

3

Research Methods and Procedures

In approaching the study of social and community life, of which we as researchers and individuals are part, we cannot ignore the competing tensions active in the array of social research methods.

(Eyles and Smith, 1988:198)

This chapter concentrates on the methods and procedures employed in conducting the research. A justification of why the chosen procedures were followed will be given. Limitations and problems to the study will also be highlighted.

Research in social science is defined by Eyles and Smith (1998:2) as a task "to uncover the nature of the social world through an understanding of how people act in and give meaning to their own lives". The definition by Eyles and Smith suggests that research in social sciences is about the lived world of people, to understand how people interact with their environment.

It was indicated in chapter 2, that the positivist view tended to elevate the physical scientific view, where issues of the natural world were preferred above human experience. It was also mentioned that it is a tendency of positivism to use quantitative methods in work with data related to human phenomena. Quantification led to a mechanical understanding of the Human Geography. Weber, quoted in (Bailey, 1994:9) remarks that "the use of methods of natural science play a role in social research, but not an exclusive role, physical scientists stand in a different relationship to the phenomena they are studying from that of social scientists". This assertion suggests that methods followed in the physical and natural sciences are legitimate but inadequate to the study of social phenomena. The next logical question is that, if then that is the situation, which method is appropriate to social investigation?

3.1. Qualitative research

Berg (1998) defines qualitative research as research that seeks answers to questions by examining various social settings and the individual who inhabits these settings. Berg's view is supported by Kirk and Miller (1986:9), who assert that qualitative research is "*a particular tradition in social science that fundamentally depends on watching people in their own territory and interacting with them on their own terms*". This approach is interpretative in essence, it seeks to define, explain and give meaning to human phenomena. An analysis of literature on methodological questions in the Humanities and Social Sciences, reveals that social scientists tend to prefer the utilisation of the qualitative approach in their discourses. The reason for such a choice is that the qualitative method manages to deal with *intentionality*, which is key in a human investigation, in a way that ultimately renders a subjective investigation objective. At the same time Ley (1981:252) warns that during social investigation there should be no excessive celebration of humankind as this might be accompanied "*by an overly subjective methodology withdrawn from conventional empirical data collection*". However, Ley (1981) recognises that the research technique of participant observation, interviews and more structured survey methods (questionnaires) balance the philosophy and the methodology of Social Science. This approach then renders the qualitative method an appropriate method of inquiry in social research. The method does not denigrate the quantitative method of understanding social phenomena, but prefers to add human agency in understanding facts about the actual people researchers observe and to whom they talk. It avoids a warning by Berg (1998:7) who asserts that, "*if humans are studied in a symbolically reduced, statically aggregated fashion, there is danger that conclusions — although mathematically precise — may fail to fit reality*".

A factor that should be noted in Geography is that its Social Science-oriented facet, Human Geography, cannot be equated with other independent sciences like Anthropology and Sociology. As a science about the environment, where the environment includes both the physical and the human dimensions, Geography scholars should insist on the unity between the physical and the human. This renders a methodological approach that will conspicuously continue to display this empirical unity. While qualitative techniques can be employed to arrive at some reality, quantitative representation may still be necessary.

3.2. The research setting

The case of the Western Region of Mpumalanga Province that constitutes the subject of this study, is a lived world of rural people of South Africa. These people find themselves in a rural space that has been shaped by the historical events of apartheid rule that preferred a segregated socio-political scenario in South Africa. The Region is a rural setting where most participants are either semi-literate or are completely illiterate. They have never filled in a questionnaire nor have they been interviewed as was done in this study. Table 1.1 in chapter 1 has shown that of the 3 million people of the Province of Mpumalanga, 2.3 million, that is two thirds of population, have either not gone to school or have standard ten as the highest level of formal education. Table 3.1 indicates that the majority of the people in the Western

Table 3.1: Provincial and Regional Education Levels

	<i>No schooling</i>	<i>Matric only</i>
Provincial	665 596	155 529
Mbibana	9 936	2 795
Mkobola	31 350	7 147
Moutse	38 839	5 510
Moretele	14 446	5 554
Kwamhlanga	29 776	6 805
Mdutjana	29 010	7 547
Ekangala	4 890	1 820
Regional Total	158 247	37 178
<i>Source: Statistics South Africa, 1996</i>		

Highveld Region do not have formal schooling. In this setting, the cultural consideration regards a person with a Matric certificate as an educated individual. After Matric, most parents in the Region expect their sons and daughters to seek for employment as are regarded culturally marketable in the job market. The point of fact is that the Region has a very low level of education, this naturally impacts on the population's responsiveness to formal research methods in a form of answering a questionnaire.

An investigation in the experience of these people obviously demands that their feelings; their emotions; their ecstasies and agonies be understood in the context that will accurately reveals the truth about their experiences and what informs their thoughts. In turn, this demands from the researcher extra caution as a slight misconception can ruin the whole project. There are also cultural and religious considerations like how to greet the chief, how to address an elderly woman, what to wear when meeting with traditional elders; considerations which makes the research work not as easy as it may seem. In this work, several research strategies to afford a multidimensional effort in arriving at reliable and valid information were used. Reliability and validity defined by Kirk and Miller (1986:19) respectively as "*the extent to which a measurement procedure yields the same answer however and whatever it is carried out and the extent to which it gives the correct answer*". It is these elements that make a research objective. To enhance validity and reliability of the research process, the interview technique, the questionnaire and participant observation techniques were utilised.

3.3. Research techniques and data collection

The basic techniques of survey research, defined by Babbie (1998:256) as "*the best method available to the social scientist interested in collecting original data for describing a population too large to observe*" was used. Babbie further identifies a questionnaire and interviewing as two basic techniques of a survey research. Another research technique employed, was the participant observation technique described by Goldberg (1992:324) as "*an excellent exploratory technique that is not very fully exploited. [It is] a complete and sufficient methodology...for the exploration of the actors' world*".

3.3.1. The questionnaire

Robson notes that there is a self-completed or self-administered questionnaire, which he refers to as "*a questionnaire which respondents fill for themselves*" (1993:243). Flowerdew and Martin (1998:83) also note that there is an '*interviewer-administered questionnaire*' is a tool used by interviewers in their research work. Hult (1996:66) contends that the questionnaire is "*a kind of survey form that asks for responses to a set of questions*". Large numbers of people can be asked their opinions by means of

questionnaires over telephones, through the mail or in person. The questionnaire extends the investigation's powers and techniques of observation.

Self-administered questionnaires were used to access information about the TLCs of the Western Highveld Region, from the Reconstruction and Development Committees (RDCs). RDCs are structures that are found in most of the villages of the Region. They were formed after the 1994 democratic elections in South Africa as community-based development structures that would monitor and assist in the implementation of the Reconstruction and Development Programme. These institutions were targeted as they constitute a legitimate voice for the needs of the people in most villages.

Prior to implementation of the research programme, a letter (Appendix 1) was obtained from the University Geography Department to legitimise and authenticate the research work. It explained the purpose of the research. The questionnaire, Appendix 3A, was delivered to all the villages by hand through friends and acquaintances and were accompanied by Appendix 1 and Appendix 2, which is the letter from the researcher requesting assistance from the participants. A total of 109 questionnaires were delivered to the RDCs of the Region. This constituted a 100% of the RDCs that had been established throughout the Region. The questionnaires were sealed in A5 envelopes that contained all the letters and self addressed and stamped envelope for the return of questionnaires through the post office. The post office is the major centre of rural activity. It has facilities like telephones where people could contact whomever they wish. Also, most rural residents use the post office as a financial centre, this is where they deposit and withdraw their pensions or other earnings. The post office is generally used as a major rural communication facility.

A point worth mentioning is that the structuring of the questionnaire (Appendix 3A) was made possible by the pilot survey that was conducted before the questionnaire could be finalised and sent to the respondents. The survey in question was conducted at random. The researcher would attend meetings of RDCs, traditional Authorities, civic organisations and community those convened by councillors. During meetings and after meetings the researcher would pose unstructured questions to stakeholders and their responses would be noted. In this way, the pilot survey enabled the researcher to familiarise himself with the research setting, and to select

the major points of concern that were at the centre of the communities' needs. These were then crystallised in the questionnaire that was used in this study.

The best part of 1998 saw a trickle of returning questionnaires. Of the 109 dispatched questionnaires, there was an average of three returns per month which meant that, by the end of 1998 only about 30 questionnaires had been returned, a 27.5% return per annum. During the middle of 1999, a new strategy was adopted. The seven TLC offices of the Region were visited and residential addresses of the co-ordinators, and, in some instances, the executive committees of these RDCs were obtained. In the light of this, a village-to-village delivery of questionnaires was embarked upon. The respondents were expected to fill in the questionnaire and return them through the post. It was the intention of the researcher to use the questionnaires as some kind of interview, an interview-administered questionnaire, and fill in the questionnaire on the spot. However, it was discovered that there was so much cohesion in the RDCs that they could not agree to on-the-spot completion of the questionnaires. They preferred that they be filled after consultation with the communities. A truly democratic consideration.

This *modus operandi* strengthened the reliability and validity of the data collected in that it was not a product of a few individuals but a community effort conveyed through the RDCs. In this way response errors that often accompany interviewing biases were avoided as RDCs completed the questionnaires alone without any interviewer's influence. Flowerdew and Martin (1997:83) warn that during "*a questionnaire-led interview or otherwise... questions asked, may not be understood in the way intended, the respondent may feel pressured into agreeing with the researcher's own ideas, or other sort of biases may enter into responses given*".

The second attempt yielded positive results, because, by the end of 1999, almost all questionnaires had been returned. Of the 109 questionnaires served to the RDCs, a total of 96 questionnaires were received. Although a questionnaire is a valid survey technique in qualitative research, theoretically, caution is advised as a major disadvantage lies in the fact that "*the honesty*" and "*seriousness*" of the respondents cannot be assessed (Robson, 1993). In the case of data collection in the Western Highveld Region, the researcher through personal contact, enlisted the co-operation and confidence of the respondents. The fact that the researcher was perceived as a

member of the Region, the respondents became even more open as some thought somehow, their concerns would be addressed through the researcher who understands their circumstances. They became interested and appreciated academic concern. Interpretation and discussion concerning the new initiatives could improve their own capacity and knowledge to perform well in the interests of the community. The fact that the researcher could address them in their language, and sometimes attend their cultural festivities, an artificial barrier between 'researcher' and 'the researched' fell away in a way that strengthened the authenticity of the data.

3.3.2. Interviews

Berg (1998), identifies what he refers to as "*a family of qualitative interviews*" consisting of structured and unstructured interviews; formal and informal interviews; standardised and unstandardised interviews. A standardised, formal interview uses a structured schedule of interview questions while, an unstandardised, or informal interviews prefer open questions. As a research technique, the interview has some advantages in that it "*includes flexibility, the questioner can interact with the respondent, the questioner immediately knows the respondent's answer and the questioner can gather non-verbal and verbal clues*" (Hult, 1996:68). Robson (1993:299) also observes that, "*asking people directly about what is going on is an obvious short cut in seeking answers to our research questions*". Johnson also notes that an interview "*represents a direct attempt by the researcher to obtain reliable and valid information, in interviews you discover people's current thoughts, ideas and attitudes*" (1998:99).

With regard to this survey, the interview technique assisted in discovering facts from a host of stakeholders that constituted an important human infrastructure in the local government situation. An understanding of the Region was achieved from talking to people and conferring with Community Based Organisations (CBOs), Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs), civic organisations, traditional authorities, youth clubs, government employees from the Health and Welfare Services, mayors and councillors. Consequently interviews were held with different role players and stakeholders. Appendix 4 is a schedule of all interviews that were conducted. A note should be made that some responses of these interviews will be reported on in

chapter 5. Although some interviews will not be directly quoted, they have provided an important background in comprehending matters at stake in this treatise.

3.3.2.1. The interview questions

Different questions were asked of different role players as they differed according to their interests in local government. In all cases a tape recorder was used so that the interview could be remembered as accurately as possible and in its proper context. While researchers are not in unison in as far as voice capture is concerned, Dannemiller quoted in Babbie (1998:272-273) notes that the voice capture technique, enables "*coders to play back the responses and code them – much as they would do with the interviewer's typescript of the responses. This offers an easier and more accurate way of accomplishing a conventional taste*". The researchers in most cases use open-ended questions. This technique allows probing to take place and as such more information can be derived from the respondents or the focus group.

Interviews conducted with the GaMatlala Traditional Authority, the Bantwane Traditional Authority and the KwaManala Traditional Authority illustrate the unintended effect of the recorder. In all these cases, the tape recorder was used. It would appear that the tribesmen of these authorities thought that through voice recording, their voices would be heard over the radio! This was evidenced by their active participation in answering questions. For example, the KwaManala Traditional authority was asked to describe their relationship with the local councillors, they almost answered in unison. So that, while the recorder captures response accuracy, it at the same time, as it happened in this case, manages to elicit response competition from the respondents. It is the willingness of the respondents to respond to questions that enables the researcher to acquire more information from the audience. From the open-ended question like the one that was asked the KwaManala Traditional Authority as mentioned earlier, the researcher may derive a number of responses if there is active participation from the respondents.

3.3.2.2. Interviews with focus groups

Stewart and Shamdasan (1990:10) define a focus group interview as an interview with a group of "*8 to 12 individuals who discuss a particular topic under the direction of a moderator who promotes interaction and assures that the discussion remains on the topic of interest*". Stewart and Shamdasan continue to assert that a typical focus

group session will last from one and a half to two and half hours. This technique, came into vogue after World War II and has been a part of the social scientist toolkit ever since. This technique, which is by its nature an interview, can also be a research method on its own, as Bailey suggests that's "*although focus groups are often designed to argument larger surveys they also seem to be enjoying increasing success as a stand alone method*" (1994:192).

During the research, this method was used to establish the views of the KwaManala traditional authority on their relationship with the Mbibana TLC. A group of about 15 tribesmen had gathered at the traditional authority's office and were asked questions as a group. Manyathi (1997:22) affirms that traditional leaders are responsible for a number of functions in communal areas. "*These range from governance, administration and community development*". As their role competes with that of the local councils this particular group was interviewed so as to understand their relationship with the Mbibane TLC. An interesting feature of this technique is that the richness of the diversity of views assists in the understanding of matters at stake. Bailey accepts that the advantages of focus groups is that "*they provide data quickly; their cost is relatively low; they provide qualitative data on beliefs, attitudes and behaviours and provide more depth of coverage and more detail than is usually possible in a large survey*" (1994:192). Indeed attitudes, perceptions and sometimes positions that were held by a number of stake holders and role players, particularly the KwaManala Traditional Authority members, whose views will be captured during the analysis of the research findings, were intriguing. This Traditional Authority, the eldest in KwaNdebele, was able to provide an interesting historical analysis of community development trends in KwaNdebele. Part of their responses showed that the new dispensation had left them out as an important traditional formation in the development of communities. This raises an important debate of the involvement of traditional leaders in local politics.

3.3.2.3. *On-site impromptu interviews*

A rare technique that is at the disposal of the social scientists is the on site impromptu interview. This interview takes place at the locality where project managers can be interviewed through unstructured interviews during construction or authorities interviewed in the field or setting where the situation can be observed. This technique is used to confirm, concretise and correlate information. Two such

interviews were conducted at GaMatlala Ramoshebo (Moutse) during the installation of electricity and at Vlaklaagte in Mkobola during the upgrading of the storm water channels

Plate 3: Construction site at Vlaklaagte: A scene for observation



Plate 3 is an example of on site observation. In this plate, an excavation machine can be seen during a storm water creation project at Vlaklaagte. In this situation, the interviewer was able to observe a project under construction and to ask questions about the work in progress. These interviews are helpful as they always give first hand information.

3.3.2.4. Participant observation

Observation is an important research tool that is generally used by the natural scientists. For example, in Geomorphology, the weathering of limestone into various landforms can be observed over a particular period, results can be obtained through mere observation and coding. By the same token, social scientists agree that a researcher may observe a community and its activities over a given period. This kind of observation, however, demands that the researcher be either an active participant

in the events of that community, in other words a civic leader may be part of the civic movement and report on the activities of his/her organisation. The researcher can also be passive a observer in that, he/she may be part of that community but not be involved in the observed or researched institution of the community. Flowerdew and Martin (1998:127) define participation observation as *"the method [involving] living and/or working within particular communities in order to understand how they work from inside"*.

The participant observer in this regard, is deliberately immersed in the community's everyday rhythms and routines. S/he virtually observes the community by sitting back and watching activities that unfold in front of his/her eyes. The researcher – observer records his/her impressions in a form of photographs, notes, drawing, and other tangible ways. In most cases the observer will keep a diary and note all the events of the community. While there is a distinction between a non-participant observer and participant observer, Bailey (1994:247) warns that, *"in a natural setting, it is difficult for the researcher who wishes to be covert not to act as a participant. If the researcher does not participate, there is little to explain his or her presence, as he or she is very obvious to the actual participants"*. This may affect their behaviour and can in effect, change a natural setting to an unnatural one.

During the research, the researcher's investigation coincided with that Indima Managerial Service, a company employed by the Highveld District Council, to conduct Land Development Objectives (LDOs) and Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) for the whole of the Western Highveld Region. Coincidentally the researcher was invited in his capacity as an educator to participate in the exercise in one locality of the Region. On realising some parallels between Indima's work and this research work, a special request was made for the researcher to be part of other workshops that were scheduled for other localities of the Region. In this way the researcher became part of the revolving Indima team and participated as both a researcher and a member of the broader community of the Region. In this case the researcher was a participant observer, in that, while he participated as a member of the community, his observations and experiences from being part of the contingencies as reported in this study, form part of his research work. Indeed in the process of participation, valuable information was gathered and is reported on in the observations of this study.

Appendices 5 to 7 are roll calls that indicate meetings and workshops in which the researcher participated.

Yin (1994:88) argues that "*participant-observation provides certain unusual opportunities for collecting data. The most distinctive opportunity is related to [one's] ability to perceive reality from the viewpoint of someone inside rather than external*". In earnest, during *Indima* workshops, opportunities were afforded as the researcher had access to the minutes of the meetings, documents of the meetings, maps, photographs and survey reports related to the infrastructural framework of the Western Region. In general, co-operation was received from all stakeholders and role players during the research exercise. Appointments with mayors, councillors, traditional authorities, CBOs, NGOs and civic organisations were honoured with great appreciation. Some local councillors assisted in making their council documents available. A notable factor is the amazing hospitality that was displayed by the traditional authorities.

What this chapter has done is to report on the real work that was done in the study area. It brought all the stakeholders, role-players and interested parties to the foreground and also revealed the methods used to gain information from these parties. The role of qualitative research, which interprets the lived world of people, was stressed. The chapter brings the researcher to the real world, the real space of meetings, workshops, visits to cultural places, contacts with traditional leaders and the real space of social construct; constructed by years (time) of neglect and destitution. Chapter 4 will provide a historical (time perspective) analysis of the local government phenomenon in South Africa as a prelude to the contextualisation of the current situation prevailing in the rural areas (spatial perspective) of South Africa. The account in chapter 4 will reveal how the different periods in South African history have shaped and created social geographies like the townships and homelands; geographies of real people who have experienced the hardships of living under colonial and apartheid rule. These geographies justify why social scientists need to employ interpretative geography if they are to understand human agency.