced in terms of employment security, the frustration with the grievance procedure in the work situation, and the limited opportunities for and under-employment of women.

Farm dwellers believed that the working conditions of male labourers were unhealthy and caused many of their illnesses. Farm workers often complained that the work was too taxing and that they were tired. This seemed to be more than a physical tiredness. A young male labourer said:

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.

The FLAGH-finding that a large portion of labourers had reduced respiratory capacity due to an obstructed respiratory system supports this belief. The overall nutritional intake, especially of men and children,

Figure 1: Outline of the findings on the life experiences of farm dwellers

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unhealthy working conditions for men Employment security threatened Grievance procedures unsatisfactory Limited work opportunities and underemployment of women • Income and expenditure <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inadequate income and high cost of living A debt trap Nostalgia for the former practice of <i>mabala</i> Supplementing income • Housing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Housing security threatened Availability of and access to housing when leaving the farm a concern 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transportation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Distance, means of transport and cost involved are major considerations • Community life on the farm <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The importance of family and friends Lack of connectedness between residents Community life in the past was better Ambivalence about the employer as a support system • People, places and services beyond the boundaries of the farm <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Importance of extended family Church as a source of strength Health services a link with the outside world
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was low, with micronutrient intake for many nutrients below 80% of the recommended daily allowance (RDA). A high prevalence of the physical symptoms associated with stress, as well as high anger levels internalised and managed by self-control, could contribute to their physical symptoms and psychological stress (Kruger 2003).

Labourers were reluctant (even scared) to talk about their frustrations due to the threat to their employment security. One male 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. A male worker lamented:

If it rains 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’.

Although workers should not have to pay for protective clothing, money was deducted from their salaries for this purpose. Workers experienced this practice as unfair and very frustrating.

A grievance procedure for labourers did exist. According to their understanding they first had to discuss a concern among themselves

and then with the foreman, who is the intermediary between the labourers and the farmer. The men did not experience this procedure as effective. They felt the foreman did not take their concerns seriously and that he sometimes advised them to discuss their issues directly with the farmer. Sometimes they did this, but it was mostly the younger labourers that were willing to take the risk. However, they experienced the farmer's reaction to an individual complaint as unsympathetic. A male labourer related with frustration: "If you complain as an individual, the boss says nobody else is complaining. It is only you".

Most of the time they were scared to approach the farmer as individuals because of the threat of being fired, but also because it was against the rules. A young male labourer explained:

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, and the older generation sees the young ones as troublemakers.

In the past a committee system worked well, according to the older labourers, but this was a bone of contention at the time of the study. One older labourer recalled:

[W]hen 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.

Again, generational tension seems to have played a role in the demise of the committee. A young labourer declared: "The elders 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 was to keep quiet and to endure, because there were few other work opportunities.

The employment situation of women was noticeably different from that of men. Few of the women had permanent jobs. Those who did, were employed as domestic workers in local farm owners' homes. The unemployed women did seasonal work to supplement the household income. They were very aware of the scarcity of employment opportunities and expressed a strong need to work. According to an unem-

ployed woman: “It was better when I worked, because now I do not get money for staying at home”. The women took responsibility for managing the household and raising the children, but were generally bored. Another unemployed woman said:

When I get up, 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 were kept very tidy, and that the women finished their household tasks early in the day.

3.2 Income and expenditure

Farm dwellers considered their income inadequate to meet the high cost of living. Inadequate income was generally attributed to the low wages of (male) farm workers and the underemployment of women.

An additional financial hardship was the employer's practice of deducting money from their salaries to cover credit at the local store, damage to equipment, and penalties when there was unrest in the community. As a result of this, when salaries were paid at the end of the month, the farm dwellers often received very little. The practice at the local farm store was to sell on credit. Store wares were not visibly priced, but were written up on purchase. Only at the end of the month would customers know how much they owed. They lacked awareness of how much they had spent, and how much money was available for further spending.

Efforts on their part to change these practices had been to no avail. As a result, they felt themselves to be at the mercy of the shop owners and powerless to do anything about it. Of course, the farm dwellers realised they were dependent on these shops for subsistence and that they were caught in a debt trap. Starting the month with only a small disposable income always leads to another month of buying on credit and borrowing from others. An unemployed woman explained:

We get R500, but due to various deductions — for milk, maize meal, meat and credit at the shop, [we] get maybe R123 at the end of the month.

A general feeling of despondency was 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.

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The general perception of outsiders (but also among the 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. A woman participant said with certainty:

Yes, they are going to booze again. They know nothing about money.
If they get paid higher salaries, they will only play with [them]!

In fact, some farm dwellers struggled with the idea of budgeting and saving, while some had success in their endeavours. They were fully aware that money does not have its former buying power. A woman participant said in a matter-of-fact manner: “Today’s money is not like yesterday’s money ... today’s money doesn’t buy much”. There was consensus among the farm dwellers (both men and women), however, that the only real solution to their financial problems was an increase in salaries. A male labourer captured this general feeling: “I think the boss should increase the salaries to at least R800 or R700. That would improve my life.” Farm dwellers were afraid to discuss their dissatisfaction about salaries, because of threats that they would lose their jobs if they pressed the issue of money.

They spoke with nostalgia about the former practice of *mabala* — when they received part of their wages in kind, for instance maize meal or meat. A young woman said: “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 [could] receive *mabala* again, it [would] be better”.

The farm dwellers supplement their household income in various ways. For those with the means to travel to town, buying and selling was the preferred way to make extra money. They bought products in town and sold them to the community at a profit. Farm dwellers also borrowed money from each other and bought each other’s products on credit on a daily basis. They also borrowed from the farmer, but only if they needed to make a big outlay, or for funerals. The farmer also operated a savings system whereby farm dwellers could earn interest. Some made use of it to save for bigger outlays. Some women practised the *stokvel* tradition, agreeing to pool an amount of money on a regular basis, which then went in turn to each member of the *stokvel*, enabling them to buy more expensive items.

3.3 Housing

The farmer provided housing for workers and their immediate families. They reported at the time that their right to live on the farm and to have a roof over their heads was directly dependant on at least one family member's being a labourer on the farm. If for any reason a worker could not continue to serve, the family lost its housing on the farm. It is not only a job and housing that is lost, however, but a whole way of life. As a result, becoming too ill or too old to work was a constant threat to housing security. An unemployed woman revealed:

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 people having to leave the farm. Some were children when they had to leave. "My father become ill and he [the farmer] chased us away, even when we tried the other farm. He controls everything!" a young woman stated angrily.

As soon as there was no one left in a family to work on the farm (whether due to sickness, death or termination of employment) the family thus lost its right to stay on the farm. Although this affected everybody's housing security, the aged were of special concern to the workers. A young male labourer recounted:

They are old. They cannot work any more, 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!

They did not consider this an acceptable situation.

Another threat was the possibility of being fired (and chased away) if one displeased the farmer by complaining about work, housing or anything else. The wife of a labourer commented:

... 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.

None of the participants related this past practice to their newly acquired rights. It was not clear whether they were uninformed about the change in legislation or whether they in fact knew about it, but did not yet experience it as a reality that could positively influence their own lives.

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The availability of housing was limited for those leaving the farm settlement. Older children needed to attend secondary schools in a town. Relatives in towns were a source of help, but sometimes that option was not available. Some people rented rooms or space to erect shanties. Sometimes children even had to live on their own, in order to attend school. Most children, however, did not return to school. A young woman declared:

My sister and I are going to rent 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.

This young woman actually never went back to school, because her parents could only afford to send one child, and chose to send her sister. Their lack of alternative accommodation, away from the farm, is a serious concern for the farm dwellers.

3.4 Transportation

When the farm dwellers had to go somewhere away from the farm, the distance, how to get there, and the cost of transport were major considerations. They lacked both personal and public transport and depended on different means. Walking, hiking, taxis and lifts with the farmer were reported as the most common.

Travelling was also time-consuming. For example, one woman told the researcher that she had to go to town at the end of every month to pay their burial society contributions. She would walk to the main road (4 km) where she would wait to get a lift. Sometimes it would be several days before she had any luck. In financial terms the cheapest means of transport were walking, hiking and lifts with the farmer. However, in terms of time and safety transport was expensive. Taxi fares were expensive and only used if absolutely necessary and if money was available. According to a male participant:

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, and two stores on neighbouring farms, 1 and 5 kms away, were the most accessible sources for buying household necessities. The next nearest

stores were in town, about 50 km away, and difficult to access due to transport limitations. The farm dwellers identified transport as one of their main needs. Access to regular, affordable transport would make a significant positive change in their lives.

All the farm dwellers experienced the same restrictions, but men and women were affected differently. Most men worked and only had freedom of movement outside working hours. They had Sundays off, as well as every second Saturday — which meant that not much free time was available. The men who owned bicycles were more mobile if distances were not too great. The women, most of whom did not have formal jobs, could hitch-hike wherever they wished to go any time of the week. Sometimes they took a lift from the farmer when he went to town on business.

3.5 Community life on the farm

The researcher's first impression of the settlement was that the community lacked a sense of connectedness. This impression was repeatedly reinforced, by both the interviews and the researcher's observations during field visits. For example, a young man said: "I don't see them, because I don't go there". There was a low sense of coherence within the community, as measured on the Sense of Coherence Scale (cf Kruger 2003). It was only later on that the researcher realised that this excluded the very strong connection between family members.

Family and friends were an important source of support to farm dwellers. While concern about family members in general was a basic aspect of social life, mutual support between husband and wife was apparent. It was mainly the female participants who gave accounts of such support. One explained:

If we have a problem we discuss it [with] 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 were also very important. One's welfare and sense of belonging in the community was influenced to a large degree by having or not having other family members living there. A young male labourer said:

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.

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Another female participant (new to the settlement) said:

You just keep quiet if you don't have family in this place. A lot of people here are related.

Various processes seemed to play a role in the low level of connectedness among community members. 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 due to the prevalence of alcohol abuse and associated fighting. Those who had enjoyed socialising and drinking with neighbours in the past, had suffered negative consequences. A young man explained:

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 socialise anymore. I don't want my money to be deducted.

As a result such neighbours would start to avoid social contact. Some farm dwellers were said to have been appointed by the farmer to report who the rowdy ones were. As a result the farm dwellers did not trust one another and only communicated on a superficial level. Another young male labourer stated:

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 who had been living on the farm for a long time recalled times when community life had been more positive. They described a more stable community and a more positive relationship with the farmer and his family. A female participant recalled:

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 any more. Everyone is doing his own thing in his house. It was nice in the past, but not any more. In the past we played with the boss's children. Not any more. We took photos. They don't do that any more.

It seemed that a once stable community had been disrupted by an influx of new people, sometimes of different cultural groups. One of the new residents explained:

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!

The farmer appeared to have exploited this man's marginalised position by making him an informant.

Apart from being the employer, the farmer was also reported to be a source of support to farm dwellers. He provided lifts into town, lent money if anyone needed to go to the doctor and sometimes provided items gratis. It was often with mixed feelings that the farm dwellers accepted this support, however. The farmer decided if and when he was going to help. A farm dweller could not be sure of being helped. A male participant stated: "They will first wait to see if you cope on your own and then give you money to go to the doctor". It also sometimes seemed to be a question of "I will help you, if you obey me". According to another male participant:

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 *mabala* has already been discussed. It seems, however, that the *mabala* they still received was experienced as being supplied not in a spirit of giving, but with ulterior motives. A male participant complained:

They give us meat, but not for the sake of giving, because I know there is a surplus. There is not enough [storage] space. Then we know we will receive something.

3.6 People, places and services beyond the boundaries of the farm

Farm dwellers' contacts outside the farm setting were very limited. Extended family, the church, and health services were most often mentioned by farm dwellers as contact points beyond their immediate environment.

Contact (or lack thereof) with extended family not living on the farm was often mentioned by farm dwellers as a source of support, social contact and identity. Actual contact depended on family living

in close proximity to the farm. The more distant the family, the less contact there was, and telephones were not freely available in the settlement. However, distance is relative — what the farm dwellers experienced as far was not far in real terms if one had access to transport or could afford to travel.

The church was an important source of strength to the farm dwellers. They attended various churches in the surrounding area, and for some this was their main link with the outside world. For others, church was more than merely getting out. A female participant commented: “I like my church a lot. When we sing, my heart becomes more open and I feel better”. The same participant, however, stated in no uncertain terms: “The church does not solve our money problems”.

Health services were an important link to the world beyond the boundaries of the farm. Visits to the clinic, to doctors, and to the hospital in town were often mentioned. It would appear that the farm dwellers’ need for health services was not solely medical — it was also a way to get off the farm for a while. Illness was a good reason to be absent and to go to town. Not surprisingly, the FLAGH report mentions a high incidence of psychosomatic complaints (Kruger 2003). According to the farm dwellers, the farmer often accused them of feigning illness.

4. Discussion

Contradictory forces appear to structure farm dwellers’ everyday life experiences on the farm: difficulty in acquiring tangible and social resources, geographical and social isolation, the uneven transformation of traditional employment relations, the extension of labour protection, and a low sense of power (their inability to influence their circumstances).

The bulk of the farm dwellers’ accounts related to the resources they needed and the difficulties they experienced, not so much because of the unavailability of resources, but mainly because of their inadequacy/insufficiency and inaccessibility, both on the farm and beyond. Employment was available for the able-bodied men. For women and the “disabled”, it was unavailable or only available to a limited extent. Although at the time of the research farm dwellers’ cash wages were in line with the national average of R544 per month, they experienced this as inadequate. Nationally, however, farm dwellers were, and still

are considered the poorest group in the formal sector (De Lange 2001: 14). A grievance procedure was available, but it was experienced as inadequate. The housing available to farm dwellers could certainly be regarded as a resource, but their experience of it was dominated by their uncertainty about its longer-term availability and what their options would be if they were to lose it. Access to resources off the farm was limited, due to a lack of transport. These experiences, however, were not unique. They are very similar to the experiences of farm dwellers elsewhere in the country (Du Toit 1993, Luck 2004) and emphasise the scale of the plight of farm dwellers in South Africa at large.

The experience of not having secure, sustained access to resources is captured in the concept of vulnerability. According to May & Norton (1997: 113), this refers to potential circumstances rather than to concrete conditions, and addresses the prevailing insecurity of the livelihoods of poor people. 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 them, for instance their right not to be evicted. Furthermore, the formalisation of employment relations is often accompanied by a loss of the facilities and services associated with more traditional employment relations — a situation which leaves many farm dwellers feeling insecure, vulnerable and powerless.

The researcher's first impression, of a community that lacked connectedness, was supported by the farm dwellers' accounts of community life. The myth of the simplicity of "face-to-face" society (Cohen 1985: 28) and the harmony model of community development (Burkey 1993: 43) substantiated the researcher's impression. Researchers (as in this study) and community developers often expect small, closed, traditional communities to be closely connected and living in harmony — but often that is not the case. The researcher was struck by the absence of the general spirit of *ubuntu* commonly associated with African culture — the spirit of sharing and caring, and the belief in being a person through other people (cf Mbambo 2002: 7). According to Breton (2001: 23–6) the properties of a resilient neighbourhood include networks of individuals who identify themselves as neighbours, feel emotionally positively connected, and engage in neighbourly behaviour. Such networks are considered important, especially in economically

deprived/poor neighbourhoods. However, networks also depend on the existence of at least a minimal sense of personal power — something that seemed to be lacking in this settlement. The negative effect of the remaining vestiges of paternalism on the farm (for instance, using community members as informers) could explain the farm dwellers' isolation in the community. According to Du Toit (1993: 5) paternalism is ultimately deeply divisive and “creates a culture of back-biting and jealousy, pitting worker against worker in rivalry for the farmer’s approval”.

Although the farm dwellers described their experiences on the farm mostly in terms of aspects which limited and entrapped them, some positive experiences did emerge. These included endeavours to improve financial planning, strategies to supplement household income, and family support. Places to visit beyond the boundaries of the farm, such as the church and health services, formed a link to the outside world and were thus a source of strength and support. Although limited, such experiences did provide farm dwellers with an opportunity to transcend their social isolation and to develop an identity separate from the farm and their relationship with the farmer.

5. Conclusion

Farm dwellers identified various changes that would improve their lives, with wage increases, affordable transport, and access to affordable housing after leaving the farm being priorities. From this the researcher deduced that they wanted a better life on the farm and did not necessarily want to leave, and that they focused on what should be provided for them rather than on what they themselves could do to transform their circumstances. Farm dwellers experienced themselves and their circumstances on the farm from a disempowered position. Although they possessed survival strategies, they lacked the vision and skills to transform their circumstances to incorporate the potential advantages of the new politico-legal dispensation.

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