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Disrespecting people with working conditions in South Africa

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The working conditions of people mostly play second fiddle to productivity and profitability in construction. Anecdotal and empirical construction reports, mostly in developing countries such as South Africa, suggest inappropriate social interactions on project sites. The awkward social interactions manifest through lack of respect for workers, who are regarded as people with limited rational abilities. Using three case studies from South Africa as an illustration for the discourse, this paper argues that on-site working conditions are critical to the well-being of people at the front line of construction work. For example, poor working conditions are indicative of a disrespectful attitude towards the people on a site. Further, both poor working conditions and lack of respect for people (RFP) constitute a significantly negative influence on the general well-being of workers and their managers. This paper thus argues that it is time to translate the notion of RFP into actual practice in the interest of employees and employers in the industry.

1. Introduction

A construction site is a labour-intensive workplace despite the existence of modern production technology (Thomas and Sudhakumar, 2014). Collaborative understanding of work between workers and management on construction sites has an influence on labour productivity (Abrey and Smallwood, 2014). Labour productivity is affected by the management competencies of project supervisors and engineers responsible for site activity completion (Odesola and Idoro, 2014). Site management staff in construction are socialised into roles and behaviours that help them to meet production targets. In South Africa, for example, the construction industry has been experiencing major productivity decline due to social aspects, which are not limited to the lack of respect for people (RFP) and poor working conditions (CIDB, 2015). The impact that the lack of RFP and poor working conditions have on labour productivity could be traced to the working relationship between management and the workers on the sites.

The term 'respect for people' refers to the philosophy of looking out for the interests and well-being of people even if doing so places certain constraints on organisations (Emuze and Smallwood, 2018). According to Kant and Friedman (2004), RFP does not imply that people are respected because they meet their targets or standard of work, but rather because they are true to themselves and their employers. *Respect for Persons* by Kant (1993, 2012) (as cited by Ness (2010: p. 484)) suggests that '… the duty of respect is the duty not to degrade others to the status of mere means to my end'. However, the word 'respect' is a difficult term to define, and, also, a policy of 'respect' allows judgements to be made about the behaviours and characters of an individual (Gaskell, 2008).

In addition, another element that constitutes the focus of this paper is poor working conditions that have implications for the health, safety and well-being (HSW) of people in construction. Poor working conditions could be observed through the lack of respect that is directed at workers as people with limited rational abilities (Andrieu *et al*., 2016). The working conditions of people in construction could be unpacked through long working hours, low wages and income, poor occupational safety and health (OHS), heavy workload, inappropriate physical aspects, lack of legal rights and poor organisational culture (Ali *et al*., 2013). The term 'working conditions' refers to the working environment and aspects of an employee's terms and conditions of employment (Ali *et al*., 2013). It can be argued that the working conditions of people are an essential factor of the overall job satisfaction of people within the workplace (Bakotic and Babic, 2013) because the well-being of individuals in the workplace depends not only on their compensations but also on their experienced working conditions (Weinschenk, 2017).

The nature of the construction industry regarding working conditions and their impact on people is explained by Paap (2006). The works of Paap (2006) and several authors (such as Fort *et al*. (2016), Hwang and Lee (2017) and Abrey and Smallwood (2014)) show that physical work in construction is an unsafe task that is undertaken in an outdoor environment. The physical work in the construction industry may involve working at heights and working with complicated machinery on-site (Carter and Smith, 2006; Chi *et al*., 2009, 2012). The details of physical construction activities in the construction industry combined with the attitudes and behaviours of people could lead to consequences that are negative for their HSW. Therefore, it is important for management to control physical construction demands effectively within an acceptable limit to sustain expected productivity without sacrificing workers' HSW (Hwang and Lee, 2017).

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the continued ways in which the lack of RFP and poor working conditions constitute significant hindrances to the promotion of HSW in construction. The illustration applies to projects where workers transform

resources into buildings, facilities and infrastructure required by society. The next section of the paper outlines the perception that working conditions disrespect people when they are a contributory factor to incidents and accidents that produce injuries and fatalities. After that, the research method concisely highlights how the presented results were compiled. The results and discussion feed into the concluding remarks of the paper.

2. When working conditions disrespect and harm people

Unsafe working conditions experienced on construction sites relate to the likelihood and consequences of accidents arising from the way that construction work is performed on construction sites. HSW practices aim to eliminate unsafe acts and working conditions that lead to accidents since unsafe working conditions are hazardous by nature, so much so that that they have the potential to cause injury or fatality on construction sites (Rae and Provan, 2019). Hazardous working conditions disrespect people when the likelihood of accidents, injuries and fatalities is high. Work-related accidents, injuries and illness in all industries are serious problems that must be solved (Fernández-Muñiz *et al*., 2017).

It is therefore the expectation of every profession that legislation and regulations would tackle such challenges. For example, the safety legislation in the UK was used to expose and reduce mechanical problems in the factories of the first Industrial Revolution (Smith *et al*. (2017), citing Hollnagel (2014)). The Occupational Health and Safety Act, 1993 fulfils similar functions in South Africa (Republic of South Africa, 1993). For example, section 43 of the South African Occupational Health and Safety Act, 1993 makes provision for safe and hospitable workplaces, which include the provision of sanitary facilities, drinking water, safe-keeping facilities for storing clothes and other valuables, change rooms with adequate seating and dining rooms for people in the workplace (CIDB, 2015).

Workplace HSW remains high on the agenda for practitioners and researchers in the construction industry (McAleenan and Smith, 2017). This is because the workers are often treated badly and there is limited investment in either their development or basic welfare facilities such as toilets and washing facilities (Gibson, 2002). Also, it is reported that occupational stress (from heavy workload and job insecurity), organisational stress (from inefficient communication, interpersonal conflicts and lack of reward) and working-environment-related stress (from inappropriate personal protective equipment, noise and severe weather conditions) are factors causing unsafe working conditions on construction sites (Lim *et al*., 2017). In most cases, where unsafe working conditions exist on construction sites, these are more likely to be involved in accident causations (Reason, 1998; Zou, 2010). Regarding accident causations, Reason (2008, 2016) explains in detail how organisational factors, industrial workplace conditions and individuals or unsafe team acts could break down defences in the organisational system and produce adverse outcomes (Reason, 2016). Activated hazards such as exposed sharp objects in the workplace may become risks that individuals convert into accidents through human error and violations (Reason 1998, 2008).

To improve unsafe working conditions on sites, management or project supervisors/engineers should have a moral obligation to look out for the HSW of the workers. Management should show respect to the workers to earn respect from the workers, clients and the public in general (Gibson, 2002). Therefore, the notion of RFP in construction is not a new concept (Ness, 2010). What is of concern is the awareness of how to treat people in construction when HSW is not evident on every construction site (Emuze, 2018). The problem of limited or no RFP in construction is manifested through the unsafe working conditions under the control of site management (Berkun, 2005).

Construction workers play a significant role in delivering construction projects according to the client's specifications, and management should understand that RFP adds to the performance of projects and organisations (RPWG, 2004). Problems between management and workers in the industry cannot be ignored because workers undertake the physical and non-physical work demanded by clients for construction operations. Such action is not limited to the operation of plant and equipment, but also includes supervision and management of the construction process to deliver construction projects (Emuze and Smallwood, 2018).

3. Research method

The exploratory study adopted a case-based strategy to understand the impact of working conditions on the notion of RFP in construction. The strategy was selected to investigate the reported problem using real-world situations in the construction industry as illustrated by Yin (2014). The approach led to the selection of three case study projects in the central region of South Africa. For logistical reasons, the projects were located in Bloemfontein and Kimberly. The selection of participants from the projects was purposive (Yin, 2014). Table 1 provides an overview of the case studies. The data from the case projects were collected between August 2016 and September 2017 using semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews allow open-ended questions, which tend to produce rich textual data for analysis (Silverman, 2013). The questions were structured in a way that allowed the interviewees to express their perceptions based on their working experience. The duration of the interviews ranged from 25 to 45 min. Each interview session was digitally recorded and later transcribed. The analysis of the textual data from the interviews was expedited thematically since such study involves identifying, interpreting and reporting patterns observed in the data (Silverman, 2013; Yin, 2014). In total, 34 interviews were conducted in the three case projects (see Table 1).

4. Results and interpretation

4.1 Overview of working conditions in construction

Regarding the working conditions of people, an interviewee stated that it is a human-made state created by workers and employers in

Table 1. Research sample

Case project	Code	Interviewees	Responses
Case project 1: multiple housing projects: Bloemfontein	CC1	Site agents (2), site engineers (2), foremen (3), safety manager (1), safety officers (2) and artisans (4)	14
Case project 2: university residents: Kimberly	CC2	Project manager (1), construction manager (1), site engineers (2), foremen (2), safety manager (1) and artisans (5)	12
Case project 3: Sars headquarter office: Bloemfontein	CC3	Site agent (1), site engineers (1), foremen (2), safety officers (2) and artisans (2)	8
Total interviewees			34

Sars, South African Revenue Service

the work environment on a construction site. The interviewee further suggested that accidents on construction sites are a sign of poor working conditions. He stated that there is a relationship between accidents and the working conditions of people on a project site. This relationship exists because, on construction sites, the behaviours of workers are influenced by the prevailing working conditions (Fernández-Muñiz *et al*., 2017). Concerning accidents and working conditions, some interviewees in CC2 commented on the importance of housekeeping. They indicated that it is the responsibility of both the workers and management to ensure a clean and healthy working environment. One interviewee noted that poor housekeeping does not only lead to accidents, but also contributes to waste pollution, which leads to illnesses. In addition, poor housekeeping can result in the creation of hazards and dangers in the form of projecting sharp objects, which may increase situations that can lead to errors, such as slip, trips and falls, on sites (Aboagye-Nimo and Emuze, 2017).

An interviewee in CC1 stated that working under a tight schedule or deadline to deliver a construction project results in rushed activities, which could cause accidents. The interviewed safety manager in CC2 commented that the safer the working conditions on a project site, the fewer the accidents. He further explained that the best way to comply with OHS regulations is to obey the basic rules, which are to provide workers and visitors with protective safety clothes, reliable equipment and machinery and excellent walking tracks on the site. It is noteworthy that the majority of the interviewees from the three cases mentioned a similar concern about working at heights, which creates a leeway for accidents on project sites (falls from heights). To prevent risk when working at heights, the interviewees further argued that people working at heights should be physically and mentally fit. Also, site management and project supervisors should properly plan for the work to be done by designing protection measures for the workers and take a sensible risk-based approach to identify suitable precautions on sites (HSE, 2006).

One interviewee, a site agent in CC3, maintained that the state of working conditions on-site is dictated by the nature and type of project that they are assigned to undertake. For instance, two interviewees in CC1 and CC2 opined that the topography and site layout of a project are the factors which determine the safety planning of a project. They explained that site layout factors such as adequate working space allow workers and managers to work in a controlled atmosphere. They further explained that they had encountered situations where management had failed to coordinate workers when a site was congested and chaotic. When such situations arise, working conditions on the project are seen to deteriorate owing to poor site management.

An interviewee in CC3 said that poor housekeeping is a sign of lack of respect between management and the workers. The interviewee said if the workers respected their superiors, they would not make a project site untidy. Instead, they would clean their working area since a construction site is the workers' second home and they spend more time on-site than at their homes. He further indicated that

> … disrespectful workers could cause unsafe acts and conditions by not doing proper housekeeping, leaving materials lying around the workplace or leaving equipment and tools on standby unattended.

However, an interviewee in CC3 raised a point that contradicts the notion that workers alone should be blamed for poor housekeeping on-site. The interviewee said that

> … the unsafe acts and condition relating to poor housekeeping cannot be blamed on the workers alone. If the workers are failing to improve housekeeping, what is it that their managers are doing to solve this matter?

A site engineer in CC1 stated that management often fails to respect workers on a project site and this causes poor working conditions on the project site. In addition, the interviewee gave an example of managers who force the workers to work in an unsafe environment. For example, the interviewee contends that

> … there are projects where you experience that workers are forced to work on scaffolds which are not properly erected due to poor quality of the scaffolds and also workers are forced to undertake construction activities on an inclement or rainy condition while their superiors are sitting and drinking coffee in the site offices.

Also, a foreman and artisan in CC2 commented that inequality is one of the factors leading to workers disrespecting their bosses on-site. The interviewee is quoted as saying

> … how will the workers respect their bosses while the contractors fail to provide facilities for the workers, you find that a construction manager has his office in a container, same goes for the quantity surveyor and the safety manager, while workers don't even have a single container to change their clothes or store their food while they are at work.

Concerning the impact of working conditions on productivity, the interviewees in all three cases stated that the working conditions of people on a project site influence the quality with which the project will be delivered. A foreman in CC1 said that when one observes a project which has poor working conditions, there is a strong likelihood of visible defects. The interviewee further noted that a healthy relationship exists when these two elements work together to maximise production while adding value to the project. In particular, interviewees in CC1 and CC3 stated that when employees acknowledge the importance of safety on a project site, they tend to promote a healthy working environment, which results in high levels of productivity. An interviewee also reported in CC2 that a few construction managers do not comply with the safety rules of the site because they believe that OHS regulations prevent their workers from working at a faster pace and this affects site production. The interviewees stated that specific health and safety provisions need to be adjusted to be more in line with the construction tasks.

Most of the interviewees from the three cases responded that directives contained in the construction regulations had helped most contractors to improve the working conditions of people on their sites. For example, the construction regulations compel contractors to hire safety officials for the duration of the project. The presence of a safety manager on a project site ensures that workers comply with OHS regulations by paying attention to housekeeping and other related workplace requirements. An interviewee in CC2 stated that the regulations had saved the lives of many workers, in particular those working in small and medium-sized companies, popularly known as emerging contractors in South Africa. The majority of the interviewees explained that most of the small and medium contractors often try to make money by taking shortcuts while putting the lives of their workers in danger. The appointment of OHS officials on projects has helped in tackling such unethical practices in the industry.

However, a few interviewees complained about the OHS regulations. They were of the opinion that some regulations reduce the pace of operations. A construction manager is quoted as follows.

> There is a case where I lost five working days because the municipality failed to issue a permit, which would have allowed me to disconnect the main water pipeline to make some repair. The reason they failed to issue my application is that the municipality workers were on strike.

Also, some artisans in CC1 stated that the consulting engineers' representatives once charged their company for a case where they were laying bricks without wearing safety gloves. They said that

> … they as bricklayers don't like to wear gloves because gloves reduce their speed of work and this makes them lose money due to the reason that they are getting paid based on the number of bricks they have placed.

The preceding quote indicates that a section of the artisan cohort in the industry places productivity and income above HSW. An interviewee in CC2 stated that most unsafe acts and conditions on a project site could be prevented if a competent manager deploys a proper OHS system. All the interviewees reported that there are certain dangerous conditions which are beyond their control. They further explained that accidents caused by unsafe acts and conditions could be eliminated through proper safety training and education, safety awareness and excellent communication between the employer and employees.

4.2 Discussion

It is reported in the literature that on-site working conditions are critical to the well-being and performance of people at the front line of construction work. The interviewees' perceptions in the previous section of this paper resonate with the literature on the impact of poor working conditions. The effect of an unsafe working condition tends to negate the notion of RFP. The interviewees raised their arguments based on their lived experiences of working conditions in the sector. Their overall perception was that factors relating to unsafe acts and conditions do not favour the promotion of RFP. Also, they reported that unsafe acts and conditions are the forerunners of accidents, which result in reduced productivity and profitability in the industry.

In theory, the interviewees were in support of the concept that there is a relationship between accidents that constitute a situation of disrespect and the working conditions of people on a project site. For example, unsafe acts of people in construction have become a symptom of the deeper inherent problem on project sites where the management system may have created hazardous situations in the workplace (Reason, 1998, 2008; Smith *et al*., 2017).

Poor working conditions and lack of RFP are regarded by the interviewees as contributory factors to accident causation on project sites. The working conditions of a project site can often be complex, as explained by several authors (Carter and Smith, 2006; Chi *et al*., 2009, 2012). As an example, the physical work in construction may involve working at heights and working with complicated machinery on the sites (Emuze, 2018). Also, accidents in the construction industry are seen as evidence of human error or failure through either unsafe acts or the emergence of a dangerous condition (Smith *et al*., 2017).

The graphical schema indicated in Figure 1 is an attempt to illustrate the factors leading to accidents through unsafe acts and conditions mentioned by the interviewees. For instance, poor working conditions on a project site happen because of improper attitudes, actions and behaviours of both management and

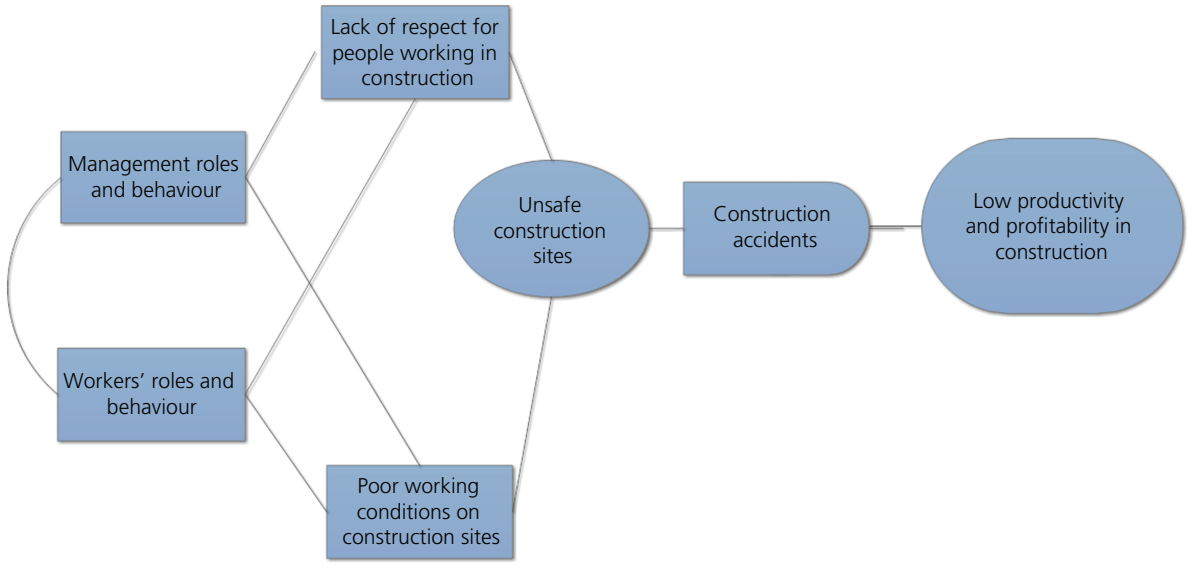

Figure 1. Working conditions and RFP schema

workers in an industry where construction workers often feel that they are treated as a low-value resource (Gibson, 2002). In addition, the lack of RFP may ensue when there are gaps in the communication channel between workers and management that endanger their HSW. This factor is described in the literature, namely, that the duty of respect is the duty not to degrade others (construction workers in this instance) into the status of means (Ness, 2010). In other words, people at the front line of construction work must have the status of 'an end' that deserves all respectfulness evident in the workplace. Poor working conditions and lack of RFP could be traced to many causes of accidents in the construction industry. In broad terms, the outcome of accidents in construction reflects negatively on the productivity and profitability of the project as the cost of accidents has both economic and non-economic impacts.

5. Concluding remarks

In this paper, two central discourses are featured that could be deemed to be a primer for future studies. The discourses are working conditions and the notion of RFP. The foregoing discussion sketched the possible ways in which these discourses influence HSW in construction. In general, poor working conditions and lack of RFP constitute significant limitations to the promotion of HSW on construction sites. It is evident that working conditions could indicate a disrespect for people when they work in severe weather conditions with inadequate protection. When such situations occur in construction, workers can be deemed to be utilised as a means to an end to favour the productivity and profitability of an enterprise. The argument in this paper is that the implementation of OHS regulations that engender HSW on construction sites would work well with the notion of RFP that helps project actors to promote safer and healthier working spaces continually in the industry.

For readers familiar with the notion of RFP, this paper serves to encourage increased awareness in workplaces, and for readers new to it, this paper is a primer for future engagement with the notion in theory and practice.

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