

RESEARCH IN THE BLACK TOWNSHIP OF MPOPHOMENI: IS THERE HOPE?

Howick is a small Natal midlands town, famous for its waterfall. It is unprepossessing, consisting of a straggling business area, an average white residential area, and a small industrial section. Its major employer is the BTR factory, Sarmcol. The whites who live in Howick enjoy the affluence of typical suburban lifestyles. It is relatively peaceful and has a rural air.

Mpophomeni, meaning the waterfall, is the black township which serves Howick. It is situated 15 kms outside of Howick, overlooking Midmar dam, along the Bulwer road. It consists of approximately 1604 houses, and is administered by Kwa Zulu. The estimates of population vary, but it seems there are between 10 000 and 11 000 people in the township itself. In late August and early September we conducted a survey in Mpophomeni. Our main objective was to look at the psychological effects of unemployment on the individual, the family, and the community. We were interested in examining the perceptions of the residents about their situation, and about their future.

Mpophomeni was chosen for a number of reasons. It is isolated, both geographically and in terms of its labour market. The residents had conducted a successful bus boycott in 1984, and they had been participants in the 1985 Sarmcol strike and subsequent dismissal. This strike had involved approximately 350 men from Mpophomeni, and their dismissal meant that 21,8% of households in the township were affected. It was reasonable to assume that unemployment in the area was as high as the rest of Natal, and that the Sarmcol dismissal would have an exacerbating effect. Furthermore, because of its isolation and the lack of job opportunities in the area, this effect would be intensified.

Communities and community organisations regard many University researchers with a certain amount of scepticism. The reasons for this are:

1. It is felt that often the researcher decides what the problem is before the investigation. The research thus assumes a Western 'white' frame of reference, and the researcher operates within this perspective.
2. The consequence of this is that information collected from community members is analysed in terms of this frame of reference and becomes divorced from the real problems in the community.
3. Very often, the community being researched has only one contact with the research; when the data is being collected. They are not informed of the results.
4. The research is then interpreted within the 'white' perspective, and published in specialised journals. It is read by other academics and catalogued in libraries. Consequently the people whom the research was meant to benefit in some way never hear what the outcome of the research was.

Bearing this in mind, the philosophy behind the survey was a dual one. We intended to do an empirical study which would provide quantifiable results, but we were also interested in the people. We believe that social research carries with it the responsibility to use the results in a constructive manner, and that the people who provide the data are entitled to feedback. We were also hopeful that the research would define the needs of the people themselves, perhaps providing a guide for those involved in attempting to help solve the problems of impoverishment and unemployment. Our intent, then, was to explore the experience of the people themselves as fully as possible, as well as obtaining as much 'hard' data as we could.

Before proceeding with the research we met with various organisations within the township in order to explain our intentions and introduce ourselves. We went into the township on several occasions to familiarise ourselves with the layout and to obtain a general impression of the conditions. The township is accessible from the main Bulwer Road only, on a road which is tarred for about 500 metres. It is not large, as townships go, and is built in blocks. The houses are small; four or five roomed, built of brick or concrete blocks, and asbestos roofed. The roads are dusty in the dry weather, and turn to quagmires in the rain. The dominant impression is one of dreariness. Everything is a monotoned yellowish-brown, intensified by the barrenness of the surrounding veld.

Dust rises in clouds and covers everything, causing one of our field workers to wonder why the entire population weren't all suffering from a lung disease. The roads are corrugated and pitted, but surprisingly litter free. The houses are almost all fenced, and many of them have touches of bright paint. Amidst the desolation is a glimmer of spirit which causes people to plant flowers in the dust. Many of the gardens are neat, and people were often busy planting and hoeing. Some women had painted white stones to mark their two metre pathways, and a few had pots of geraniums at their doors. The predominant flowers were aloes, surviving the arid conditions and adding an air of purpose and strength. These things would be ordinary, except that the general condition of the township is one of dire poverty and hopelessness.

In the centre of the township there is some open ground, which adjoins the business centre. This centre consists of a supermarket, a bottle store, a butchery and a dry-cleaning agency. These businesses are all privately owned, but are inadequate for the size of the area. Next to this centre is the shell of the original beer hall which was burnt down in 1985. It has not been rebuilt, but two ships' containers from which beer is sold have been substituted. It is the epicentre of activity on weekends and is surrounded by debris. Small children struggle back from it carrying containers of beer, and teenagers reel back home

when their money runs out. Many inhabitants are concerned about its existence, and deplore its consequences.

There are no recreation areas. The eight schools have no sports fields, the township has no entertainment. The only two organised recreational facilities available are the beerhall or shebeens and the churches. Not many of the houses have electricity, and few people have television sets. Those who do report that the reception is bad. Apart from the grind of daily living there is literally nothing else to do. Children play in the streets, youths hang around the shopping centre and clusters of people meet on street corners to talk.

The people are poorly dressed, but unfailingly friendly and courteous. They are often engaged in back-breaking tasks, but are willing to stop and answer any queries. The children are curious, sometimes shy, and watchful. The youths are more suspicious, less friendly, and seem to question your reasons for being there. We went into the township on a number of occasions, including a late Saturday afternoon and an evening. Apart from one encounter with a group of drunk youths which was unpleasant, we felt safe and welcome.

Once we had established our credentials with the community, we assembled a team of six Zulu-speaking field workers, and met with them to discuss the research objectives, to explain our need for verbatim reports and to clarify the questionnaire. This had been structured after reading about twenty other questionnaires tapping unemployment and community problems, and was scrutinised by a number of senior social scientists. We embedded a psychological instrument within the questionnaire in order to assess and compare the levels of stress of employed and unemployed in working class populations. The questionnaires were structured in such a way that checks could be made on the accuracy of the information, but many of the questions were open-ended to allow respondents to express personal and subjective opinions about their lives and experiences in the community.

The questionnaire was administered to 126 households. Although we preferred to interview the head, we stipulated that the respondent must be an adult. The houses were chosen by using a computer generated random number selection, based on the numbering of the houses. Demographic data was collected about each person in the household, but only the respondents' opinions were recorded. The interviewing was done by the field workers, but the researchers were involved with supervision and transportation, and were available at all times during the ten days of the project. Only one respondent refused to answer the questionnaire.

The results were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, on the Sperry computer at the University of Natal. Without this facility it would have been almost impossible to analyse the wealth of data yielded by the survey. This data is not only abundant in terms of quantity, but is rich in human interest. It is hoped that much of it can be used as a basis for the foundation of self-help and other projects, and for ongoing research into the experiences of township communities.

The survey represents 7,9% ($126/1604 \times 100$) of the households in Mpophomeni. This makes it a very good sample when measured by normal sociological research standards. It is therefore valid to presume that the findings can be generalised to the whole community, and taken as representative. It is our intention to refer to 'hard' data, and then to discuss it in the light of the experiences as expressed by the respondents.

The general standard of living in Mpophomeni is low, both when compared to similar studies in other townships (Padayachee, 1985) and with the Minimum Living Level (MLL) income calculated by the Bureau for Market Research (BMR) at the University of South Africa. In 1985 Padayachee found that 11,9% of households in Umlazi and Lamontville earned less than R400 per month, whereas 69% of the households in Mpophomeni fell below this figure. The MLL, which is controversial in that it is argued to be particularly conservative in its estimation of human needs, calculated in March, 1986 that an African family of six in the Pietermaritzburg area needs R385,65 to survive. On the basis of this calculation, 69% of the families in Mpophomeni are living in poverty. 19,8% of the households in Mpophomeni have an income of less than R100,00 per month, and are dependent on handouts in order to survive.

In answer to the question: What do you and your family usually eat? most people survived on phutu (hard porridge), bread and cabbage. One woman answered "We have nothing - just now I'm going to neighbours to ask for mealie meal - we are really suffering". Her household income was zero, and she herself had TB, whilst attempting to look after a mentally disturbed adult son. Families who had meat were exceptional, and families who had sugar or milk with their tea or porridge invariably would mention the fact proudly.

The degree of poverty being experienced can only be understood when the reality of daily living is explored. A loaf of bread a day each for a family of six would cost R100,80 in a 30-day month. If a litre of milk per day for the whole family were added it would bring the cost up to R127,00 per month. Nutritionally, this diet would be totally inadequate and would fail to maintain health. Another way of looking at it is that each person in a household of six earning R399,00 per month has R66,00. This sum must cover food, clothing, fuel, rent, transport and, maybe, school. A loaf of bread and a litre of milk a day would account for R43,80, leaving R22,20 for all other needs.

This level of poverty is reflected in many of the responses on the questionnaires. Most people see starvation and hunger as the major problems in the township, followed by crime and violence.

Again and again, people speak out their distress about this situation:

"My children are starving."

"Please help me with how I can earn money to maintain the family."

"In all ways (we) have been affected, and will suffer for the rest of our days."

"I worry about what the next meal for the family will be."

"We are starving, like dogs."

The poverty in the area, coupled with the high unemployment levels (35%), has led to an increase in crime and

violence. Several of the houses have been gutted and the people are concerned that new outbreaks of violence may occur. Crime is increasing, and many residents expressed a fear that this may become unmanageable. The average person in Mpophomeni feels unsafe, and sees this as a very real problem. There is a concern about the increase in drinking, and an unhappiness about the number of shebeens which have come into being. Not only do these shebeens contribute to the crime and violence, but they take money away from families who are desperately in need.

"People are starving. Our sons drink all the time."

The survey showed that these hardships are not alleviated by informal businesses. Very few of the people had any sort of income from informal activity; only two families had an income from hawking, and one woman ran a shebeen. Several other people supplemented their income by buying beer and re-selling it, but earned a negligible amount doing so. People who live in Mpophomeni, but who were not part of the survey, say that there are at least twelve shebeens in the township. This question of shebeens is an interesting one. They are often one of the few informal activities, but generate many problems. However they also provide the chief recreational activity for people and form the core of the social life of the men. (Moller, Schlemmer, Kuzwayo and Mbanda, 1978). While many people abhor them, an equal number rejoice in their presence!

The poverty and hardship of their lives has caused many of the people, particularly women, to see life as outside of their control. They express little hope, and feel that conditions can only deteriorate. In response to the question: What do you think can be done to remedy the situation? they felt that either the government or the whites should solve the problem. "I always think it is whites who will remedy the situation", "I don't know. It's the government that can do something about the situation." "No - the government has to bring about these changes - most people are unemployed and can't do much for themselves." This feeling of helplessness is a reflection of peoples' experience, and could be described as chronic depression. It is a constant theme in the open ended questions, and it was a chilling aspect of the research. "Everybody is unhappy. Perhaps the end of the world is nigh. I don't know - but I have no hope."

These perceptions are not universal. There is a strong community spirit in the township, particularly among those who belong to some form of organisation. This spirit has been fostered during the past eighteen months by the hope that the strikers have for a satisfactory settlement to their dispute with Sarmcol. Essentially, Mpophomeni people see themselves as a united community and believe that things can be changed. However, they are aware that they lack the resources necessary to implement these changes and are attempting to find means of remedying this. The township has little infrastructure and no formal social welfare programmes, but the members of the community who can do so help fulfil some of these functions. Those who are employed are sympathetic to those unemployed, and their concerns is often expressed materially. Those who have share with those who do not. "I have to share my income with the unemployed because I sympathise with them."

There is a great deal of concern about unemployment. People are aware that there are no job opportunities, and although a few disapproved of the strikers, the majority expressed strong solidarity. "If Sarmcol workers can go to work it will be better for everybody. We all support them." Sarmcol is the major employer in the area and the average striker in Mpophomeni had been employed for fifteen years. People felt that after all these years of service the company had repudiated the workers and shown little concern for them as human beings. This has added to the insecurity about employment. People feel that even when employment is offered there are no guarantees that it will be adequate for their needs. These perceptions are accurate. Wages in the area are low, particularly for domestic workers. Women are working a nine-hour day, five-day week for between R50 and R60 a month. Added to this is their travelling time as most workers are employed in Howick which is 15 kms away.

The psychological effects of unemployment are marked. Using a psychological instrument, the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ), (Goldberg, 1972) which was normed in Britain and the United States, we found that stress levels for all respondents were higher than those reported in the literature. This was compounded in the unemployed, who showed signs of far greater psychological distress than the employed. The practical meaning of these findings is that those unemployed are at high risk for non-psychotic psychological illness, and would be exhibiting signs of depression, anxiety and inability to cope. "It is very painful because the problems get worse from one day to the next."

This personal psychological distress extends into the family and eventually, into the community. Families are under severe pressure, and there have been reports of two divorces as a direct result of unemployment. Homes are overcrowded, recreation is unavailable and the lack of money is a constant source of anxiety. "I feel very down-hearted; as the man, my family is dependent on me. It was with tears and worry that I thought what I must say when my children came to me for food." Children are growing up without the necessities of life, in overcrowded and uncongenial surroundings, whilst parents struggle to survive.

"Unemployment breeds poverty and unrest within the community itself." In general the effect of unemployment on the community was perceived to be very negative. Feelings of despondency and helplessness in the face of this poverty accounted for 73,1% of the sample. The degree to which the family is able to cope with job loss will depend on the resources of the social network of the community to assist the family. With massive job loss in a community that has limited resources to begin with, the consequences are very serious. Almost 27% of the respondents reported an increase in crime and violence within the community. These can be seen as symptoms of a community in crisis.

One of the reasons for the survey was to find out from the people what they really want. Respondents' needs were relatively simple. Most people wanted taps, decent toilets and tarred roads. When these basic needs are fulfilled people want more businesses in the area, recreation facilities, creches and training schools. Many felt that the one clinic in Mpophomeni was inadequate for the size of

the community and that a hospital was becoming essential. Bearing in mind that the nearest doctor is 15 km away and that Edendale Hospital is about 50 kms away this need would seem to be very reasonable. Over-riding all these needs was the desire, expressed by 80% of the responder that jobs be created.

The need for work is overwhelming. People constantly reiterated that they wanted factories to be built and jobs to be created. They are willing and able to work but are frustrated by the lack of opportunities. "All I can say is I'm desperate for work. I hate staying at home, being out of work." Self esteem is at a low ebb, and men feel that they have lost the respect of their families. There is constant worrying about their inability to meet their commitments, and this problem will worsen with the loss of UIF payments which finished in November. 64% felt that unemployment had affected them or their families directly, and 40% saw the future as bleak.

Despite this, when people were asked if they would be willing to help, 53% said that they would, and 41% felt that the community itself could be effective in bringing about change. The community has experience of self-help in the Sarmcol Workers Co-Operative (SAWCO). This was founded by the strikers and is involved in a number of projects. It has a workshop in Howick West at which T-shirts are printed and buttons made. There is also an agricultural project which is engaged in growing vegetables for the community a news-gathering team and a bulk-buying project. SAWCO is run on democratic principles and is the first worker initiated co-operative in South Africa. Profits are used to buy food parcels for the strikers and their families but the ultimate objective is to involve the whole community. The community at Mpopophomeni is surprisingly positive about their ability to improve their circumstances, despite their recognition of the obstacles in their way. Their responses are creative and responsible: "Organisations to enlighten women"; "There are members of the community who would help bring changes about - they can donate money perhaps"; "By uniting"; "If only we can come together and join hands"; "It (the community) can also put a hand but we also need help from KwaZulu Government."

The average house-holder in the township is very ordinary. He is working class, a family man with the usual aspirations. He wants a decent job with a living wage, a house with a toilet that doesn't overflow on his back door step, a tap in that house and reasonable access to his home. He wants shopping facilities, recreational areas for his family, and a

decent education and future for his children. "... so many children are left alone, and therefore more creches need to be built, while parents go out to work." His wife wants many of the same things, but in addition she would like to learn sewing and have more time for her own interests. Both would like to train for something better, a carpenter wants to be a cabinet maker, a teacher wants a BA and an illiterate woman wants to learn to read.

The survey itself has already been of use to the community. The results were used in the MAWU/BTR Sarmcol Industrial Court case, and are being studied by several community organisations. Our hopes are best expressed by two of the respondents: "I hope this survey will bring about the necessary changes in this place. People must be treated and recognised as human beings." and "People work like pigs here. You are doing well by doing this survey to fix the whites who claim on paper to be doing a lot of good things for the blacks but actually do nothing. You are doing well by pricking them in the backside."

The community itself is a paradox. It is made up of ordinary individuals who are struggling to survive. Their lives are full of hardship and pain, and yet they have managed to struggle against the system several times. These people are battered but not beaten. In the midst of violence and conflict, neighbour shares with neighbour, and the more privileged feel a responsibility for those suffering. Against incredible odds parents struggle to bring up their children with values and use their scant energy to try and ensure their future.

There is a surprising lack of bitterness and anger. There is a strong feeling that despite the problems something can be worked out, and a new tomorrow can emerge. People have hope, in the midst of their despair, and a faith which is childlike and strong. Every day they rise to a grim reality, and yet they carry on because they believe in themselves. This will to overcome is the backbone of Mpopophomeni, and possibly, of our whole society. The question is - will we succeed? □

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