

# Social constructionism and relational practices as a paradigm for organisational psychology in the South African context

**Author:**

Dirk J. Geldenhuys<sup>1</sup>

**Affiliation:**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Industrial & Organisational Psychology, University of South Africa, South Africa

**Correspondence to:**

Dirk Geldenhuys

**Email:**

geldej@unisa.ac.za

**Postal address:**

PO Box 392, University of South Africa 0003, South Africa

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**Orientation:** This article is about introducing social constructionism and relational practices as a paradigm perspective to organisational psychology, especially as these are applied in organisation development.

**Research purpose:** The aim of this study was to investigate the relevance of social constructionism and relational practices as a paradigm perspective for studying and practising organisational psychology in the South African context.

**Motivation for the study:** The relevance of the paradigm perspective that is currently used in studying and practising organisational psychology in South Africa seems to be biased towards an individual perspective of human behaviour that is incongruent with the African context, which asks for an Afro-centric approach with the emphasis on human relationships. It was argued that social constructionism and relational practices could provide a relevant perspective that can help to transform workplace relationships in the South African context.

**Research approach, design and method:** This study was based on a non-empirical, theoretical research design. Articles written in English and published between 2002 and 2013 using specific keywords relating to social constructionism and organisational psychology were retrieved. This was supplemented by other relevant electronic and hardcopy resources. The main findings are reported and discussed and recommendations made.

**Main findings:** Although the literature on social constructionism and relational practices is limited in organisational psychology, it does provide an additional perspective, not only on the mainstream theory, but also as a practice in organisation development for transforming workplace relationships in the South African context.

**Practical/managerial implications:** Organisational psychology should be cautious about the possibility of constructing a monologue at the expense of introducing new perspectives on behaviour in the workplace. Organisational psychologists should be trained in alternative approaches such as social constructionism in order to facilitate relationships and consider applying relational practices as practical philosophy in dealing with clients, thus changing their role from that of expert to that of relational practitioner, focusing on the relational processes and making use of local contextual knowledge.

**Contributions/value add:** This article contributes to the mainstream literature on organisational psychology, more specifically organisation development as an applied field of organisational psychology, by including social constructionism with its emphasis on relational practices as an alternative approach to the field.

## Introduction

Owing to the increasing rate of violence in the South African workplace, skills in dealing with interpersonal relations have become of paramount importance in studying and practising organisational psychology. This can be done from different paradigm perspectives. These perspectives influence not only the science practitioner's view on behaviour in organisations, but also their professional practices and more specifically the way in which they facilitate adversarial relationships. The different paradigm perspectives lead not only to debates on the appropriateness of the perspectives, but even to splits between advocates of different perspectives. For instance, Watkins (2001) identifies theories that are based on psychoanalytic, behaviourist, humanist and cognitive perspectives and argues that although psychoanalysis played a key role in the development of the field, it only creates more questions than answers in a search for meaning. More specifically, regarding organisation development (OD) as an applied sub-discipline of organisational psychology, according to Frances, Holbeche and Reddington (2012), although OD

was primarily based on psychological concepts derived from psychoanalysis and humanistic values, the field has moved away from its original roots of behavioural dynamics, action research and the application of systems thinking.

In contrast to the above, there seems to be a new surge in researching and applying psychoanalytic constructs in South African organisations (Rothmann & Cilliers, 2007). This occurs on the basis of a systems-psychodynamic approach, which has its roots in the Tavistock or Object Relations movement. It is argued that interventions based on other paradigms such as humanism, behaviourism, cognitivism and positive psychology do not address the major conflictual issues encountered in South African organisations (Geldenhuys, 2012). For instance, the humanistic paradigm is based mainly on the optimal functioning of the individual, without considering their impact on other people. Relationships are only relevant as far as they enhance the process of self-actualisation (Sampson, 2008).

The systems-psychodynamic paradigm primarily emphasises the unconscious influence of past authority relations on current behaviour. Although it provides a diagnostic perspective on behavioural dynamics (Geldenhuys, 2012), the contribution of this paradigm towards transforming relationships is questioned in postmodern literature. The reason for this could be its emphasis on the negative influence of past authority relations, or the construction of a community of practice that is exclusive, and therefore only of value to the participants of that community, or possibly because it is motivated by its therapeutic value for the individual (Sampson, 2008).

With the emphasis on human relations in the African context and the acceptance of a postmodern lifestyle that is characterised, *inter alia*, by increasing connections through mobility and the use of social media, the relevance of current practices in organisational psychology mainly derived from the Westernised, modernist paradigm perspectives should be interrogated.

The argument in this article is that social constructionism as a postmodern paradigm with the emphasis on relational practices can be of value to organisational psychology for three reasons. Firstly, social constructionism is regarded as a postmodern paradigm, representing a number of theoretical frameworks such as what is coined in the literature as relational constructionism, conversational construction or relational practices, to name a few (Hosking & Bouwen 2000; Steyaert, Bouwen & Van Looy, 1996; Van der Haar & Hosking, 2004). These different frameworks, with their long-standing philosophical traditions, provide background on the contemporary debate in psychology between, on the one hand, scholars who view psychology as a natural science and argue for a descriptive approach with the emphasis on individual psychology and, on the other, scholars who view it as a moral science and a normative approach with the emphasis on collective psychology (Hosking & Morley, 2004). Scholars who view psychology as a moral science are

mostly concerned with underlying values and forms of self-expression that are constituted in conversations, unique to specific places and times.

The view of psychology as a moral science corresponds with theories of social psychology, which serve as one of the roots of organisational psychology. It is also congruent with the conceptualisation of OD as a sub-discipline of organisational psychology. OD, for instance, is regarded as a value-laden sub-discipline that is based on humanistic values (Cummings & Worley, 2008; Van Tonder & Roodt, 2008).

The perspective that OD is grounded in a paradigmatic approach or value system instead of in a set of theories is becoming more popular. This, for instance, is reflected in the OD Network 2010 definition, which refers to OD as a:

dynamic values-based approach to systems change in organisations and communities; it strives to build the capacity to achieve and sustain a new desired state that benefits the organisation or community and the world around them. (Frances *et al.*, 2012, p. 51)

This more recent approach to OD is in line with the assumptions of a post-modernist paradigm of social constructionism.

The second reason is that the emphasis on relational practices can be regarded as relevant to the diverse African context, with its emphasis on a collectivistic, holistic and interconnected view of behaviour (Bergh, 2013) that is thus characterised by the vital role of interpersonal relationships (Van Niekerk, Geldenhuys, Levin, May & Moalusi, 2012) and the reciprocated exposure to different cultures. It is thus argued that social constructionism can incorporate both a Euro-centric and an Afro-centric perspective. Thirdly, related to the abovementioned motivation, social construction is a postmodern paradigm that is characterised by opening up conversations with other paradigms (Gergen & Gergen, 2003) and might therefore also offer new possibilities for studying and practising organisational psychology and development.

Despite the possible contribution of viewing organisational psychology from a social constructionist perspective, a review of the literature seems to indicate that insights from theory and practice drawing on social constructionism and relational practices have not yet entered the organisational psychology vernacular, especially in South Africa. Teaching, researching and practising in the field of organisational psychology are mainly based on the humanistic and functionalistic paradigms. This is supported by Bushe and Marshak (2004), who maintain that these newer theoretical orientations to social reality and organisational change are underrepresented in textbooks in comparison with the behavioural, humanistic and open systems theories on which theorising was done in the 1950s and 1960s. In an article by Watkins (2001) on different psychological paradigms for industrial and organisational psychology in South Africa, social constructionism was not even mentioned.

The purpose of this article is to contribute to the literature on organisational psychology, more specifically organisation development as an applied field of organisational psychology. The aim is to theoretically explore the relevance of social constructionism and relational practices for organisational psychology in the South African context and more specifically how social constructionism can be applied to improve relationships in the workplace.

What follows is a discussion of the research design, including the research approach and method. The findings, indicating how relational constructionism and relational practices as a possible paradigm may contribute to studying and practising organisational psychology, will then be presented. The findings will be discussed, recommendations will be made and the shortcomings of the research will be highlighted, including recommendations for possible further research.

## Research design

### Research approach

This study was based on a non-empirical, theoretical research design. A systematic review of the literature was done in order to determine the relevance and utilisation of social constructionism as a paradigm in organisational psychology.

### Research strategy

A two-phased strategy was followed during this research. Firstly, the current usage of social constructionism in scientific journals was established. Secondly, the possible application of social constructionism in organisational psychology was explored.

### Research method

Relevant empirical and non-empirical research articles were systematically identified according to chosen keywords in order to allow for replication of the study.

### Targeted body of literature

The unit of analysis was textual data relating to social constructionism and relational practices. Data were retrieved through literature searches for various sources.

A search was done in e-journals that are located in databases such as EBSCOHOST, (Academic search Premier, Business Source Premier and PsychInfo), Emerald, Google Scholar, Proquest, SAePublications and Science Direct (business, management, psychology, social science), which covers multidisciplinary subjects. Access to these databases was facilitated through <http://www.unisa.ac.za/libraryweb> portal.

Data were also retrieved from reference lists of publications that were found during the database searches. South African online journals were also included in the search as well as data found in other related publications, specifically publications from the Toas Institute.

**TABLE 1:** The literature search-tracking sheet.

Date of search	Search items	Number of articles	
		Accessed	Eliminated
18 June 2013	Relational constructionism <i>and</i> psychology <i>near</i> organisation <i>or</i> development	1118	1436
03 July 2013	Social constructionism <i>and</i> employment, <i>work</i> <i>or</i> management	549	-
20 July 2013	Social constructionism <i>and</i> psychology <i>near</i> development	240	-
22 July 2013	Relational constructionism <i>and</i> employment <i>or</i> work <i>or</i> management	36	-

### Data-gathering method

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were used to ensure the retrieval of data that would be relevant to the topic of the study. Only relevant data that were written in English were included and the time frame for inclusion was limited to the period between 2002 and 2013. All other data were excluded. All abstracts of identified articles and table of contents of books were read to determine the relevance of the data for the purpose of this study. Keywords used in the search included relational constructionism, social constructionism, psychology, organisational, employment, management and development.

Table 1 illustrates the literature search-tracking sheet that was used to record the number of articles accessed for each search session.

### Data analysis and presentation

After gathering the relevant publications, a primary scan, based on the relevance of the data, was performed to reduce the amount of data. Publications that met the criteria for inclusion were then further read and analysed by means of qualitative content analysis (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Spencer, Ritchie & O'Connor, 2003). In order to ensure the quality of the study, the data were then presented in the form of a lecture to colleagues conducting research and working in the field of organisational psychology in South Africa who confirmed the possible and unique contribution of social constructionism to teaching and practicing industrial psychology in the South African context. After the presentation, the author was also requested to deliver a paper on social constructionism at an Appreciative Inquiry conference.

## Findings

In published research articles in industrial and organisational psychology in South Africa, it was found that some references are made to social constructionism. However, this is often only in relation to the description of the method used in the study, more specifically to indicate the researcher's involvement in the collection and analysis of qualitative data, or to use the term in referring to a socially constructed construct that was studied and reported on. For example, the aim of a study done by Franks, Schurink and Fourie (2006) was to explore how 21st century career-oriented women attach meaning to and how they visualise integrating their different life roles over the next decade. In another example of research referring to the concept, an article entitled 'The construction

of work-life balance: The experience of black employees in a call-centre environment' (Potgieter & Barnard, 2010) refers to the ontological perspective underlying the research approach as relativistic, based on the assumption that people construct multiple realities during their lives. Social constructionism was neither conceptualised nor explored in any of these articles. Furthermore, none of these articles referred to relational practices or relational constructionism. In the international literature on organisational psychology and management, only two relevant books and four articles were found. Most of the literature on social constructionism that was found to be relevant to this study was published by the Taos Institute. It was also found that the majority of the literature was published by the same authors. This concludes the first phase of the research strategy.

The second phase of the research strategy will now follow, namely a discussion on the possible contribution of social constructionism and relational practices to organisational psychology as found in the international literature. The discussion will entail a conceptualisation, including the ontological and epistemological assumptions underlying the concept. This will be followed by a discussion on the most relevant constructs that were identified in the literature. Thereafter, the different perspectives offered by social construction on organisational behaviour will be discussed, followed by an introduction of the concept of the relational practitioner.

## Social constructionism

Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) laid the foundation for social constructionism in the social sciences in their seminal work entitled *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. This is deemed a postmodern reaction to modernism and challenges the assumptions that are taken for granted by the positivistic scientific approach of modernism. As a paradigm, it primarily relies on the philosophical perspectives of phenomenology, structural linguistics, modern hermeneutics and existentialism (Hosking & Morley, 2004; Mattila & Aaltio, 2006).

Scholars involved in social constructionism are hesitant to define the concept or to regard it as a paradigm because that act in itself might be a construction of a reality with power over other definitions or paradigms, and hence with the exclusion of other possibilities. Social construction should therefore be regarded instead as a social action science or a practical philosophy, based on a specific thought style (Van der Haar & Hosking, 2004). Hosking and McNamee (2006) define it as a way of engaging with the world with the focus on relational practices and the social realities these practices create, maintain and transform. It is not an attempt to identify the origin of social realities, but to focus on the relational activities and the products of these activities (Anderson & Gehart, 2007).

The emphasis is thus on relationships (Hosking & Bouwen, 2000), but not in the sense of what is traditionally known as

interpersonal relationships with the focus on the individuals who are involved in the relationships as separate, independent persons (Bakhtin, 1981; Gergen, 1991). The focus is on the relational processes or activities *between* individuals and the meanings that are constructed during conversation at the intersubjective domain between them. Social construction is thus about 'relating' and relatedness, that is, the interactive processes, the conditions of being in relation and the products of this interaction (Anderson, 2007). In order to highlight the difference between relationships as traditionally defined and relationships in this context, the term 'relations' instead of 'relationship' is used where this emphasis is needed.

## Ontological assumptions

Social construction is based on a number of assumptions (Gergen & Gergen, 2003; Hosking & Bouwen, 2000; Hosking & Morley, 2004). From an ontological perspective, it is argued that the way in which the world is traditionally understood is not derived from the world as an entity, but from the shared or relational construction of the world by people who are in agreement as to what that world constitutes. In this sense, some scholars argue that all realities are socially constructed. There is thus no objective, independent reality outside the observer that has to be discovered through scientific research based on a positivistic approach of objective observation.

Social construction is thus not concerned about ontology, separate from epistemology (Bouwen, 1998). It is not interested in the literalness of things or so-called 'facts', but in the meanings attributed to them, with the focus on the processes through which people arrive at their understandings of themselves and their worlds (Gergen & Gergen, 2003).

Consequently, social construction accepts and appreciates the existence of multiple socially constructed realities. Since all these realities are socially constructed, they are viewed as interdependent constructions that exist and are known only in relation to one another (Hosking & Bouwen, 2000). We can thus also talk of a relational ontology (Van der Haar & Hosking, 2004).

## Epistemological assumptions

The epistemological assumption of social construction is that knowledge is also not an entity or substance such as a 'body of knowledge' that people can study or enquire from, as is typically argued from a post-positivistic paradigm. Knowledge is constructed through social processes (Gergen & Gergen, 2003). Since knowledge is socially constructed, representing different realities, all knowledge is regarded as perspectivistic (Steyaert, Bouwen & Van Looy, 1996). Knowledge is therefore not regarded as objective, but instead provides a subjective frame of reference or cognitive map (Edmondson, 2012). It is always expressed from a certain perspective or action logic in a particular meaning-making system (Gergen, 1994; Steyaert *et al.*, 1996). It is these systems or scientific communities that develop rules for determining



what counts as hard facts and what not, often as a means to gain social control (Gergen, 1985).

Knowledge is also regarded as a relational activity because it is expressed in and through a relationship (Anderson, 2007; Steyaert *et al.*, 1996). The people in this relationship define their mutual positions by means of relating to each other. Knowledge and the knower are thus interdependent. People can only know the world through their relatedness with or experience of the world. From this perspective, knowledge is about the construction or making of knowledge (Bouwen, 1998). Knowing is always an ongoing process of meaning-making and creating common understandings. Meaning making is thus continuously constructed in relationship and can thus not be traced to its origin or seen as finalised (Gergen, 2003). Cunliffe and Shotter (2006) refer to this as knowledge in motion.

Knowledge is thus regarded as local knowledge, also called contextual, participative or relational knowledge (Anderson & Gehart, 2007; Hosking & Morley, 2004), or knowing from within (Shotter, 1993). It is developed by and within a community of people who, through its development, not only develop new knowledge, but also set the rules for it. As such, knowledge is of relevance and regarded as objective, factual and coherent knowledge for those who are participating in its making. Through this process, scientific communities, communities of practice or cultures are formed (Bouwen, 1998).

### Human nature

It is also argued that human nature has a social basis (Gergen & Davis, 2012). Emphasis is placed on the research and theories on child development and learning of Vygotsky who, for instance, observed how babies are socially constructed as speakers through relating (intermental processes) with their care takers (Holzman, 2006). Neither the self, nor the meaning is regarded as a pre-condition for social interaction (Butler, 2003); these emerge from and are sustained by conversations. Instead, what begins as a social process is transformed over time into intrapersonal processes. This capacity of humans to act or to perform what they are currently not capable of doing provides opportunities for growth and transformation.

Human nature, including emotions such as anger and envy, is thus seen as socially constructed with a specific meaning in a specific social context (Gergen & Davis, 2012; Sampson, 2008). Instead of viewing human beings as individual identities with innate characteristics, the emphasis is on human nature as constantly evolving in different relations, over time and within cultures (Sampson, 2008). It assumes that human beings are sustaining and reproducing multiple cultural patterns that have formed them as persons and what they have learnt. What has been learnt then provides sources for future thoughts, relationships and behaviour. An individual is thus only an individual as far as it is an individual-in-relationship, created in and by that relationship (Anderson, 2007). It would thus seem that this view of human

nature is closely aligned with Ubuntu values according to which a person only becomes a person through his or her relationships with others.

### Language

Language plays a major role in social construction, not in the sense of being a tool to describe our world, or representing an objective entity or idea, but as a vehicle through which people construct, make sense and transform their world (Anderson, 2012; Gergen & Gergen, 2003). Social construction thus emphasises the generative or transformative power of language (Gergen, 1985). The use of language is a sense-making process through which we create our worlds (Bouwen, 1998).

The power of words does not only assist in constructing a current reality when people engage in conversation, it also offers the possibility of creating future worlds (Anderson & Gehart, 2007). In this sense, language opens up the possibility of transformation. It provides the opportunity for collaboratively transforming our current realities into new future realities (Anderson, 2012).

### The formation of social realities

Social constructionism relies, *inter alia*, on the perspectives of the postmodern philosopher Michael Foucault to theorise how social realities or communities are constructed (Fox, 2000). Foucault (1972) referred to regular patterns that people use to construct their understandings of the world as a discourse. These understandings then form, in a circular way, the basis for their practices and thereby sustain the discourse at the exclusion of new understandings. Each discourse sustains its own set of assumptions to the extent that it can be regarded as constituting a moral order or cultural force, providing the framework for what is right and wrong (McNamee, 2008).

Reality, truth and objectivity are consequently confined to a cultural and historical context with no absolute, universal truth or finality in our knowledge and understanding. Telling the truth does not mean providing an accurate picture of what happened, but participating in a set of social conventions according to the rules constructed by those conventions. Objective truth is thus only objective within a specific community where it is socially validated or certified (Hosking & Morley, 2004).

The context also has a historical dimension (Van der Haar & Hosking, 2004). What is regarded as knowledge and truth at one time in history is often not regarded as knowledge and truth at another time. In this manner we create knowledge that is always fluid, evolving and transforming.

However, social construction does not promote a relativist perspective of 'anything goes' (Anderson, 2007; Van der Haar & Hosking, 2004). It does not even promote the relinquishing of a chosen position. However, it does ask for the acknowledgement that one truth is not the ultimate truth and allows others, often with diametrically opposing views,

to do the same. It asks for entertaining the possibility that others simply do their best on the basis of their perspective and their understanding of, and in, a given context.

### **Sustaining social realities**

Communities who have created a social reality have privileged access to their own reality and are able to understand their world in ways that others outside that world cannot (Hosking & Morley, 2004).

When differences between communities are experienced, the different parties evaluate the facts of the other party and base their own arguments on the basis of logical, coherent frameworks that they have developed for themselves, without acknowledging that the perspective or argument of the opposing party is also based on what is coherent and logical for it. In this manner, the own community of practice is sustained.

Furthermore, the most powerful party (or dominant discourse: Becker, Chasin, Herzig & Roth, 2003) may impose itself on a party with less power than itself, thereby silencing the voice of the dominated party. A subject-object relationship is constructed with the subject exercising power over the object. The subject thus constructs the object as knowable and serviceable to its own needs. This implies the establishment and maintenance of power structures between different socially constructed realities. Deadlocks are reached when people lock each other in a specific understanding based on their own set of assumptions. In this sense it can also be argued that conflict per se is socially constructed.

### **Transforming social realities**

The emphasis in social constructionism as action science is on transforming relationships by means of what is known as relational constructionism or practices (Anderson, 2012; Hosking & Bouwen, 2000; Van der Haar & Hosking, 2004). Instead of constructing or maintaining a 'power-over' reality, social constructionism allows for the possibility of bringing together multiple realities as different but equal. Creating a space for the coordination of multiple local realities or voices, without imposing the one on the other, is regarded as the key to transforming relationships from a social constructionist perspective.

Using relational practices in building relationships implies a different perspective on change and transformation (Bushe & Marshak, 2009). Transformation does not involve attempts from an outside person to confront or directly change the behaviour of opposing or conflicting parties. Instead, it focuses on the parties changing their frameworks that guide their thoughts, actions and words. The assumption is that people do not so much resist change as they resist being changed (Wheatley, 2006).

Building relationships also does not entail a diagnosis by collecting and analysing information on interpersonal problems, but rather an inquiry in an effort to bring to the

surface, legitimise or learn from the variety of perspectives, cultures and narratives that coexist in the system that may help to establish a new context with more effective patterns of organising these different perspectives (Marshak & Grant, 2008). This approach asserts that change happens when people become aware of the variety of stories they have about themselves and each other and understand their own part in creating unproductive patterns of interaction (Bushe & Marshak, 2009). The change process thus emphasises changing the conversations, including the language used, that normally take place in the system. The assumption is that this process will result in new images, narratives, texts and socially constructed realities that affect the way people think and act. Complexity thus allows for the creation of new possibilities.

The process also does not imply consensus seeking. Reaching consensus or common ground is often based on trivial matters that have no significance for the parties, whilst those elements that really constitute conflict are avoided (McNamee, 2008). Bushe (2009) specifically critiqued the classical approach to organisational learning by stating that attempting to agree on one interpretation of the variety of experiences people hold based on their multiple realities is counterproductive to changing dysfunctional patterns in the workplace. Instead, creating new images, stories, texts, narratives and other socially constructed realities will affect the way people think and make sense of things and that, in turn, will influence the way they act and, ultimately, relate to others. Transformation occurs when people generate and explore multiple descriptions, stories and perspectives. New possibilities only emerge through collaborative processes.

Dialoguing, with the emphasis on its collaborative nature, is accentuated in the literature on relational practices (Anderson & Gehart, 2007; Barrett, Thomas & Hocevar, 1995). Engaging in a dialogue is regarded as the opposite of a monologue or debate. A monologue is constructed when the same story is repeated incessantly. Although the same argument is offered, it is done in an intensifying or increasingly aggressive manner without realising that different arguments can be equally valid even though they are based on different realities or contexts.

To dialogue, however, is to engage in the tensional space that is created by holding firmly on to one's own position, whilst simultaneously remaining open to the positions of others who often have contradictory views (Stewart & Zediker, 2002). Taking a risk in doing so and allowing other parties to do the same, and being open to and curious about the coherence of these opposing realities, create a unique relational context. Although this might not remove the conflict, it might transform the nature of the interaction and ultimately influence the nature of the relationship (McNamee, 2008).

Because the parties to a dialogue have built their realities that serve as frame of reference for current dialogues on multiple stories, histories and contexts (Sampson, 2008), and even deposits of others in themselves (McNamee & Gergen, 1999),

they have developed a number of conversational resources. Dialoguing could allow participants to draw on these other parts of their own stories that have worked in the past in different contexts. The extent to which people can invite the use of the familiar forms of action in unfamiliar contexts provides the soil for generative transformation.

Dialoguing also offers the opportunity to appreciate the stories of the other party. Appreciated ways of relating provide participants with resources for connecting with each other and the possibility of constructing a future reality (Watkins & Mohr, 2001).

### Perspectives on organisational behaviour

Social constructionism provides a different perspective on organisational behaviour (Hosking & McNamee, 2006). The focus is not on the individual and the organisation, but on the relational processes and meanings that are constructed at the intersection between people and organisations (Graversen & Johansson, 1998). The individual in the organisation can thus be described as a socially constructed worker, constructed in relation to and, even at times, in service of others such as the organisation, the co-worker and the manager. The different constructions define one another and hence depend on their interrelatedness for their existence (Hassard & Parker, 1993). Workers, for example, can be constructed in the reality of leaders as unproductive resources with the focus on the mistakes, problems and shortcomings of the workers. If the leaders sustain this reality of understanding the worker in this one-dimensional way, the leaders participate in locking the workers in a specific understanding and thereby sustaining a deadlocked position. Similarly, leaders can also be regarded as being constructed by followers, with the focus on only one or a few of the leaders' dimensions. The study of leadership would thus not focus on what a leader is, but instead on the relational process by which leaders and workers co-construct one another (Knights & Willmott, 1992) and the exercise of leadership as a collective sense-making process, instead of a command and control function (Koivunen, 2006).

Viewing group behaviour from a social construction perspective assumes that a group is not an entity that can be controlled from the outside. Group members are interdependent participants who engage in conversations in order to co-construct a space for group activity. A group is thus regarded as a relational space that is continuously in the making through the conversational processes in which the participants engage. It can therefore be said that participants co-create projects and relationships throughout the conversations they enact (Bouwen & Hovelynck, 2006).

Group dynamics and processes are thus not regarded as bodies of knowledge to be studied from the outside, but instead as a way of participating in conversations that unfold when people engage in group making. Edmondson (2012) preferred the word 'teaming' to emphasise the activity of working together in performing interdependent tasks. Creating this relational space may, for instance, entail

acknowledging significant stories or practices that were experienced as meaningful, owning these experiences by questioning the assumptions underlying the practices and exploring new stories and behavioural alternatives (Bouwen & Hovelynck, 2006).

Social construction also provides a similar perspective on the organisation. Organisations per se can be regarded as socially constructed, with their own sets of realities. The focus is thus not on the hierarchical structure or organisation as an entity, but on the process of organising (Hosking, 2006). Organisation is what happens when people engage in conversations or interact in order to get things done (Addleson, 2006). Organisations are thus viewed as an emergent result of the conversations between the members of an organisation. As such, there is nothing inherently real about how people organise, no ultimate truth about organisations that has to be discovered by a consultant and no right or wrong way to organise people who make up any particular organisation (Bushe & Marshak, 2009). From the perspective of social construction, Abell and Simons (2010) define organisations as:

the ongoing result of the production and reproduction of given sets of rules, norms, written procedures, customs, and practices that self-referentially act to constitute social reality, mediated through dominant practices of power. (p. 160)

Based on the above, it seems clear that the traditional classification of organisational psychology into *building blocks*, consisting of individual, group and organisation level variables that can be studied and changed as entities, can also be regarded as social constructionism processes, and hence as different perspectives on behaviour in the workplace.

### The organisational psychologist as relational practitioner

Social construction not only offers a different perspective on organisational psychology as a discipline, but also introduces relational practices as a practical philosophy in consulting that might help to transform workplace relations in the South African context. Relational practices can be regarded as the vehicle for applying social constructionism with the focus on the relational, constructing or interactional process (Graversen & Johansson, 1998; Hosking & Bouwen, 2000). Relational practices are especially relevant for organisation development as an applied field of organisational psychology with the emphasis on enhancing workplace relationships.

By introducing relational practices, the role of the organisational psychologist working with relationships in the workplace could be described as that of a relational practitioner. The stance of the relational practitioner would be that of not knowing, characterised by openness and curiosity (Anderson, 2012). The focus is not on the parties as entities, but on the relational processes between them aimed at exploring ways of creating a context (physical, relational and personal) that invites dialoguing.

The role of the practitioner is that of offering a relational space (Oliver, 2005) for bringing together or coordinating conversations that are based on multiple realities and represented by different stakeholders with different stories and experiences and bases of power and belief systems (Anderson, 2012; Winslade & Monk, 2000). It entails offering a reflective space for the parties, through dialoguing, to consider their own realities and the context in which those arguments were created (McNamee, 2008). The crucial purpose is to achieve acknowledgement by all parties that their respective views are also socially constructed and that the question of right or wrong is based on their own sets of assumptions that do not necessarily correspond with the logical framework of the other party. Self-reflection may open up new possibilities of engaging and hence creating relationships.

The relational practitioner will focus on the coordination of multiple realities without seeking consensus. One can consider other forms of interaction by doing what is known as double listening (Monk & Winslade, 2013). This entails not only listening to the conflicting story, but also attempting to identify other stories, often unspoken, that are relevant for transforming the current relational context. This implies that the relational practitioner acts as a process consultant by not only attending to the process but also focusing on the content and context of conversations.

Realities can also be transformed by focusing on the possibility of imaging and creating future realities. With the emphasis on the past, little room is left for new possibilities in the future (McNamee, 2008). The relational practitioner could thus provide space for sharing preferred images of what the parties expect as conditions for relating in the future.

It is easier to transform current realities by focusing on the future because people do not yet *know* the future. The future has not yet been embodied. Hence, to the extent that people engage *with others* (enemies) in conversation about the future, they underscore the relational construction of their worlds. By the words people use, they co-construct the preferred reality into which they might collaboratively engage. Transformation can commence with the very first question that is asked.

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to theoretically explore the relevance of social constructionism and relational practices for organisational psychology in the South African context, more specifically how social constructionism can be applied to improve relationships in the workplace.

As an introduction to this article, the importance of interpersonal relationships in the South African workplace and the significant role of the organisational psychologist in transforming workplace relations were highlighted and the different paradigms that are currently used by science practitioners in the field were discussed. It was argued that

applying social constructionism and relational practices as a thought style could provide a unique perspective on transforming workplace relations into future relationships in the workplace.

A review of the literature revealed that no relevant data on social constructionism and relational practices were found in the South African literature on organisational psychology, and hardly any data overall. This confirmed the view of Bushe and Marshak (2004), who maintain that these newer theoretical orientations to social reality and organisational change are underrepresented.

The difficulty of acknowledging and introducing a different paradigm in the field of organisational psychology can be ascribed to the huge need for establishing industrial and organisational psychology as a discipline in its own right. However, such an emphasis, according to Kuhn (2003), leads to an immense restriction of vision and resistance to paradigm change. This might, for instance, be evident when referring to industrial psychology as a viable scientific discipline in a summary by Schreuder (2001) on the contribution of industrial psychology in South Africa.

Despite the underrepresentation of social constructionism in the mainstream organisational psychology literature, the unique contribution of this paradigm to studying and practising organisational psychology is clear. Social constructionism offers a relational perspective on reality, including human beings. It emphasises the crucial role of language and provides an opportunity for studying how social realities are formed, sustained and, more importantly, transformed through dialoguing.

Social constructionism thus provides a unique perspective on the individual and the organisation with its emphasis on the relational nature of these concepts. Whereas mainstream views on organisations regard people as economic resources, and only recognise relationships in terms of teamwork, the relationships are not regarded as fundamental to the organisation. Instead, organisations are seen as an entity that exists behind those relationships with individuals, teams and the organisation to be studied as separate identities (Addleson, 2006).

A unique perspective on groups is also offered. Viewing group processes as co-constructing the group activity space through an ongoing engagement in conversations differs from the traditional view on group dynamics which holds that group behaviour can be studied by an expert from outside the group (Bouwen & Hovelynck, 2006).

The role of the industrial psychologist in facilitating relations in the workplace is also different from the traditional role of the process facilitator with the emphasis on listening skills. However, a number of these practices that are congruent with social constructionism have already been introduced in the workplace by means of interventions such as future search conferences and appreciative inquiry, with their



focus on discovering the best from the past and designing and sustaining the future on shared images in the current relational context (Lewis, Passmore & Cantore, 2008).

### Practical/managerial implications

Organisational psychology as a discipline should be cautious about the possibility of constructing a monologue at the expense of introducing new perspectives on behaviour in the workplace. Although organisational psychologists as science practitioners are in favourable positions for facilitating workplace relationships, their current training is too limited. They are largely exposed to training in facilitating skills that are mainly based on humanistic or, to a lesser extent, systems psychodynamic theories and approaches. Social constructionism with its focus on relational practices, and not on the individuals as entities, offers a unique approach that cannot be disregarded.

The implication is that organisational psychologists should be trained in alternative approaches to facilitate relationships in the workplace. This entails a willingness by science practitioners to acknowledge that their own approaches are not the only approaches and that they need to be open to other alternatives. Even more important is the acknowledgement by the science practitioners that they are not the source of knowledge but that knowledge is contextualised and socially created through dialoguing. They should thus consider applying relational practices as practical philosophy in dealing with clients in the workplace. Their roles should thus change from that of expert to that of relational practitioner, focusing on the relational processes and making use of local contextual knowledge.

However, social constructionism should not be regarded as a replacement for other perspectives or approaches because it can be regarded as an approach that makes provision for incorporating other approaches. Science practitioners practising social constructionism should therefore also refrain from viewing this approach as the only relevant approach to facilitating workplace relationships in the South African context. The implication is thus that protagonists of different approaches should dialogue with one another and their clients in co-creating conducive approaches for the current South African context.

### Limitations and recommendations

Although relational practices (or relational construction) are linked to social constructionism as a paradigm perspective, the literature on the construct is still limited, especially in scientific publications. The number of authors who publish in this field is even more limited. Because relational construction is still a new development in the use of postmodern approaches to organisational psychology, and due to possible development and change without an established agreement on the terms, the selected keywords in the searches might have resulted in important publications being overlooked. Furthermore, articles were limited to those

written in English only and a number of important articles published in different languages were thus excluded from the literature review. The author thus realises that this article is not an accurate reflection of social constructionism and relational practices, but merely a constructed version from his perspective.

### Recommendations for future research

The author's future plan is to develop a model in which the different practices of the relational practitioner, including those with a focus on the past (negative as well as positive) and those with a focus on the future, are coordinated in a learning process. It might also be worthwhile exploring the relevance of social constructionism and relational practices to other sub-disciplines, thereby enriching the study and practice of industrial and organisational psychology.

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