

---

**“TOO CLOSE FOR COMFORT”:  
PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF PEOPLE  
AFFECTED BY DAY LABOURERS AT THREE HIRING  
SITES IN TSHWANE, SOUTH AFRICA**

---

**Rinie Schenck**

Professor, Department of Social Work, Unisa  
schenckj@unisa.ac.za

**Dehlia Nell**

MA(SS)MH Student, Department of Social Work, Unisa

**ABSTRACT**

*This article explores the perceptions and experiences of people affected by day labourers in Tshwane. All the existing research on day labourers focuses on the day labourers themselves, not on the people with whom they share the public spaces and who are affected by them. The aim of this article is to share the experiences, perceptions and suggestions of residents, business owners, police and employers who are directly affected by day labourers. An exploratory and descriptive methodology was used in this research and the results indicate a mixture of experiences: intimidation, invasion of private space and powerlessness, but also compassion for the labourers. They also show the urgency for further research on day labourers and the people affected by them in order to find some direction in this complex matter.*

---

**Key words:** day labourers; unemployment, hiring sites; cybernetic systems approach ; exploratory research; descriptive research

---

## **INTRODUCTION**

From 1995 to 2001, unemployment in South Africa doubled, increasing from 15.6% in 1995 to 30.3% in 2001 (Banerjee, Galiani, Levinsohn, McLaren and Woolard, 2007). In 2000 it was estimated that 50% of the population lived below the poverty line. Blaauw, Louw and Schenck (2006) did, however, indicate that the official unemployment rate in 2005 had dropped to 26.7%. Because of the high unemployment rate, more people are forced into the informal sector or second economy. One of these informal ways of earning a living is to stand next to the road marketing one's skills or availability for employment in general or for some specific job. This is what happens in Tshwane, South Africa. According to Blaauw et al (2006), who conducted such research in Tshwane, most day labourers in this area are African men and 88% of the interviewees in the study were South African. Many of the men included in this study came from provinces surrounding Gauteng: North West, Free State, Limpopo and Mpumalanga, as Gauteng province is regarded as the province where work opportunities are to be found. The other 12% came from neighbouring countries such as Zimbabwe and Mozambique. Blaauw et al (2006) describe the day labourers as men who wait for informal and usually temporary employment on a daily basis, who live a harsh life and who do not succeed in getting employment every day. The preliminary research conducted by Schenck and Louw (2005) in a suburb of Tshwane indicated that these men perform a range of low-skilled jobs, mostly in the construction industry but also in gardening and home improvements. There is a supportive relationship amongst day labourers: they share food, places to sleep and income in order to survive. Although their circumstances are harsh, they perceive themselves as responsible people who are trying to support their families (Schenck and Louw, 2005).

This research was conducted in order to give a voice to some of the other people or subsystems affected by the day labour dilemma. This article describes the perceptions, experiences and recommendations of people who are affected by the presence of day labourers – for instance, residents and businesses that form part of the contexts of three hiring sites identified in Tshwane. The paper also provides pointers for practice.

## **BACKGROUND AND APPROACH TO STUDY**

Day labourers may be best understood systemically, that is, in context, and holistically. In this case the context is the geographical area where they wait to be offered employment. These hiring sites are usually public spaces that they share with residents, shop owners, and others. The authors became

aware of the strong perceptions and experiences that people have about day labourers. In fact, day labourers cannot be studied without including the perceptions and experiences of the people they affect and by whom they are affected.

In 2003, in the *Washington Post*, Branigin reported the five-year-old struggle between day labourers and neighbourhood residents and store owners who did not want them at a particular site in Washington. The municipal authorities spoke of the difficult and complex task of finding a site that would be acceptable to all parties. Residents were said to feel strongly that the site should not be too close to residential areas. Their concerns seemed to include the untidiness of sites, safety issues and increased traffic. The conflicting feelings of residents are also evident in an article published in the *Chicago Tribune* (Avila 2003) and reflected in the novel *Tortilla Curtain* by TC Boyle (1995). The article mentions that residents and merchants often see day labourers as a nuisance or a security risk. The article “Day to day, but making a living” in the *New York Times* (Greenhouse 2003) refers to the ambivalent feelings in communities about day labourers: there are those who accept them and others who react to them with hostility.

In Arlington in the USA, a decision to build a facility for day labourers resulted in complaints from local residents that the labourers caused traffic problems and were noisy and sometimes disorderly. According to the Assistant County Manager, the decision was taken in an attempt to balance the interests of the community, the day laborers, and the employers. Complaints about the workers included that they urinated in public, whistled at women passing by and left trash in the area. The aim was to provide a place where employers could find workers easily and where the labourers would be away from the residences where they had stood previously (Rivera and Wiseman 2003; also compare Perez 2004).

The theoretical approach used in this research was the cybernetic systems approach, which enabled the researchers to see the respondents and affected people as parts of an interrelated whole. Assuming the various subsystems and day labourers are part of a system and related to one another, directly or indirectly, means that there are “relationships” between them. Jones (1993:2) includes this in his definition of a system. He describes a system as “... a group of elements in interaction with one another over time, such that their recursive patterns of interaction form a stable context for individual and mutual functioning”. This “stable context” may be seen as the consistent relationship between the need for work and the need for day labourers.

From a cybernetic systems viewpoint, the following assumptions have been made:

- Although some of the subsystems may not see themselves as connected to the day labourers, they are nonetheless “directly or indirectly related”. The mere fact that some of the subsystems are physically close to a site, and that some of these employ day labourers or have to enforce laws and/or municipal bylaws concerning them, constitutes a connection. There might be no direct communication, but it can be said that they communicate by “not communicating”. They relate to the day labourers by ignoring them, hiring them, fighting with them and complaining about them.
- Day labour sites or the presence of day labourers will continue as long as there is a need for work and a need for day labourers to do the work.
- Looking at this phenomenon systemically, it is important to acknowledge that this research is only a part of a larger whole and, as Bateson (1979: 24) states, “... without context, words and action have no meaning at all”. A description of the day labourers’ context will assist in understanding the people affected by the day labourers as well as understanding the actions of the day labourers.

## DESCRIPTION OF DAY LABOUR HIRING SITES

The researchers adopted the term “day labourers”, as documented by Valenzuela (2002:5), to refer to “men gathering at informal hiring sites or pick up points, hoping to sell their labour for a day or longer or for a specific job in order to earn something”. These “informal hiring sites” are simply the average street corner or pavement in residential or business areas, depending on the demand for labour.

Day labourers gather at different locations where they are picked up by employers. Theodore and Valenzuela (2006:1) found that informal hiring sites “tend to form near home improvement stores, at busy intersections, and in parks and other public spaces”. The nature and size of these sites vary. Valenzuela (2001:342) refers to three types of site: connected, unconnected and regulated.

- **Connected** sites are those connected to an industry such as painting and building. These sites are found in front of shops or malls containing hardware stores or shops that provide building materials. The day labourers at connected sites usually have skills related to the industry.
- **Unconnected** sites are those that are not close to any apparent

connection point and which probably exist on account of “foot or vehicle traffic, police co-operation, or historical reasons” (Valenzuela 2001:342).

- The third type of site is **regulated** sites. These are formal sites supported, run or sponsored by municipalities, building industries, community-based organisations or private persons. At the time of this research, no “regulated sites” existed in Tshwane.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Grobbelaar (2000:93) describes **exploratory research** as follows: “Research is done in a particular field or topic in social sciences on which no research has been done or of which mention has been made, but which has not been addressed in a scientific manner.” Yegidis and Weinbach (1996:92) add that “there can be no hypotheses to test, only the broadest of research questions to examine”.

According to Dane (1990:6), **the descriptive design** “involves examining a phenomenon to more fully define it or differentiate it from other phenomena”. Rubin and Babbie (1993:108) state that the main attribute of much research in the social field is that “[t]he researcher observes and then describes what was observed”. In addition, Bateson (1979) sees this as something that, while including all the available facts concerning the phenomena that can be described, would not include an explanation or study of possible connections.

### The research process

Step 1: Identifying the three hiring sites

The research team started the process by locating and counting the “hiring sites” and day labourers in Tshwane. Three sites in Tshwane were identified for the study using judgemental sampling.

According to Grobbelaar (2000), this kind of sampling is done in terms of the available information about the population (also see Bailey 1987). The researchers selected the following sites as examples of the three types of sites identified during the locating and counting process:

- a site in a predominantly residential area
- a site in a predominantly business area
- a mixed site in a combined residential and business area

Step 2: Identifying the subsystems that might be affected by day labourers

This step involved structured and unstructured observation methods (Yegidis and Weinbach 1996).

The different subsystems involved at each site were identified as the day labourers, residents or home owners, business, members of the South Africa Police Services(national police force) and employers of day labourers.

Steps 3 and 4: Exploring the perceptions and experiences of selected subsystems with regard to day labourers

It was decided to focus primarily on the viewpoints of residents and businesses in the streets where the sites are situated, as they are directly affected by the day labourers on a daily basis because the labourers stand on the pavements or open spaces in front of their houses or businesses. Further information was collected from interviews with the police commissioner in each area and with the metro police, as well as with two employers of day labourers.

No non-governmental organisations (NGO) or churches were included, because no church or NGO was directly involved at any of the three sites. There are sites where churches are involved in providing day labourers with food, but not at these particular sites. No involvement by any welfare organisation was detected.

### **Process of determining the system, contacting interviewees and conducting interviews**

Area maps of sites

A street map of each site was sourced on the Internet ([www.brabymaps.co.za](http://www.brabymaps.co.za)). After unstructured observation, the participants were limited to residents and business owners in the same street.

Gathering contact details of possible respondents

The Bureau for Market Research at Unisa introduced the authors to the Cybertrade program ([www.cybertrade.co.za/cybertel.html](http://www.cybertrade.co.za/cybertel.html)) as a method for obtaining telephone numbers of residents living in the relevant streets. The sampling method used for the residents may be described as **convenience** sampling (Van Rensburg 2000). It was decided to interview the business owners in person, since it would be possible to see them during business hours. It was assumed that they might be too busy to respond to telephonic

interviewers, or that they might be suspicious if the interviews were conducted in such a way.

Telephonic interviews were conducted with the residents, as this seemed a more time- and cost-effective way of contacting the respondents at a time convenient to them and took into account the safety of the female researcher.

Interviews with the police, the metro police and employers were also conducted according to the **availability** sampling method, with one or two people from each group being interviewed. The purpose of these interviews was to acknowledge the role of these subsystems in the day labourer phenomenon and to gain an idea of their perceptions and experiences, while acknowledging at the same time that only a particular person's perceptions would be reflected. The perceptions and experiences of interviewees cannot be regarded as reflective of those of all people affected by day labourers.

### **Results of the unstructured and structured observation**

Three relatively different sites in different socioeconomic areas were decided on. Although these sites are all connected sites (situated close to building supplies shops), they are located in different income-group areas. The differences between the sites, as described previously, would allow the researchers to obtain different perspectives from different people. At site A, more residents could be approached, whereas sites B and C provided more access to businesses.

#### Site A

This site is located in the east of Pretoria in one of the more affluent neighbourhoods. On the southern side of the street there are residential houses, while two residential townhouse complexes and two businesses (one a building supplies store and the other a petrol station) are situated on the northern side. The site is situated near a large open space with a small stream that normally flows in the rainy season. People sleep in the field at night; presumably many of them are day labourers.

A group of approximately 60 day labourers (all black males) gather at the site every morning from Monday to Sunday. The largest number is observed in the early morning but numbers diminish during the day, presumably as some find work and others retreat or go "home".

## Site B

This site is located in the central business district of Pretoria with several businesses selling building materials. It is a large site where more than 200 day labourers congregate. They advertise their skills, but not to the same extent as those at site A. There is a food stall at the site where a woman sells food to the day labourers.

In front of one set of shops a security guard is on duty with a large dog. No day labourers are allowed in the parking area of the building supplies shop.

## Site C

This site is in one of the northern suburbs of Tshwane and next to a long, wide street which allows traffic to flow easily, which increases the possibility of employers passing by. It is a fairly small site where approximately 16 people can be found by 07:30 in the morning. On the northern side of the road there is a house and a fenced vacant property where a small office sells basic building materials and sand. East of the road there are five businesses: a supermarket, a bottle store, a butchery, a hairdresser and a chicken wholesaler. This site is situated in a middleclass residential area. All three sites can be seen as connected sites, since the businesses create the potential for possible employers.

The interviews: perceptions and experiences of people affected by the presence of day labourers

Interview results and observations from affected people were summarised in terms of themes. The following themes emerged:

### **The daily experience of poverty**

At site A, residents stated that the day labourers brought poverty to their doorstep. Without the presence of the day labourers, poverty would not be visible on a daily basis, as the residents lived protected from poverty-stricken areas. Instead, residents are confronted daily with desperation for work, inhumane living conditions and hunger.

*“Poverty is not out there anymore it is on my doorstep.”*

### **Invasion of privacy and intimidation**

Residents experience an invasion of their privacy and personal freedom and they feel victimised. They have the feeling of being watched and they feel



intimidated when moving out of their houses, in their gardens and in the street. Their movements become restricted. The business people also find that their customers feel intimidated by day labourers who stand either in the parking areas or in front of the shops. They said that women in particular felt uneasy and intimidated, and this is not good for business. Women might be discouraged from buying, preferring to find another shop where they can move freely. Some of the businesses employ security guards to create a feeling of safety. According to the police, there is no legislation pertaining to the restriction of day labourers, who therefore have freedom of movement.

### **A perception that crime is masked**

Residents in the various areas, businessmen, metro police and police all perceive that day labourers are, at least potentially, masking the presence of criminals. The day labourers stand next to the road, and so do drug dealers and criminals.

*“You cannot distinguish who is who.”*

The people do not necessarily believe that day labourers are involved in criminal activities and believe they might indeed be honest job-seekers, but the fact that they mask the criminals is a concern. *“You do not know whom to trust,”* and it may be because of this perception that most of the residents and business people restrict their interaction with the day labourers.

According to the police, the only the way they can deal with this is to check the day labourers regularly for stolen goods, drugs and documents, and they also pay some day labourers to be informants.

### **Experiences regarding safety and security**

One of the businessmen saw the day labourers as a nuisance and a perceived threat to the safety of customers and of staff working in the shops. He has appointed security staff with dogs to create the perception among customers and staff that he is concerned about their safety. The hiring of security guards increases the expenses of business people. On the other hand they admit that, to some extent, day labourers can contribute to safety. One mentioned an incident where a day labourer caught someone who stole a purse. *“They (day labourers) are aware that if criminals give them a bad name, they will not be able to stand at the site. Then we will call the police to remove them.”*

In contrast to their experience of intimidation, some residents found that the day labourers actually stand guard over the property close to where they wait.

### **A perception that they attract other people and activities**

On one particular site the business people indicated that the presence of day labourers attract other people to the site. Although they mask criminals, they attract street vendors, people who supply food and employers, resulting in an increase in traffic.

### **A perception of health risk**

Residents and business people perceive the day labourers as a health risk to the community and environment. The day labourers do not have access to facilities such as water and toilets. In some areas there might be a garage close to the site where they can access water and toilets; but in general they use any open space to relieve themselves, and they often litter and urinate on the sidewalks.

### **A perception of lowered property values**

The main concern expressed by residents is that the visibility, loitering and littering by day labourers in front of their properties has a negative impact on the value of their properties. They have difficulty in selling their houses, or at least in getting the prices at which they are valued.

### **Perceptions and experiences of employers of day labourers**

Residents, police and business people perceive building contractors as the main employers of day labourers. Day labourers offer cheap labour, and as long as people employ them the hiring sites will exist. Contractors build relationships with these workers over time and prefer to use them when extra hands are needed. According to one contractor, there are no specific advantages to using day labourers: they are paid the basic rate according to their level of skill and are given lunch.

### **Experiences of powerlessness**

Most of the respondents express feelings of powerlessness. They feel that actually little can be done to improve matters, because the day labourers are entitled to freedom of movement. They have the right to be present in the community, and residents and business people cannot prevent it. The police

and metro police also find that they cannot really act, since no act or bylaw gives them the power to do so.

### **Some positive experiences**

Not all the feedback was negative. Despite the concerns and irritations, there was a great deal of compassion for the day labourers because people can see how desperate they are for work. Some of the business people stated that the day labourers in front of their shops, in particular the building supply stores, create the impression that the shops are busy. Some residents stated that the presence of day labourers create some form of security and safety, since they do not allow crime on “their” street corner.

### **Suggestions made by respondents**

During discussions with affected people, we also asked for suggestions to improve the situation. They are aware that there is no solution that will make the labourers disappear: as long as there are employers, there will be day labourers. The following suggestions were made by the different groups:

- Skills training for day labourers to enable them to access and sustain work more easily.
- Job creation was seen as very important.
- Organised day labour sites: respondents would consider it more acceptable if there were organised day labour sites where labourers can be registered and trained; where there are facilities and they can wait in a demarcated area.
- Respondents felt strongly that ablution facilities should be provided.
- For day labourers who do not sleep at home but in the bushes and open spaces, shelters should be available. There were suggestions that employers should provide shelter of some kind for the people they employ.

## **CONCLUSION**

When a phenomenon is investigated in the human/social sciences, it is done from a theoretical perspective that explains human behaviour and human systems and guides the scientists’ thinking and the research process. In this research the cybernetic systems approach, that is, interconnectedness, was used as it was realised that the day labour phenomenon could not be researched and explained without looking at the people with whom they share space. The authors surveyed the day labourers in Tshwane (Louw

2007) and came to realise that, in order to understand the existence of the day labourers, research needs to be carried out on the other parts of the system. Although the day labourers are perceived as being “too close for comfort”, there should be factors that create a “stable context” and keep the system going.

According to the three assumptions indicated in the theoretical discussion the following results emerged:

- Although some of the subsystems may not see themselves as connected to the day labourers, they are nonetheless “directly or indirectly related”. This assumption was confirmed, as all the people interviewed may not all necessarily interact directly with the day labourers but are deeply affected by them. Their space is invaded, they feel intimidated, and they are confronted with poverty. Despite these negative feelings, they also have compassion for the people.
- Day labour sites or the presence of the day labourers will continue as long as there is a need for work and a need for day labourers to do the work. The results show that the day labourers will not remain at a particular site if they are not hired. The fact that the shops exist, construction workers and residents employ them, the churches provide food, and the police use them as informants means that they will keep on coming back to the site. This context creates opportunities for day labourers, despite the security measures and clean-up operations conducted by the police and business people. This also links up with the following assumption.
- In explaining a phenomenon systemically it is important to acknowledge that this study is only one part of a larger whole and, as Bateson (1979:24) states, “... without context, words and action have no meaning at all”.

The study assisted in understanding and giving meaning to the existence of day labourers at the particular sites and also the perceptions and experiences of the people affected who interact with the day labourers. However further exploration is necessary.

According to Theodore and Valenzuela (2006), all those who are part of a system or see themselves as part of a system should come together to offer thoughtful and pragmatic solutions to local concerns. Based on the research findings it is recommended that the day labourers, employers, business people, residents, police services, and others should come together to address systemically both the challenges and opportunities resulting from the



Hooper-Box, C. (2002). *Bleak job market knocks unskilled the hardest*, 4 May. [http://www.iol.co.za/general/news/newsprint.php?art\\_id=ct20020504174604968J120](http://www.iol.co.za/general/news/newsprint.php?art_id=ct20020504174604968J120) (Accessed on 21/07/2006).

Jones, E. (1993). *Family Systems therapy: development in the Milan-systemic therapies*. New York: John Wiley.

Krauss, S.E. (2005). *Research paradigms and meaning making: a primer* <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/OR/QR10-4/krauss.pdf> (Accessed on 08/08/2006).

Louw, H. (2007). *Men at the margins: Day labourers at informal hiring sites in Tshwane*. Unpublished Doctoral thesis. Unisa.

Men on the side of the road project (MSR) [www.unemployment.co.za](http://www.unemployment.co.za) (Accessed on 07/08/2008).

Perez, M. (2004). Fight over day laborers in freehold, N.J. could have wider impact. *The Record (Hackensack, N.J)*, 1 February. [http://web22.epnet.com/DeliveryPrintSave.asp?tb=1&\\_ug=db+aph%2Cbuh%2Cnfh%2C](http://web22.epnet.com/DeliveryPrintSave.asp?tb=1&_ug=db+aph%2Cbuh%2Cnfh%2C) (Accessed on 19/02/2004).

Rivera, E and Wiseman, M. (2003). Weta accepts decision on day laborers' shelter. *The Washington Post*, 2 August. [http://web22.epnet.com/DeliveryPrintSave.asp?tb=1&\\_ug=db+aph%2Cbuh%2Cnfh%2C](http://web22.epnet.com/DeliveryPrintSave.asp?tb=1&_ug=db+aph%2Cbuh%2Cnfh%2C) (Accessed on 19/02/2004).

Rubin, A and Babbie, E. (1993). *Research methods for social work* (second edition). California: Brooks/Cole.

Schenck, CJ and Louw, H. (2005). An exploratory study on day labourers in Elardus Park, Pretoria. Article accepted for publication in *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* 41(1):84-93.

Theodore, N and Valenzuela, A. (2006). On the corner: day labor in the United States. Unpublished draft report, University of Illinois, Chicago.

Valenzuela, A. Jr. (2001). Day laborers as entrepreneurs? *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 27(2):335-352.

Valenzuela, A. Jr. (2002). Working on the margins: immigrants in day labor work. *Migraciones Internacionales* 1(2):5-28.

Van Rensburg, GH. (2000). Study unit 6: Sampling. *Only study guide for RSC201-H*. Pretoria: UNISA.

Yegidis, BL and Weinbach, RW. (1996). *Research methods for social workers*. 2nd edition. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

**Other websites consulted**

<http://www.brabymaps.co.za> (Accessed on 10/10/2006)

<http://www.cybertrade.co.za/cybertel.html> (Accessed in March 2004)

---

**Acknowledgements:**

This research was funded by a Thuthuka grant from the NRF and the University of South Africa.

---