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Coping strategies of informal day labourers and the role of churches and non-governmental organisations in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

In South Africa and in other parts of the world, day labourers are often faced with contingencies owing to the unregulated nature of their work. The activities of the day labourers fall within the informal sector, with difficult working conditions. This study sought to investigate and assess the coping strategies that day labourers in East London adopt in order to survive. This study utilised a qualitative research approach to gather data from 18 day labourers who were recruited at six hiring sites to participate in the study using semi-structured individual interviews appropriately. Resilience theory provided the theoretical basis for the investigation. The data that the interviews generated was analysed by means of thematic analysis. The findings revealed day labourers' reliance on various sources of support (including churches), willingness to work according to the requirements of prospective employers, and alternative means of generating income are the key survival strategies adopted by the day labourers through their daily endeavours within the context of their work. The findings underscored the need for coordination among NGOs and government institutions in order to provide a fit-for-purpose combination of strategies to alleviate the immediate material needs of day labourers as well as to enhance their resilience to ensure a just transition to social justice in the long run.

KEY TERMS: challenges, coping strategies, day labourers, informal work, resilience theory, South Africa

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INTRODUCTION

Day labourers in South Africa face a number of challenges and adversities owing to the unregulated nature of their work. These labourers face irregular employment, low and uncertain levels of income, possible exploitation as well as difficult and often unsafe working conditions (Mapendere, Schenck & Blaauw, 2019). This study investigated the coping strategies that the day labourers in East London of South Africa adopt in order to survive. The purpose is to highlight how vulnerable day labourers in the South African context demonstrate resilience. The study will first provide a background to the study, and describe the qualitative research approach that was used to collect and analyse the data. The article then provides a discussion, conclusion and recommendations that can guide social service professionals, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and churches on how to enhance their services towards vulnerable groups.

BACKGROUND

Resorting to finding employment by working as day labourers is a global trend that is increasingly visible and widespread – in the case of South Africa even under the lockdown imposed in 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Blaauw, 2010; Theodore, 2015; Mapendere et al. 2019; Mutandiro, 2020). Day labour in South Africa is a form of informal employment (Blaauw, 2010; Mapendere et al., 2019). It is often characterised by poor working conditions, which are not regulated by relevant legislation, and the rights of day labourers are not protected by institutions such as trade unions. Instead, they are employed as casual labourers by different employers, often for one day only (Blaauw, 2010; Mapendere et al., 2019; Xweso, 2019).

As the official rate of unemployment in South Africa is estimated at a staggering 32.6 percent (Statistics South Africa (Stats SA), 2021), many people venture into day labour work as a means of employment in order to generate subsistence-level livelihoods. The findings of the initial study that Schenck and Louw (2005) conducted revealed that day labourers can be found in large cities and towns, congregating on street corners, seeking temporary employment for the day or a limited extended period (Xipu, 2009; Ngwenya, 2018). They gather daily in open spaces, where they may be exposed to wind, rain or extreme temperatures, without being certain of finding work (Mapendere et al., 2019). Consequently, their working conditions render them highly vulnerable to both extreme poverty and hazards to their health. Blaauw, Louw and Schenck (2006) and Blaauw (2010) have conducted extensive research into the phenomenon of day labouring in South Africa. The findings of their studies have revealed several instances of abusive treatment of day labourers by employers. The harsh reality of the daily lives of day labourers includes cases characterised by abuse (Xweso, 2019), such as failure to pay them for work that they have performed, denying them breaks during their working days, and requiring them to work in unsafe conditions, thereby exposing them to significantly increased risks of sustaining work-related injuries (Blaauw, 2010; Mapendere et al., 2019). It must be noted that there also man case of day labourers being paid on time, given breaks etc. (Blaauw, 2010).

In order to be able to survive under harsh circumstances, day labourers develop effective survival strategies. As Blaauw (2010) explains, entering the informal sector of the economy in itself represents a highly precarious strategy for achieving material survival. In response to this assertion, the authors endeavoured to assess the resilience of day labourers in East London in the Eastern Cape in South Africa, and the strategies that they adopt in order to survive, to understand how they respond to the hardships that they encounter in their daily lives. The research question through which the aims of the investigation are articulated is: *How do day labourers respond to the hardships that they encounter in their continuous search for gainful employment?*

Theoretical framework

Resilience theory, specifically as it is propounded by Van Breda (2018), underpinned the theoretical framework for this study, particularly with respect to the ability of people to exceed expectations in their responses to adversity. Resilience theory continues to exert an increasing influence on research and practice in several different disciplines (Southwick, Bonanno, Masten, Panter-Brick & Yehuda, 2014; Van Breda, 2018). Worthington and Scherer (2004) characterise resilience as a process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or other significant sources of stress. As Van Breda (2018) explains, resilience articulates the ways in which systems recover in the aftermath of stress, which is particularly relevant to the unemployed status of day labourers. According to Mapendere et al. (2019), the resilience and capability that people display are consequently predicated upon their ability to respond more effectively to adversity than their circumstances might suggest could be possible. Fundamental to resilience thinking is the observation that while some people may be predisposed to

succumb to a particular stressor, others, who are exposed to the same stressor, demonstrate resilience by recovering and ‘bouncing back’ (Van Breda, 2018).

METHODS

Study’s approach, design and sampling

The findings that are presented in this paper were obtained from a broader qualitative research study. The first author gathered most of the data from semi-structured individual interviews. The interviews were conducted during December 2017, over six days and had durations of between 45 and 90 minutes. The authors consulted the national study that Blaauw (2010) had conducted in South Africa in 2008 as a guide to select hiring sites in East London for the purpose of the study upon which this paper is based. All of the sites were visited to enable the authors to establish that all of the sites from which data had been obtained in 2007 and 2008 were still in existence. No new sites were found. The target population for this research study comprised all of the day labourers who gathered at hiring sites in the East London area. The selection and recruiting of participants for this study were informed by the observations of Blaauw (2010) and Schenck and Louw (2005) that as day labourers frequently move from one location to another in search for employment, it is often difficult to obtain representative research samples. Owing to the unique behaviour of the research population, the authors used availability or convenience sampling to select participants at the six hiring sites in East London. This type of sampling entails selecting all of the potential participants who are available and willing to be interviewed (Bless & Higson-Smith & Kagee, 2006).

The following selection criteria were applied:

- (i) Participants should be over the age of 18 years.
- (ii) They should have stood at the selected sites in East London for more than six months.

Eighteen participants were willing to be interviewed to explain the strategies that they adopted to survive the hardships that are endemic in day labouring.

Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee of the University of the Western Cape, with Ethical clearance number HS17/8/18. All reasonable measures were taken to adhere to the ethical code of behaviour that applies to all professional research in the social sciences. The participants gave written informed consent to ensure their free voluntary participation and the right to withdraw their participation at any time without incurring any penalties. The researchers ensured that no participant was harmed in any way. When the study was conducted, the researchers ensured that the identities of the participants were protected by omitting the names of individual participants instead of revealing their true identities. The participants were assured that they would not be exposed to anybody without their consent. Participants’ benefit to the results of the study had to be clarified to the participants, and they were ensured that the findings of the study may be presented at a national conference and international colloquia with an intention to make findings available to the key stakeholders dealing with vulnerable groups.

FINDINGS

In summary, the 18 participants whom the first author interviewed were all black males. Their average age was 40 years. A majority (85 percent) had never married and 15 percent were cohabiting with their partners. Only nine had matriculated. The other 50 percent of the sample completed primary and some secondary schooling but not matric. The thematic analysis provided these main themes: sources of support, willingness to work according to the requirements of prospective employers, and finding alternative means of obtaining income. These will be discussed in detail in the following paragraphs.

Sources of support

The respondents were asked: “Which methods do you use to cope during bad days?” It was evident from the findings of the study that the day labourers relied heavily on the support that they received from local churches.

Support from local churches

The participants explained that local churches in East London provided them with support in the form of food at all six of the sites at which this study was conducted. Out of 18 participants who were interviewed, 11 mentioned that churches are helpful in desperate times. The interviewees said:

When I do not have something to eat, I go to the Trinity Church in Southernwood. They will give us food and bread, you see the government, bro, is doing nothing, church people are the ones that support us here always (P2, male day labourer).

Most of the time we survive here from the handouts that Church people in the community are giving to us, sometimes it is difficult if they do not come, we often notice the days when they come on Thursdays and sometimes on Fridays, they always come around and help us, they are very helpful, the people of the church are better than everyone here (P8, male day labourer)

Formation of groups for mutual support

It was also evident from the findings that the day labourers formed mutually-supporting groups to assist one another to cope when individual members are unable to obtain work. Interviewees related as follows:

We go together with my friends from Duncan Village, sometimes, and have some work and share the money (P13, male day labourer)

You see we help each other here as brothers, if the employer is on the lookout for someone who does bricklaying and I know for a fact I am not good with bricklaying I only do painting, so I call the one who does bricklaying and they call me also when people need someone who does good painting P7, male day labourer).

In this study, the authors found that day labourers in East London tended to group together according to their clan names, which are known as 'iziduko' in isiXhosa. As one interviewee explained:

You know what, bhuti, we are one blood here, this one and this one 'ngabamthembu' (clan name), they belong to me, I love them, bhuti, and we are from Gobe together, we stay together every time....you know what, I know their parents they used to stay with my father at home, So we have that relationship since we were young, if I don't have a job or one of us does not have a job, we usually share at least, so that we can help each other, they are my blood mos, so it's fine to help them (P4, male day labourer).

Pooling earnings with partners or 'isandla sesibini'

Some of the interviewees explained that the reciprocal support that partners provided to each other is known in isiXhosa as isandla sesibini, whose literal meaning is to work with a partner. In the words of the participants:

Isandla sesibini is mostly needed, here I work with my girlfriend to make money for ourselves, she is doing house cleaning and I do painting and other tasks, this is helping me because if I couldn't make it for the day, she makes it, so it helps a lot (P6, male day labourer).

I come early in the morning to wait for employment opportunities here together with my bhabha [partner], while I am waiting for employment, she helps me with selling cigarettes to some people around so that if it happens we go home without getting employment for a day, the money for cigarettes can help us to buy bread (P1, male day labourer)

Developing sound relationships with employers

Maintaining good relationships with employers enables day labourers to increase the frequency with which they are hired, by becoming regular employees of particular employers. The findings of this study revealed that some of the participants maintained close relationships with some employers by exchanging mobile phone numbers with them, to enable them to be contacted easily when the employers were in need of the services of day labourers. According to one of the interviewees:

I have my own people. They always look for me when they come here. That helps me to get more jobs every day (P8, male day labourer)

Participants also had definite preferences with respect to the employers who hired them, owing to the abuse to which they were subjected by some employers. Consequently, they expressed strong preferences for employers who treated them well.

My brother, me, you see, I always run away from working ... employers. They do not want to throw money away...I like ...employers, sometimes they are nice, they give us even extra money and food when we have finished the work (P17, male day labourer)

The authors decided not to include the racial groupings referred to by the respondent in the quotation. We do not want to run the risk of appearing to be generalising on the basis of the words of a particular respondent.

One participant explained that he preferred to work for female employers after having been employed once by a woman, although women rarely came to the site to hire day labourers. In his own words:

I so wish I can work for women every time when I get a job here...They have mercy (P11, male day labourer)

Willingness to work according to the requirements of prospective employers

Willingness to work on a standby basis

Emergency work refers to work that, of necessity, needs to be done without delay, owing to circumstances for which the employer could not reasonably have been expected to make provision and that cannot be performed by employees during their ordinary hours of work. Emergency work excludes the performance of routine maintenance work outside of normal working hours. The willingness of the participants to accept employment under these conditions is evident in the following excerpt:

He has my number. When he calls me, I do not say 'No, I don't want the job because it is weekend'...I take the job because I know it will help me and I will be able to buy food during the weekend and have a Sunday dish meal with my children, yebo I make cash, bra, yhoo I can't just sit (P2, male day labourer)

By contrast, some of the participants regarded being available at all times as a form of abuse by employers, as is evident from the following excerpt:

You know sometimes I used to call them and ask for work, they had my number that way now they are calling me even during weekends to do their work...even at night to come and repair leaking pipes....but now no, I cannot work during weekends anymore, do you know what they do? In the past I have been available whenever they need me, I used to do almost anything they asked me to do, but they will say after I have done the work I must leave. I cannot sleep and they will never pay me at all (P9, male day labourer)

Alternative means of obtaining income

Resorting to waste picking

Despite the hardship that day labourers experience each day, it was evident from the findings that they tend to have a strong sense of independence and display considerable resourcefulness and resilience. Most of the participants indicated that they engaged in waste picking by collecting iron, copper and bottles to sell for money to buy food. One of the interviewees said:

When times are not good for me, I collect iron and sell it to the scrapyards so that at least I can have money to buy bread and take that bread home, sometimes it's difficult to get enough money because many of us here are doing the same thing, so we get less money (P15, male day labourer)

Other participants articulated that:

We struggle here a lot what we normally do we collect irons and sell them to the scrap yard so that we can buy amagwinya [fat cakes] from the shops and eat, sometimes we ask money from the people passing by the streets, some people do give us the money and some they don't (P1, male day labourer)

When I came looking for a job in this area I didn't know if I could collect cans and sell them for money, I learned that here, so if I can't find any piece of job, I collect the cans and go and sell them so that I can get some money (P2, male day labourer)

Going from door to door in search of employment

Some of the participants explained that when opportunities for employment were particularly scarce, they went to the townships in which they resided or to residential areas in East London, going from house to house to ask for employment or to perform any tasks in return for small amounts of money. Some of the participants reported that their attempts to obtain employment were often met with hostility, particularly in residential areas. In the words of some of the participants:

I used to stay here on site the whole day and wait for employers to take me to work, someday I saw my friends going door-to-door asking for employment and they got the employment, I did the same thing, but it did not work for me. I was chased by the guy, accusing that I came for a bad motive...I wanted to steal their things (P18, male day labourer)

Sometimes I even go to the location and ask door-to-door what can I do to help in return for money... sometimes they do not give me money they just give me food (P3, male day labourer)

Soliciting loans from Somalians

Some participants explained that they were usually able to obtain loans from Somali people, to whom they referred as friends, when they were in need of money or food. The Somalis upon whom they rely reside mainly in the informal settlements, which are home to many day labourers in Duncan Village and some Gqobhasi areas in East London. The implicit trust that the participants appeared to place in their Somali benefactors is reflected unequivocally in the following excerpt:

If I do not get work here, I just go back in Duncan Village where I stay and borrow money from my friend; they will never let me down. I even get food from them and they will give me (P13, male day labourer).

The findings also revealed that the participants often lent money to those who were unable to obtain employment:

We give each other money if someone is in need of help, we help each other here because we know that the following day some of us will need help, so that is why we want to live by helping each other (P7, male day labourer)

DISCUSSION

The day labourers demonstrated considerable resilience in the wake of adversity. It was evident that their morale was increased by the social cohesion that the formation of groups for mutual support afforded, as it emerged that they shared wages and food to help one another, to finding employment. These findings accord with those of Blaauw (2010), who emphasised the crucial role that support among day labourers plays to enable them to cope with everyday challenges and adversities. In East London, clan names provided the basis for forming social groups and the participants perceived the bonds within their groups to be strong. Similarly, Schenck and Louw (2005) found that day labourers in Elardus Park, in South Africa tended to form groups according to criteria such as marital status or their birthplaces. In addition, the findings of this study recognise the considerable support that the local churches in the East London area provide for the day labourers while waiting at the hiring sites. For day labourers, the support from the local churches is one of the most important sources of strength to continue working as day labourers and search for employment.

Another finding concerned the resilience that the day labourers demonstrated through their willingness to accommodate the specific needs of prospective employers, even if doing so entailed working for extended hours or during weekends. The authors assessed the flexibility of day labourers in relation to their willingness to undertake extra work and to do whatever may be required to perform particular tasks adequately.

Day labourers revealed considerable resilience through their dogged persistence in a market that they themselves perceived to offer few opportunities for gainful employment. The key role played by NGOs and independent organisations in helping them to continue their participation in this informal labour market against the odds cannot be overemphasised. We argue that this can be an important point of departure or basis for continued and improved assistance to allow the day labourers to harness their resilience and effectively as possible.

NGOs and their role in supporting day labourers

The role of social workers and in particular non-government organisations (NGOs) is crucial in alleviating the plight of day labourers. According to Rooderick, Blaauw and Schenck (2016), support from civil society organisations such as NGOs can make a difference in the lives of vulnerable people such as day labourers. Matthews and Nqaba (2017) argue that non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are regarded by many as vital role-players in improving the lives of the poor and bringing about social justice. The role of social work at all levels should always strive to create safety nets for vulnerable groupings, including day labourers, through advocacy and activism. At the moment, however, it seems to be the NGOs taking the steps to create safety nets for vulnerable people in order for them to cope with adverse situations.

Edwards and Hulme (1992) had long recognised that the NGOs are a critical feature of society with the aim of partnering and complementing government efforts and government services through the delivery of their own services to the poor people and identification and addressing of new social problems. In essence, it is evident that NGOs are becoming the development and assistance agencies engaged in relieving the more visible symptoms of underdevelopment through relief and welfare measures (Schenck, Nel & Louw, 2010). There is no doubt that the involvement of NGOs in the plight of day labourers fundamentally keeps them going.

Korten (1987) describes four generations [stages] of strategic orientation and voluntary development for NGOs, and we argue that these are appropriate as a basis for assisting day labourers and ultimately sustaining their livelihood practice:

Generation 1: Relief and welfare

First-generation strategies involve the NGO in the direct delivery of services to meet an immediate deficiency or shortage experienced by the beneficiary population, such as needs for food, healthcare or shelter (Korten, 1987). In this study, the direction that the local churches take in the East London area in supporting the day labourers through offering food and hand-outs is congruent with the first generation's notion of immediate support to the vulnerable groupings.

Generation 2: Small-scale, self-reliant local development

The second-generation strategies are developmental in concept, and are often referred to as *community development strategies* (Korten, 1987). Second-generation strategies focus the energies of the NGO on developing the capacities of the people to better meet their own needs through self-reliant local action. Partnerships between the NGOs and the community contribute significantly to the implementation of small-scale projects to cater for poor people through self-help initiatives. The study of Mapendere et al. (2019) among day labourers in Cape Town mentioned the positive and significant impact of such a social enterprise called Men on the Side of the Road (MSR).

Generation 3: Sustainable systems development

Third-generation strategies look beyond the individual community and seek changes in specific policies and institutions at local, national and global levels (Korten, 1987). The notion is to achieve a sustainable and inclusive developmental outcome. There is a growing concern for NGOs to advocate for day labourers in terms of recognition within structures of the government. The recognition should be channelled through appropriate institutions and through relevant policies. It is the role of social workers within the NGO sector to establish policies that are developmental in their orientation and are contrary to the neoliberal approaches that are becoming prevalent in the South African NGO sector (Ornellas & Engelbrecht, 2020).

Generation 4: Social movements

Fourth-generation strategies recognise social movements to have a special quality in the endeavour to social change. The power of people's movements has largely been ignored in the field of development (Korten, 1987). Attention has been focused on money rather than social energy as the engine of development. In the literature (Schenck & Louw, 2005; Blaauw, 2010; Malinga, 2015; Mapendere et al., 2019; Xweso, 2019), there is growing evidence that day labourers formulate mutual support groups [networks]. It is upon this resilient gesture that day labourers continue to sustain living through their temporary employment. In the United States, movements such as the National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON) gained momentum over time in promoting the labour and other legal rights of day labourers (Theodore, 2015).

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK

The implications of the findings of the study for the social work profession are therefore vested on several interdependent levels. Fourth Generation strategies in the form of recognising social movements as agents for social change have very little chance of success if sufficient attention is not given to Generation one strategies such as the alleviation of hunger and starvation. Coordination among NGOs and government institutions is critical in order to provide a fit-for-purpose combination of all four generation strategies to alleviate the immediate material needs of day labourers in the short run; and to enhance the resilience shown by these men and women in the long run to ensure a just transition to social justice.

CONCLUSION

The findings can be assessed from at least two different perspectives. Rising levels of inequality in South Africa and the phenomenon of day labouring have been substantially documented. The plight of indigenous day labourers in South Africa is particularly poignant against the backdrop of the socio-political changes that the country has undergone in recent decades. While their marginalisation may partly have stemmed from the imposition of policies that were based on racial discrimination during the apartheid era, in the post-apartheid era the marginalised have merely been abandoned, along with the commitment of the ruling party of meaningful social change for all South Africans. The perception of the participant, who explained that he and his fellow day labourers relied on local churches for food, while the government did nothing for them, is an eloquent articulation of this assessment. Accordingly, the glaring widespread evidence of the misery in which the marginalised and vulnerable are condemned to subsist provides a permanent reminder of the betrayal of a people in favour of the interests of international capital.

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