

EXAMINING EXPLOITATION AND ITS INFLUENCE ON CONSTRUCTION SITES IN SOUTH AFRICA

Fidelis Emuze¹

Department of Built Environment, Central University of Technology, Free State, Private Bag X20539, Bloemfontein, 9300, South Africa

The purpose of this study was to understand exploitation. Phenomenological research was used in the study. Participants in the interviews answered open-ended questions based on lived experiences on construction sites. Analysis of the data affirmed that exploitation harms the work environment and the image of contractors. For example, people in construction tend to react negatively to instances of exploitation by quitting their jobs when demotivated or causing a scene at work. In contrast, the theoretical argument indicates that respect for persons motivates people in construction to perform better in their work with direct implications for a healthy work environment that saves time and money. By becoming mindful, people in construction will be more aware of situations and how to prevent exploitation on construction sites. Construction managers need to embrace mindfulness and RfP as a prerequisite for safe work performance to build back the economic wiser.

Keywords: exploitation; respect for persons; site work; South Africa

INTRODUCTION

Negative attitudes and actions on a work site reduce morale and team performance. The behaviour that should be of concern to site management is negative acts that are chronic and endemic. If an individual or a team is exposed to negative attitudes, site operations can be derailed. When negative influence takes hold on a worksite, 'learned helplessness', which makes all activities problematic, can ensue (Reason, 2008; Sharman, 2019). Learned helplessness, in the context of this paper on exploitation, is a mental state in which individuals are forced to bear aversive actions or attitudes that are unpleasant because they cannot control the situation. Such situations will proliferate where negativity among workers is allowed to flourish to the detriment of both employers and the employed.

Over two decades ago, it was estimated by the U.S Bureau of Labour Statistics that organisations (regardless of sector) lose a great deal of income annually because of negative attitudes among workers (Topchik, 2001). In his book, Topchik (2001) suggests that managers must address the root causes rather than the symptoms of negative behaviours. In other words, to move forward on a construction site plagued by negativity among its workforce, underlying reasons should be uncovered and eliminated. Widely cited reasons for negative behaviours at work include lost confidence, job anxiety and feeling unappreciated or lost. Some of these reasons are

¹ femuze@cut.ac.za

linked to a worker feeling exploited either on a construction site or off site. For example, Sharman (2019) explained some of the reasons as follows:

- Lost confidence, which occurs when a worker experiences personal decline in confidence caused by a stagnant role with low interest (being ‘in a rut’)
- Feeling unappreciated, which happens when a worker is often overlooked for a promotion or upward change in status
- Feeling lost, which occurs when workers feel removed from the core operations and thus become displaced and powerless in the organisation

The above reasons, adapted from Sharman (2019), show that, on a construction site where injuries and illness rates are indicative of the working conditions, the feelings of the workforce matter. People in construction (PiC) have dignity that influences how they feel: valued or exploited. When people, such as PiC, perceive that they are not granted respect as rational beings, as Kant (2013) contended, the idea of being exploited (used) will permeate the workplace (Modarelli, 2006).

Exploitation is the opposite of respect as it involves taking unfair advantage of individuals by manipulating them as a means to an end, whereas Kant (2012) clearly says “always treat the humanity in a person as an end”. It is also notable that respect takes different forms. Some people are respected for their upright character, and others for their unique achievements (Buss, 1999). For others, respect is shown because it is the right way to treat people. People want to be treated with respect, but people differ and not everyone perceives the action of respect in the same way. Thus, it is necessary for everyone (including PiC) to take into consideration how a person will perceive respect from others (Haydon, 2006). It is argued in this paper that, regardless of job title or position on a construction site, everyone deserves to be treated with respect.

It is essential to remember that all people are unique individuals, who deserve to be treated as ends (Kant, 2012). Most employees want to perform well in their job, tasks, and responsibilities. They do not want to feel unappreciated, lost or exploited. To understand the phenomenon better in the South African construction context where casualisation and poor working conditions continue to marginalise PiC (Mollo and Emuze, 2017), a descriptive study was conducted in 2020. The general trend of having a large layer of unskilled site workers hired on daily or short-term contracts exposes PiC to indecent practices such as poor payment, late payment or no payment for work done as cited by Mollo and Emuze (2017). One interviewee in the study reported by Mollo and Emuze (2017: 2021) said:

"...one of my clients once took me to renovate his house, painting, and to install new tiles. After I completed the work, he paid me half of the agreed payment and promised to pay me the rest of the money in town. And when I arrived in the town, he instructed me to wait for him, as he was going to withdraw money from the ATM. And that was the last time I saw him, as he drove away without saying any word."

The above quote shows that some employer of casual workers in construction are exploitative. The episode may be widespread in an industry where major construction firms only retain core workforce (such as quantity surveyors, site managers, and skilled artisans) to limit overhead cost (Cottle, 2013).

Therefore, the study that is presented in this paper was undertaken to respond to the question: What is exploitation and how do PiC react to it on construction sites? The purpose of the study was to understand exploitation and explore how RfP and

mindfulness can be used to chart the way forward in South African construction. The phenomenological method used in the study is outlined in the next section of the paper followed by a succinct presentation of the results. The discussion, which is focused on RfP and mindfulness, provides a platform for making concluding remarks.

METHOD

Phenomenology as a theoretical position was used to drive the reported study, where exploitation was the phenomenon. Although the various approaches to qualitative studies differ in their theoretical assumptions, in their understanding of issues and in their methodological focus, theoretical points of reference can be drawn from phenomenological considerations (Flick, 2018). A phenomenological approach to inquiry was adopted for the reported study. Traditionally, phenomenology is employed in the direct exploration of lived experiences (King *et al.*, 2019). The primary data were thus collected through face-to-face and mediated interviews. Interviews are widely used in phenomenological studies because of their emphasis on exploring how people interpret their experiences (King *et al.*, 2019). The exploratory study was conducted to describe exploitation based on the lived experiences of the interviewees. The sources of primary data were face-to-face and mediated interviews, owing to mandatory social distancing, expedited by a protocol of open-ended questions. Examples of the questions include:

1. "What are the common reasons for exploitation in construction?"
2. "What measures reduce/prevent lack of respect for people in construction?"
3. "How do exploitation or lack of respect affect work performance in construction?"
4. "What can be done to mitigate situations that might arise from lack of respect on site?"

The same instrument was used for all the semi-structured interviews to enhance confidence in the data (Huberman and Miles, 2002). A purposive sampling method was used to select project sites and the interviewees. The criteria for selection were participation in physical work on-site and lived experience of work practices in construction. The data collector was a student registered to study Quantity Surveying in 2020, who was familiar with the subject. Seminar-like training was provided for him before data collection. The training incident to the methodology classes covered site access and ethical norms. The ethical considerations included informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. The interviews were audio-recorded and the responses to the open-ended questions were transcribed before thematic analysis.

The data were obtained from people involved in on-site work in Bloemfontein, South Africa. Initial attempts were made to conduct the interviewees on purposively selected building and civil engineering construction sites in Bloemfontein. However, owing to strict COVID-19 social distancing rules, alternative ways to access the interviewees had to be followed. Accordingly, personalised e-mails were sent to six different firms. Five companies responded, and the interview questions were shared with them for approval. After securing permission from senior management of the five companies overseeing construction projects in Bloemfontein, the number of individuals who would participate in the interviews was requested. The gatekeepers provided contact for, or mediated access to, the respondents whose background information is shown in Table 1. Altogether, 60 construction professionals from the five companies were willing to make their contributions. The interviewees held

various built environment job titles, which included Architects, Construction Managers, Quantity Surveyors, and Forepersons.

Table 1 shows the length of experience that the interviewees had while working in the construction industry. It is notable that most of the interviewees had between 5 and 15 years of industry engagement and could be deemed to be experienced in the construction industry. The job profile on the table show that construction managers were interviewed the most. Most of them had either a diploma or bachelor's degree to back up their work experience. In effect, they had the foundational knowledge required to practise in the industry.

Table 1: Background information of the interviewees

Profile	Frequency	Percentage
Experience		
1 to 4	6	10
5 to 9	32	53
10 to 15	13	22
16 to 20	6	10
21 to 29	2	3
30 or more	1	2
Total	60	100
Job title		
Architect	8	13
Construction Manager	25	42
Foreman	9	15
Project Manager	6	10
Quantity Surveyor	12	20
Total	60	100

FINDINGS

The responses to the opened-ended questions asked in the interviews are presented in this section.

Factors influencing exploitation on construction sites/work environment

According to the responses of the 60 individuals who participated in the interviews, the factors that influence exploitation the most on construction sites were selfishness (68%), greediness (66%), and not caring for the needs of others (56%). A notable response from one interviewee was that some people will exploit others out of spitefulness to feed their greed. Ten percent (10%) of the answers also included the factor of hatred or being very angry towards another individual for some reason.

In addition, at the organisational level, four consequences of exploitation on construction sites were identified, based on the responses. Loss of time (92%) was one of the most common responses, followed by the loss of money (88%). Relationships between employees and/or employers in the workplace deteriorated (68%) making the work environment very unpleasant. Furthermore, 65% perceived that exploitation would lead to more injuries and other health-related issues, as shown in Figure 1.

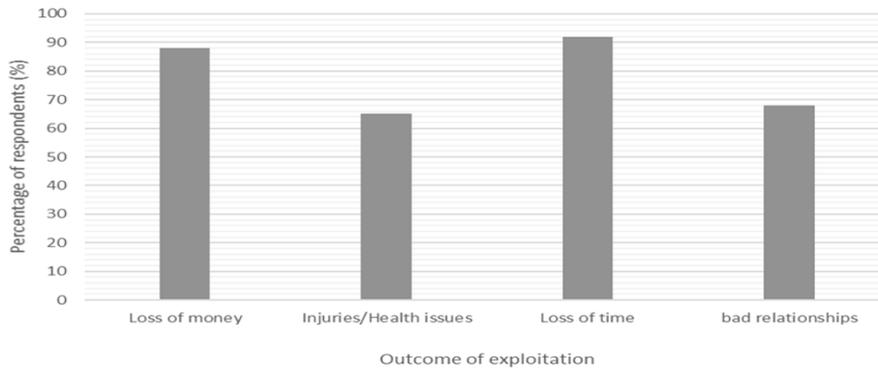


Figure 1: Effect of exploitation on work environment on construction sites

At the individual level, most of the interviewees (93%) said that exploitation will demotivate an individual or group on construction sites. More than half of the interviewees (60%) said that some operatives will react to exploitation immediately and cause a scene on the construction site, while 52% also observed that workers might quit their job when exploited. It was notable that less than half of the interviewees (45%) indicated that operatives will do nothing in reaction to exploitation.

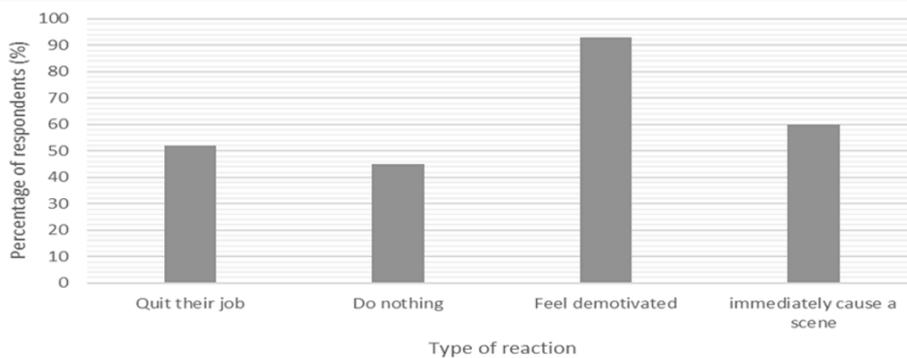


Figure 2: Reaction of employers and employees to exploitation on construction sites

Interpretation of salient points

The first key point from the descriptive study was that PiC react negatively to instances of exploitation. As shown in Figure 2, PiC will quit their job, they can become demotivated and/or cause a scene at work, resulting in anything from being rude, to verbal abuse or a physical fight. The second salient point was that respect for people motivates them to perform better in their work. Almost half of the interviewees believed respecting others makes the work environment better and peaceful for everyone. RfP boosts the image of the contractors when everyone cooperates in doing their jobs and, when respect prevails on the construction site, it boosts work performance which, in turn, saves time and money.

The third salient point from the study was that an exploited construction worker is a demotivated worker. As shown in Figure 2, 93% of the interviewees indicated that they would feel demotivated at work if they were exploited. An example used by one interviewee was that "one bad potato in a bag can make the other good potatoes bad over time". The fourth salient point addressed the consequences of demotivation. It was noted in the study that workers demotivated through exploitation are prone to make errors and mistakes in the workplace. Such mistakes have implications for the H&S of the workforce. Figure 1 shows that the detrimental effect of exploitation on

construction sites. Based on the views of the interviewees, injuries or other health issues might eventuate in the life of an exploited construction worker. This view can be supported by personal observation onsite by the researcher that, when an individual is demotivated, he/she will not be fully focused on the job at hand.

Cultivating a sense of understanding and engagement on a construction site can promote the chances of sustained positive behaviours that will help to keep negative attitudes and perceptions at bay. RfP and mindfulness are potential preventive interventions in this regard.

RfP and exploitation

As alluded to earlier, and most clearly by other authors such as Sample (2003), RfP is the opposite of exploitation, which means taking advantage of people at work. The causes of exploitation cited by the interviewees fall under the concept of self-interest. Self-interest might be the result of an imbalance in power relations between workers and their managers. Self-interest is evident when one human being uses another entirely for his or her own benefit. According to Kant (2012), the moral relations between people should not be governed by self-interest. Rather, respect should be deployed to avoid exploitation. The usefulness of RfP has been explored in the construction industry, especially in the UK for example, in addressing some of its problems. The 2000 and 2004 RfP reports in the UK contained responses to issues of skills, image, equity, diversity, H&S and working conditions. In the reports it was noted that, for the industry to deploy RfP, it must change how construction practice promotes diversity, working conditions, training, H&S, and wellbeing (Emuze and Smallwood, 2018).

The superficial changes in the working conditions of PiC, which are exploitative, as revealed by the plight of migrant workers in some regions of the world, make the use of RfP imperative to either prevent or limit exploitation in thoughts and actions (Adsul *et al.*, 2011; Ghaemi, 2006). The concept of RfP propounded in this paper is Kantian as it is based on morality that is not diluted with the notion of 'business case'. To address exploitation, RfP is an effective approach to build relational trust on construction sites. The original concept of RfP will help to improve factors that influence cognitive performance such as mental state, attitudes, and moods on sites. It must be recognised in the industry that to respect people is to respect the moral rights of people. When the moral rights of individuals are upheld, instances of exploitation are less likely to occur because everyone will be mindful about such rights in social interactions on site. PiC can be mindful of situations that make workers feel demotivated and exploited, but what does it mean to be mindful?

Mindfulness and exploitation

Langer and Moldoveanu (2000) described mindfulness as paying attention to things that are new or different in an environment. It denotes the "capability to induce a rich awareness of discriminatory detail and a capacity for action" (Weick *et al.*, 1999: 82). Therefore, mindfulness is linked to situation awareness as a concept. According to Casey and Griffin (2020), when mindful, individuals will be sensitive to the environment and work conditions, open to new views, and aware of different perspectives. Mindfulness is useful in improving workplace H&S (Reason, 2008). For instance, Casey and Griffin (2020: 33) stated:

"Mindful people are generally able to draw on greater levels of focused and directed attention; they tend to notice more risks, make less biased or automatic judgements, and can consciously control their safety-related behaviours. Mindful people may also make fewer errors. Mindfulness has been linked to improved situational awareness (put

simply, 'knowing what is going on' and being able to anticipate what will happen in the future)".

Of the different four levels of mindfulness (individual, relational, organisational, and societal) outlined by Langer (2021), the relational level plays a critical role in protecting the H&S of the workforce in construction. Relational mindfulness implies that healthy relationships and high-quality social interactions between individuals involved in a project can make a significant difference between exploitation and RfP. The creation of a working environment of high trust, where everyone is seen as 'an end', will engender collective awareness of how to behave on site. The question is how can mindfulness be created? Figure 3 illustrates a response, as it shows five cognitive processes that could lead to mindfulness. Thus, a mindful person on a construction site will focus on failure (such as negative attitudes that might reveal exploitation), will not neglect data, will actively promote the big picture of operational terms, and defer to expertise to ensure that H&S is not compromised.

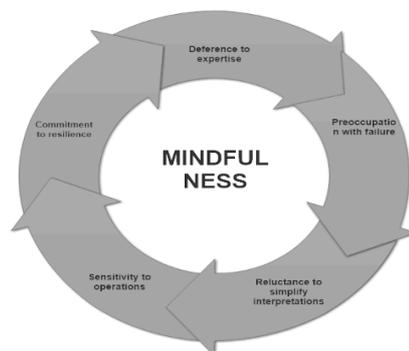


Figure 3: Five cognitive processes leading to mindful organising of tasks, Source: Schochlow and Dekker (2019)

The benefits of mindfulness described above are applicable to site management and general workers on construction sites. Mindfulness increases the ability of PiC to detect and handle unplanned events (Schochlow and Dekker, 2019). In relational terms, "mindfulness means being awake. It means knowing what you are doing" (Kabat-Zinn, 2004: 17). Knowing what is happening on a site, individually and collectively, will assist in spotting instances that could be perceived as exploitative because of effects on task completion and the wellbeing of those doing the work. Several authors have mentioned that mindfulness is a pre-requisite for safe work performance in all industries (Reason, 2008: Casey and Griffin. 2020), including construction operations. As an illustration, if mindlessness is brought to a task, there is the ever-present risk of an accident such as falls from height or struck-by objects.

CONCLUSION

Creating safety and safe behaviours within a team on construction sites is more a question of addressing attitudes and beliefs. Instead of adding layers of administrative controls or levels of compliance or adding to the number of H&S professionals on site, site management should seek to establish the right kinds of behaviours. It is based on this premise that how professionals view exploitation and its effect on PiC on sites is presented in this paper. In the paper it is shown that the concept of exploitation is viewed as taking unfair advantage of people based on selfishness, not caring for the needs of others, and greediness. In addition, as mentioned by a few participants, hatred towards another individual is a concern that should not be ignored. The factors influencing exploitation on construction sites directly affect PiC. When

such incidents occur, the consequences include lost time (92%), lost money (88%), and a very unpleasant work site filled with distrust. Another consequence identified in the findings (65%) is the likelihood of more injuries and other health-related issues on sites. In summary, the cited consequences prove that exploitation influences the whole construction site in a negative way and that there is a serious need for ways and ideas to reduce and eliminate it.

The interviewees affirmed the notion that exploitation will affect employers and PiC negatively, as it will demotivate individuals or groups on construction sites. Negativity among workers will lead to a decline in work performance (Topchik, 2001; Sharman, 2019) and safety outcomes. Signs of demotivation are evident in people causing a scene on the construction site by physically or verbally abusing others. It is clear from the findings that there will be some form of reaction from employers and employees when exploitation occurs on a construction site. The reactions of people are understandable but, in most cases, there can be a better way to react and address a situation.

The findings suggest that there are ways to avoid and reduce exploitation on construction sites. Interviewees suggested weekly, open, information forum sessions between employers and workers to prevent exploitation from happening. From a conceptual argument point of view, RfP is the direct opposite of exploitation. When it is deployed effectively on construction sites, it will be difficult for exploitation to occur among the crew. By becoming more mindful, PiC will be more aware of situations that promote exploitation instead of RfP. Mindfulness can be exercised to identify low morale and prevent a slide into an atmosphere of exploitation on a site.

However, in the South African context, the reported study was exploratory and descriptive. The analysis of the data is limited regarding inferences and relationships. Initially, the study was designed as sequential, mixed-methods research using quantitative (survey questionnaire) and qualitative (interview guide) instruments. However, the hard lockdown and slow return to the 'new normal' hindered the smooth implementation of the design in 2020. The need to conclude the project within a year of postgraduate diploma study meant that only interviews were concluded. Thus, there is a need to build on the research with rigorous, multi-year studies that will provide tangible evidence of exploitation and lack of respect for PiC. Future studies should also explore how RfP and mindfulness will act as the antithesis of exploitation on construction sites. The link between exploitation, RfP, mindfulness and work performance on site should also form part of future studies that use multiple techniques to collect data.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In compiling this paper, the author has drawn on research work assigned to DJ Kleu in 2020. The author gratefully acknowledges his contribution. The contributions of the two anonymous reviewers of the abstract and this paper are also appreciated.

REFERENCES

- Adsul, B B, Laad, P S, Howal, P V and Chaturvedi, R.M (2011) Health problems among migrant construction workers: A unique public-private partnership project, *Indian Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, **15**(1), 29.
- Buss, S (1999) Respect for persons, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, **29**(4), 517-550.

- Casey, T W and Griffin, M A (2020) *Lead Safety: A Practical Handbook for Frontline Supervisors and Safety Practitioners*, Boca Raton: CRC Press.
- Cottle, E (2019) Lessons from SA's FIFA World Cup: Legacy for labour, *South African Labour Bulletin*, November 19, 2019.
- Emuze, F A and Mollo, L G (2019) Disrespecting people with working conditions in South Africa, *Proceedings of the Institution of Civil Engineers: Management, Procurement and Law*, **173**(3), 112-117.
- Emuze, F A and Smallwood, J J (2018) A Kantian approach to Respect-for-Persons in construction site work, *In: Emuze, F A and Smallwood, J J (Eds) Valuing People in Construction*, Oxon, UK: Routledge, 242-258.
- Flick, U (2018) *An Introduction to Qualitative Research 6th Edition*, London: Sage.
- Ghaemi, H (2006) Building towers, cheating workers: Exploitation of migrant construction workers in the United Arab Emirates, *Human Rights Watch*, November 2006,18.
- Haydon, G (2006) Respect for persons and for cultures as a basis for national and global citizenship, *Journal of Moral Education*, **35**(4), 457-471.
- Huberman, M and Miles, M B (eds) (2002) *The Qualitative Researcher's Companion*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kabat-Zinn, J (2004) *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditations for Everyday Life*, London: Piatkus Books.
- Kant, I (2012) *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*, North Chelmsford, Mass: Courier Corporation.
- Kant, I (2013) *An Answer to the Question: 'What is Enlightenment?'* London: Penguin Books.
- King, N, Horrocks, C and Brooks, J (2019) *Interviews in Qualitative Research 2nd Edition*, London: Sage.
- Langer, C (2021) *Mindful Safety: A Multi-Level Approach to Improving Safety Culture and Performance*, Boca Raton: CRC Press.
- Langer, E.J and Moldoveanu, M (2000) The construct of mindfulness, *Journal of Social Issues*, **56**(1), 1-9.
- Modarelli, M (2006) A Kantian approach to the dilemma of part-time faculty, *Changing English*, **13**(2), 241-252.
- Mollo, L and Emuze, F (2017) Casualisation of work in construction and the plight of workers in Bloemfontein, *Journal of Construction Project Management and Innovation*, **7**(2), 2018-2026.
- Respect for People Working Group (2000) *A Commitment to People: Our Biggest Asset*, A report from the Movement for Innovation's working group on respect for people, London: Rethinking Construction.
- Respect for People Working Group (2004) *Respect for People: A Framework for Action*, Constructing Excellence, London.
- Sample, R J (2003) *Exploitation: What It is and Why It's Wrong*, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield,
- Sharman, A (2019) *Naked Safety: Exploring the Dynamics of Safety in a Fast-Changing World*, London: Routledge.
- Schochlow, V and Dekker, S (2019) The 1980s and onward normal accidents and high reliability organisations, *In: S Dekker (Ed) Foundations of Safety Science*, Boca Raton: CRC Press, 267-304.

Reason, J T (2008) *The Human Contribution: Unsafe Acts, Accidents and Heroic Recoveries*, Farnham, UK: Ashgate.

Reason, J (2016) *Managing the Risks of Organisational Accidents*, London: Routledge.

Topchik, G S (2001) *Managing Workplace Negativity*, New York: AMACOM.

Weick, K E, Sutcliffe, K M and Obstfeld, D (1999) Organising for high reliability: Processes of collective mindfulness, *Research in Organisational Behaviour*, **21**, 81-124.