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# The discourse of 'Respect for People' in UK construction

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Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is mobilized to investigate some of the assumptions that lie behind the text of the Respect for People reports (2000, 2004), part of the 'Egan agenda' in the UK. The concept of respect is examined, contrasting the humanist view of people as ends in themselves with the instrumentalist view in which human beings are treated as means to an end. Conceptualizing people as an asset encourages this instrumental view. Similarly, the 'business case' argument for respecting people means that improvements to working conditions are judged purely in accordance with their contribution to efficiency and profitability rather than in terms of moral imperatives (not killing people) or fairness (not discriminating against them). Investigation of the structural, institutional and discursive context of the text reveals it to be a response to conditions at a particular historical moment: labour shortages; the desire to avoid or pre-empt regulation; changes in the wider prevailing discourse; and the need to give the impression that 'something is being done'. In conclusion it is suggested that, while the Respect for People discourse may be seen as a way of containing and defusing potential critique, it could also be drawn on by those seeking to improve working conditions.

*Keywords:* Discourse, human resource management, Respect for People, working conditions, labour relations.

## Introduction: Respect for People in the construction industry

Construction is a labour-intensive industry. It employs more than two million people in the UK, including about 12% of the total male workforce (ONS, 2009a, 2009b). Yet, as present conditions remind us, these workers are taken on and shed with the business cycle. The work is often seasonal, insecure and carried out in difficult working conditions. Construction workers must move from place to place as the work moves around, and move from contractor to contractor depending on which bids successfully for work. It is routine for construction workers to be killed, maimed or made ill by their work (HSE, 2001, 2003; Jones *et al.*, 2003). Under pressure to win work, even in boom times employers cannot include in their tenders the long-term costs of training the next generation of construction workers, of keeping the current generation safe and healthy, and of paying pensions to the previous generation. Contractors compete over who can best escape paying for the industry's long-term needs, to meet the short-term goal of winning contracts.

It is against this background that the report of Sir John Egan's Construction Task Force *Rethinking Construction* (Egan, 1998) was commissioned. The impetus came initially from government. The Labour party had returned to government in 1997, having made a commitment to build schools, hospitals, etc.—yet it was doubtful whether the construction industry had the capacity to deliver what was required. The Egan report highlighted shortages of skilled labour and identified 'commitment to people' as one of the essential 'drivers for change'. Construction firms were concerned about the recruitment and retention of labour, and it seems likely that they were also keen to forestall possible legislation on 'people issues' by being seen to behave 'responsibly'. The trade unions were hopeful of improvement in working conditions with the change in government, but also, perhaps, after their experience of Thatcherism, many were looking for opportunities to be listened to, and willing to work with any 'reasonable' employer. Clients' concern was to drive down the costs of building by bringing in the same kind of 'lean' supply chain management in construction as they were already doing in car manufacturing and supermarket retailing.[1] Attempting to

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respond in some sense to all these overlapping and contradictory concerns, the Respect for People working group produced two reports: *A Commitment to People 'Our Biggest Asset'* (2000) and *Respect for People: A Framework for Action* (2004) (hereinafter referred to as RfP 2000 and RfP 2004). The 'people issues' covered were diversity, working facilities, training, health and safety.

This paper offers a critical reading of the 'Respect for People' reports, inspired by various strands of critical thought and by the 'discursive turn' in the social sciences. No attempt is made to combine ideas into a coherent approach; the aim is merely to sketch out an example of how some themes from wider social theory might be drawn on and applied to empirical material (in this case principally texts) in the field of construction management.

## The critical approach

There has been relatively little critical work within the domain of construction management research, though this is now beginning to change. Insights from the social sciences have long been drawn on in a somewhat selective way, but some have recently argued for drawing upon a more critical vein of social science thinking from the field of management and organization studies (Green, 1998; Bresnen, 2005; Hodgson and Cicmil, 2006).

The critical study of management and work organizations questions the subordination of knowledge to the production of efficiency; its aim is not to develop for managers 'knowledge which contributes to the production of maximum output for minimum input' (Fournier and Grey, 2000, p. 17). Instead, it questions established social orders and challenges assumptions, aiming to counteract the dominance of taken-for-granted ideas and practices, to draw attention to what is hidden, and to uncover the interests served by commonsense ideas. Specifically, this may mean asking questions about ends as well as means and questioning the privileging of certain values or outcomes over others—such as 'productive efficiency over job satisfaction, for example, or value engineering over architectural merit' (Bresnen, 2005, p. 490).

The main forms which this critical work has taken are labour process theory (Braverman, 1974; Knights and Willmott, 1990) and 'critical management studies' (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Fournier and Grey, 2000). There is a wide range of often contradictory perspectives. Alvesson (2008) identifies, in addition to Marxist and labour process approaches, deconstruction (Martin, 1990; Calas and Smircich, 1991), Foucauldian work (Townley, 1993), existentialism, Frankfurt school critical theory, critical interpretivist work (Watson, 1994), gender studies (Collinson and Hearn, 1996; Martin, 2003) and left Weberians (Sennett, 2008). While the meaning of 'critical' is itself contested, all the 'branches' recognize the importance of the context of social relations in which action is embedded, and the contested nature of constructs such as management. They also share a tendency to focus on the 'dark side' of business organization and management.

Bresnen (2005) explores recent applications of these ideas within construction management, while Hodgson and Cicmil (2006) present various critical perspectives on project management. There are some overlapping themes which emerge from critical work in the field. The importance of power is central to the critical perspective—see for example Clegg's (1975) study of power on a building site. New management initiatives have been subjected to critical scrutiny, often pointing out gaps between rhetoric and reality, for example business process re-engineering (Green, 1998; Green and May, 2003); lean construction (Green, 1999a, 1999b, 2002; Green and May, 2005); partnering (Bresnen and Marshall, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c; Dainty *et al*., 2001; Bresnen, 2007) and benchmarking (Fernie *et al.*, 2006). Some of this work takes a social constructionist view of the world and treats language as a source of power (Clegg, 1987; Bresnen *et al*, 2005; Green and May, 2005; Rooke and Clark, 2005). Commonly used concepts such as innovation (Larsen, 2005; Davies, 2006; Harty *et al.*, 2007) or competitiveness (Green *et al*., 2008) are deconstructed. A final important dimension of critical work is a reflexive view on research itself, questioning the validity of different forms of research and being aware of how we, as researchers, actively construct the social world we are studying (Seymour and Rooke, 1995; Rooke and Clark, 2005).

The research described in this paper shares many of the perspectives of this emerging body of critical work on construction management, in particular a concern with language and power. A focus on language as actively producing the very phenomena which it appears to represent may be a way of combining insights from different strands of critical work. Studies of specific instances of language use can be a way to ground these ideas in empirical reality. There is, as Alvesson and Deetz (2000, p. 122) contend in their work on critical management research,

> 'a strong case for focusing solely on language use … as the only target of enquiry of which we can develop fairly robust empirical knowledge'.

The next section will present the specific approach used, critical discourse analysis. In subjecting to critical scrutiny another 'best practice' initiative, Respect for People, the focus will not be on gaps between rhetoric

and reality, but on how discourses shape reality, as well as how particular interests shape discourses. The critical analysis of a text as part of its social and cultural context can cast light upon how and why it was produced, what lies behind it, what effects it has, and whose interests it serves.

## Critical discourse analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a well-developed approach in other fields, but has only recently begun to be applied to issues of interest to construction management researchers (Davies, 2006; Green *et al.*, 2008). CDA is not a single theory or method, but a family of approaches with certain common features. The principles of critical discourse analysis described here are drawn mainly from Fairclough (1992, pp. 35–6), van Dijk (1997, pp. 29–31), Fairclough and Wodack (1997, p. 268) and Wodack (2002).

By discourse is meant, broadly following Fairclough, language in its social context, language as social practice. Discourse (and the analysis of discourse) thus goes beyond a specific example of talk or text, to include the processes of production and consumption of the text, and the larger social context which shapes and is shaped by the text. Discourse is seen as socially constructive—through their discourse, language users enact, confirm or challenge social and political structures.[2] The relationship between discourse and society is dialectical; discourse both structures the social world and is structured by it. By *a* discourse is meant a group of statements that provide a way of talking about something: a particular way of representing specific aspects of social life.

> When statements about an object or topic are made from within a certain discourse, that discourse makes it possible to construct that object in a particular way. It also limits the other ways in which that object can be thought about and acted upon. (Du Gay, 2000, p. 67)

Discourses are seen not just as representations of the world, but also as (re)producing or transforming social practice and social relations. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) aims to show how discourse shapes identities, social relations, knowledge and beliefs, and how power relations and power struggles shape and transform the discourse practices of a society or institution.

Fairclough's approach to discourse analysis draws on traditions in critical theory, highlighting the link between language and power. One of the strengths of Fairclough's framework for CDA is the interplay of micro and macro levels—emphasizing the importance of detailed linguistic analysis on a textual level, but also placing this description within a web of interpretation and explanation which assists in understanding the connections. The aim is 'to combine social relevance and textual specificity' (Fairclough, 1992, p. 100). The analysis moves back and forth between the general and the specific, linking the specific text with the underlying power structures in society through the discursive practices which constitute and are constituted by the text.

### An example: accidents

As an example, take the word 'accident' as used to refer to injuries and deaths at work.

'Accident' is a euphemism which does not directly refer to the resulting death or injury. It suggests a chance occurrence, an unfortunate mishap which is no one's fault. This use of the word 'accident' is so frequent that it is almost automatic. Yet this suggestion of a chance occurrence masks the fact that many workers are killed or injured as a result of a criminal act by the employer (Davis and Pless, 2001; Robertson, 2004). Every use of 'accident' for an injury or death at work reproduces, and strengthens in a small way, this conception of it as a random event. This discourages consideration of the causes of those deaths and injuries, suggesting that they are 'just one of those things'. The analysis seeks to make explicit the commonsense assumptions that underpin the use of this specific word, and to clarify whose interests these assumptions serve, how they come about, and how they are reproduced or challenged by discourse practices.

### Method: doing the analysis

Discourse analysis cannot be reduced to a set of procedures, and many leading critical discourse analysts are reluctant to describe a 'method' for doing CDA. Van Dijk (2002) stresses that CDA is a perspective rather than a method, while Fairclough (2002) has expressed reservations about the concept of method as 'a tool in a box of tools'. It is possible to go through the entire text looking for examples of particular linguistic features, or to code it in terms of topics—some discourse analysts work that way. But it may be more fruitful to select small samples for detailed analysis. The excerpts are selected so as to yield as much insight as possible into the question being investigated; Fairclough (1992) suggests concentrating on moments of crisis, contradictions, or sudden shifts of style.

The analysis, as carried out here, 'works' by asking questions, approaching the text in many ways, zooming in and out, moving between levels, trying various lenses or filters, forming impressions, counting words, reflecting, speculating, returning again and again to the text with different questions, with different aspects of the context in mind and asking: 'What is this all about?', 'What is going on?', 'What is the role of language

here?', 'Why do I react to this as I do?', 'What is implied here?', 'What is the background to this?', 'What is hidden or missing?', 'How could this be different?'. The analysis moves beyond the text itself in the interpretation and explanation of the text in its context. The analysis and comparison of other texts can be valuable in elucidating how discourses emerge and are disseminated across different social fields and at different social scales (Fairclough, 2005). However, the focus only on the two Respect for People reports was the only realistic option, given limited resources.

### Research validity

Critical discourse analysis makes no claim to absolute truth, or to objectivity; 'CDA is biased—and proud of it' (van Dijk, 2002, p. 96). The contention here is that no research can be neutral, apolitical and objective. Research that claims to be so often simply takes for granted and legitimizes existing power structures. As Seymour and Rooke (1995, p. 521) point out, 'The researcher's values are regarded as either irrelevant or self-evidently correct'. Yet researchers' own beliefs and values inevitably affect not only their choice of topics and approaches, but how they perceive them. Analysts have different experiences and different insights, and derive their analyses from different social theories; indeed part of the value of an analysis lies in that. Ward-Schofield (1993, p. 202, cited in Wainwright, 1997) writes (about the qualitative approach in general):

> The goal is not to produce a standardised set of results that any other careful researcher in the same situation or studying the same issues would have produced. Rather it is to produce a coherent and illuminating description of and perspective on a situation that is based on and consistent with detailed study of the situation.

The analysis must be grounded in the text and built on previous scholarship, but the interpretation will also be informed by the researcher's personal experience of construction. As Wood and Kroger (2000, p. 166) argue, the socially constructed nature of discourse means that it has shifting and multiple meanings, of which an analyst's account is only one version.

They contend that the key requirement is *demonstration*—'show[ing] the argument through presenting the steps in the analysis of excerpts rather than simply telling the reader about the argument and pointing to an excerpt as an illustration' (p. 166). A demonstration analysis is presented in the next section.

## Analysis

The analysis is divided into three sections, broadly corresponding to Norman Fairclough's framework for critical discourse analysis, which sees discourse as composed of text, interaction, and context, and the corresponding three dimensions of analysis as *description, interpretation* and *explanation* (Fairclough, 1989, 1992). In practice, though, the three cannot be completely separated, and description inevitably shades into interpretation in order to make sense of a text.

> What one "sees" in a text, what one regards as worth describing, and what one chooses to emphasise in a description, are all dependent on how one interprets a text. (Fairclough, 1989, p. 27)

## Description

The texts are formal reports, written in a low-key, factual style and a fairly formal, authoritative tone. The use of KPIs and statistics enhances credibility by emphasizing objectivity (van Dijk, 2000), and the use of a linear, 'logical', coherent structure ending with 'next steps' can also be seen as part of an Enlightenment 'grand narrative' of continuous improvement. The authors[3] are industry leaders and 'experts' claiming the right to speak for, and to, the construction industry in reports. Their 'discursive legitimacy' (Hardy and Phillips, 1998) affects the interpretation, acceptance, meaning and impact of the text.

### Respect for people—people 'our biggest asset'

Respect is a central concept in these reports—and indeed in New Labour's wider political project. Kant was the first Western philosopher to put respect for persons at the centre of moral philosophy, arguing that human beings must be respected as ends in themselves. Humans, as rational beings who are capable of moral agency, have an intrinsic value. Our most fundamental moral obligation is to respect persons in virtue of their dignity as ends in themselves: 'the duty of respect is the duty not to degrade others to the status of mere means to my ends' (Kant, 1997, pp. 449–50). This view has become a core ideal of modern humanism. It can be counterposed to Hobbes' view (1958, p. 79) that 'the value or worth of a man is, as of all other things, his price'. The view that a person's value is the same as their 'price' (what someone is willing to pay for their work) is expressed in the concept of people as a 'resource' or 'asset', which implicitly endorses an instrumentalist view in which it is acceptable to treat human beings as means rather than ends.

The first report is entitled *A Commitment to People 'Our Biggest Asset'*, and the concept of people as assets recurs throughout the text. Conceptualizing people as an asset (or referring to 'investing in people', 'human

capital', 'human resources', etc.) encourages people to be seen in economically instrumental terms—it is a discourse of accountancy.[4] According to Green (2002, p. 150):

> Even supposedly enlightened practices such as partnering and TQM are ultimately judged in accordance with their contribution to efficiency. Employees are continually conceptualised as cogwheels in a remorseless machine. In the UK construction industry, utilitarian instrumentalism reigns supreme.

The instrumental reasoning and objectification of people implied by the use of 'people as assets' in the report reflect (and are reflected in) the common construction industry practice of referring to bricklayers as 'trowels' and construction workers in general as 'bodies'. The older use of 'hands' which Marx so objected to also survives in expressions such as 'chargehand'. The word 'employment'—literally *using*—is completely naturalized. Yet when construction workers are often seen as a variable cost rather than a valuable resource, the 'people as assets' discourse comes across as progressive. And each time it is used it reproduces and strengthens (by a miniscule amount) the instrumental view of people.

### The business case for respecting people and the discourse of enterprise

Each section of the first RfP report (diversity, site facilities, health, safety, career development, off-site facilities) has an introduction explaining the scope of the theme, then the 'business case' for why firms should take action. Typical statements about the 'business case' are:

> A clear business case has been established for Respect for People. Respect for People is not altruism; it adds significantly to the performance of projects and companies. (p. 4)

> Improving the industry's respect for people is not a high-minded aspiration; it is a business necessity. (p. 9)

> There are good business reasons for looking after people. (p. 9)

The implication is that 'altruism' (or moral/ethical belief) is not a good or sufficient reason for making changes. If respect for people were *only* a 'high-minded aspiration' without 'good business reasons', then it would not, seemingly, be justified. Respect for people is considered only from the economic point of view, not the social, cultural, moral and political. The primacy of profitability is taken completely for granted, and the present economic structure of the industry is viewed as a given 'state of nature', ignoring the continuing political battles that shape it, and the way in which this structural view is based on free-market ideology (Shrivastava, 1986). This also means that the possibility is not considered that to really achieve respect for people, major changes in the construction industry, in the organization of work, and in the wider society, would be required.

The use of 'business case' makes reference to the discourse of enterprise, which became widespread during the 1980s and has continued to gain ground since. During the 1980s and 1990s there were many inter-related changes in markets, technologies, employment practices and ideologies. What is important here is the specifically discursive element of this 'enterprise culture'. Enterprise culture is described by Legge (1995, p. 83) as pervaded by 'individualistic values (and anti-union bias)'. According to du Gay and Salaman (1998, p. 59) the language of the market has become 'the only valid vocabulary of moral and social calculation'. Thus, it is now 'common sense' that those unfairly excluded from employment should be expected to show that it would be in the employers' financial interest to stop discriminating against them.[5]

## Interpretation: contradictions and power struggles in producing the text

This section of the analysis considers the *process* of producing the text, and corresponds to what Fairclough calls interpretation. As it is not possible to observe the production of the text, the analyst must try to trace it from signs in the text, reconstructing power struggles within the working party where conflicting voices can be detected in contradictions or sudden shifts of style. In this process of interpretation, the analyst must draw upon her own 'insider's knowledge' of the construction sector; as Fairclough (1989) points out, what the analyst does is not essentially different from what the user of the text does—though more theoretically informed and systematic. This is merely one of many possible interpretations.

The texts were produced by a working group whose members represented various interests and points of view within the industry, such as clients as against contractors, contractors as against consultants, or trade unions as against employers. Industry bodies such as the CIB, M$^4$I, Construction Clients' Forum, and Construction Confederation were well represented, as were the big contractors, and government bodies such as DETR, OGC and DTI. Clients, consultants and trade unions were also accounted for on the working group. There were, however, few members from the small firms that make up most of the industry, and minimal representation of employees. There were no representatives of 'civil society' or those who suffer the

construction industry's externalities, no one from equal opportunity organizations, and no representative of the public sector as employer of construction workers.

## Power in discourse and power behind discourse

The power relations between the members of the working groups at the situational level reflect and draw on their power at the institutional and societal levels—they are there *because* they have that power, but will use the situation to reinforce their power and their power to influence the situation. Fairclough (1992) suggests that the discursive context allows some actors to exercise power as a result of the position they occupy in the field and their access to resources such as money, rewards, sanctions, information, credibility, expertise and their political access. Participants may also be powerful through social relationships that confer the ability to mobilize economic, social and cultural capital (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Green (1998) describes the rhetoric propagated through construction industry bodies by a few powerful individuals as shaping the reality of the UK construction industry. Discourse is both the site of power struggles and the stake in power struggles.

No one is 'against' Respect for People, but each interest group will strive to (re)define it in their own way. There will be struggles for control over the meaning of respect, diversity, safety, etc. as each participant or group seeks to dominate the definition of what it means to respect people, using the term strategically to impose their view. Various groups share interpretations, and form shifting coalitions on different issues. The struggle over meanings within the working party is part of wider power struggles over conditions of work. For example, the construction trade unions are trying to use the perceived situation of skills shortages to get better conditions for their members; from their point of view the struggles over the production of this text form part of that struggle. Discourse defines what counts as work, what are acceptable conditions for doing it, who does what type of work and so on—and this text contributes to recreating that discourse. These power relations and power struggles on the drafting committees will have influenced the process of producing the text. There are likely to be elements of conscious obfuscation, mystification, or representation of a particular view in the text (strategies such as credibility enhancement, rhetorical effects aimed at producing an impression of objectivity, persuasion, legitimation, and so on), and these will depend on the balance of power between the participants. However, many other elements are not the subject of overt struggle because they have become naturalized; they are seen as common sense by all or almost all the participants and thus not seen as ideological or as representing the position of those with most power. This might include, for example, the shared storyline that the Respect for People initiative is 'a good thing' for both firms and employees.

## Conflicting voices in the text

Many parts of the reports do read smoothly, telling a coherent 'story', but there are points where it is possible to detect traces in the text of struggles between differing discourses and ideologies. The analysis here focuses on parts of the text where there seem to be contradictions, moments of crisis, sudden shifts of style (Fairclough, 1992, p. 230). These contradictions could be indications of different voices speaking, representing the different interests involved in producing the text, the outcome of power politics on the drafting committees. Two examples are given:

(1) Poor record or poor reputation?
(2) Business case or 'business case'?

*Poor record or poor reputation?*

The following paragraph from the introduction to the first report seems to show signs of having been stitched together from disparate parts:

> Unfortunately, the industry's record on people issues is poor despite the efforts of a number of firms who have already made significant improvements. Reports from trade unions about breaches of employment law and the lack of basic employment rights add further weight to the need for action. The situation has also been exacerbated by a reliance on temporary agency labour and self-employment. This perception of the industry is seriously damaging its image and reputation, and is discouraging potential recruits of all abilities from joining or remaining within it. This has led to a skills shortage. (RfP, 2000, p. 6)

The traces of a power struggle can be detected, and it seems from the way the final text is phrased that the employers had the upper hand. It is stated categorically as fact that 'a number of firms have made significant improvements', whereas the breaches of employment law are only 'reports' from trade unions, and all this is a 'perception' of the industry. Nevertheless, this is the only overt mention of employers breaking the law, and the only point in the text where the use of temporary agency labour and self-employment is mentioned as problematic[6]—so it appears that the trade unions were able to insist on this being included at least once. What follows is pure speculation, to demonstrate the process which *may* have led to the production of this passage:

*TUs* The industry's record on people issues is poor.
*Employers* Some firms have made significant improvements.

*TUs* There's no employment rights; employers are breaking the law.
*Employers* That's what you trade unions *say*.

*TUs* It's all caused by reliance on agency workers and self-employment.
*Employers* That's just your perception.

*TUs* Construction's poor record is discouraging potential recruits.
*Employers* Construction's poor image is discouraging potential recruits.

*Employers* What we're concerned about is the skills shortage.
*TUs* We can agree on that.

*Business case or 'business case'?*

The concept of 'business case' could be said to have become part of the *zeitgeist*. However, it is still contested in some quarters, particularly the trade unions. The interdiscursive context here shows the unions quite consciously resisting the ideology carried by this new language (from a magazine produced by the TUC):

> Basically protecting workers health is a moral issue. It is wrong to kill and maim people. This is nothing to do with the fact that employers may, or may not, save money by not injuring us. [The 'business case' argument] gives the wrong messages to employers who have a duty to take action where there is a risk … (Robertson, 2004, pp. 6–7)

The traces of one small contribution to this struggle can be identified in a paragraph about lifelong learning on page 32 of the RfP 2000 report:

> Employers and individuals need to see the value of engaging in the process: there must be a perceived gain in making the investment in learning. This is often referred to as the 'business case' …

This seemed to 'read' differently from the rest. On analysis, it is the only place in the report where 'business case' is in 'scare quotes'. The use of scare quotes implies 'this is not my term'. It may be used to distance the writer from the terminology in question, calling attention to the use of jargon or slang, or to a neologism or metaphor. It is also used to express disapproval, irony or scepticism. In this case it seems to shows resistance being expressed, presumably by the trade unions—the phrase is felt to be part of someone else's discourse. However, the other 22 uses of 'business case' in the report take it completely for granted, thus reproducing the instrumentalism which it expresses, drawing on the discourse of enterprise and thus reproducing it, contributing to the naturalization of the concept.

## Explanation: why Respect for People, why now?

This section investigates the reasons why the RfP reports, and the respect for people discourse, were produced at a particular historical juncture, in a particular cultural and political context, and also what effects they might have. This broadly corresponds to the explanatory moment of Fairclough's framework for analysis (though with some elements of interpretation). Seeing discourse as social practice requires reference beyond the text in question to the broader discourse in which it is embedded—the interdiscursive and social context. In addition to 'members' resources'[7] and 'factual' sources such as Hansard, this section returns to the literature. This iteration between empirical data (in this case, the texts) and theory recalls the 'contextualist' approach described by Green *et al.* (2009). Knowledge of existing literatures shapes the initial explanations, but also tentative explanations emerging from studying the texts cause fresh theoretical perspectives to be mobilized.

### Labour/skill shortages

The RfP reports were set in a context of increasing labour or skills shortages. Government policies to encourage more young people to stay in education were causing a significant decline in the traditional source of construction recruitment (boys leaving school at 16), and applications for construction degrees had fallen dramatically. The original Egan report (Egan, 1998) had been commissioned by a new Labour government concerned that the construction industry might not have the capacity to deliver the new buildings it required. In the late 1990s, construction had recovered from recession, but many of those who had been forced to leave the industry never returned. There was a construction boom in Ireland, and the return home of many Irish building workers was contributing to a severe shortage of skilled labour in the UK. The overt or ostensible reason behind the Respect for People initiative, then, was simply the need to attract and retain people to work in construction.

But the 'problem' (for employers) of skills shortages presented an opportunity for others. As McCabe (2007, p. 301) argues,

> respect for people may be viewed as an attempt to redress what employers see as the shift in power to construction workers whose skills are currently in short supply.

The Respect for People initiative can be thus be seen as a response to possible increases in construction employees' and trade union power brought about by skill shortages and an increased workload, as well as a more direct response to the shortages themselves.

With the benefit of a little hindsight, it now seems that, as there was no underpinning moral or ethical commitment to 'respecting people',[8] the enthusiasm for change has evaporated as soon as the economic downturn undermined the 'business case' of pure expediency. Indeed, even before the present recession, an alternative became available in the form of East European workers, obviating the need to pay higher wages and to improve conditions. Nevertheless, *some* of those involved (most obviously the unions) were doubtless hoping that genuine and lasting changes could be brought about, using the leverage of scarcity.

## Pre-empting regulation?

An important part of the historical context of the first report was that the new government had recently passed the Working Time Regulations and the Employment Relations Act. There had been some moves to change the regulation of construction self-employment. Deaths on site were rising (by 26% in 1999/2000 and another 31% in 2000/2001 (HSE, 2001)), leading to great concern, and there was talk of legislation on corporate killing. It can be suggested that in this context, construction employers were keen to forestall possible legislation on health and safety, employment protection, or equal opportunity by showing that they were taking action voluntarily. (Or at least by appearing to do so, using Respect for People as a screen.) It seems that much of the purpose of Respect for People is to convince people that the industry can regulate itself.

However, the construction employers' fears of regulation were not realized. The government too was keen to show that 'something was being done'. As soon as the first report was published, it was used by the government to defuse criticism and demands for action from its own backbenchers. This is shown in a Commons Adjournment debate on the employment conditions of construction workers, where Mr Jonathan Shaw MP said:

> The central issue surrounding conditions of employment is that of bogus self-employment—a system that enables contractors, and, more commonly, subcontractors, to fiddle tax and prevent workers enjoying basic rights such as paid leave, paid breaks and representation by a trade union … a fragmented, casualised work force … are experiencing something unique: an increase in recorded accidents and fatalities in a particular industry. (Shaw, Hansard, 2000, Col. 189WH)

In reply, Ms Beverley Hughes MP referred to the RfP report published the previous day, spoke of the 'business case' for improving working conditions (voluntarily), and assured Mr Shaw that the rethinking construction agenda would:

> promote good conditions, training and a long-term partner relationship between contractors and clients. (Hughes, Hansard, 2000, Col. 195WH)

It was becoming evident that the government too was committed to voluntarism and deregulation. The 'third way', an updated unitary perspective based upon a 'mutual gains' model and concepts of partnership, was reliant upon a lightly regulated labour market (Smith and Morton, 2006).

## Changes in prevailing rhetoric and social attitudes

Discourse both shapes and is shaped by situations, institutions and structures, in a dialectical relationship (Fairclough, 2001). The respect for people discourse is both a response to the *zeitgeist* but also an attempt to influence it. Clegg *et al.* (2001, p. 32) describe 'business paradigms', the changing discourses which business people use to legitimate management action, as being 'not only of rhetorical significance but also of practical relevance in the way that businesses are run'. The meaning given to concepts such as work, management, efficiency, quality, innovation and knowledge shapes relationships and procedures in organizations, as well as affecting what is considered morally acceptable, although 'No necessary relation exists between the words and the deeds' (ibid.). The RfP (2000) document can be seen both as a response to an emerging new business paradigm (after the change of government in 1997) and as contributing to the creation of that new paradigm. Social attitudes to the acceptability of sex and race discrimination or of deaths and injuries at work were perhaps perceived to be changing. It seems that the rhetoric of 'respect for people' and of people as assets resonated more with New Labour's 'new language' than with the ideology of the previous government, more inclined to perceive labour as a variable cost. Fairclough (2000, p. 49) cites (then) Education Minister David Blunkett describing education as 'investment in human capital'. New Labour often use the discourse of enterprise ('business case', 'entrepreneurship', 'competition', etc.), but have refashioned it, combining it with elements of other discourses such as fairness and social justice. The close inter-relationship between government discourse and respect for people discourse is demonstrated by the way in which a phrase from a speech by the (then) Minister for Construction:

> Improving the industry's record on respect for people is not just a high-minded aspiration—it has become an industry necessity. (Raynsford, speech at the CIB in 1999)

is closely echoed in the first Respect for People report:

> Improving the industry's respect for people is not a high-minded aspiration; it is a business necessity. (RfP, 2000, p. 9)

Note, however, the difference in meaning given by the omission of 'just'. According to the government discourse, Respect for People is *both* a high-minded aspiration and a business necessity, though with the emphasis on the latter. In the discourse expressed in the RfP text, Respect for People is *not* a high-minded aspiration.

### Containment: preventing 'coagulation of class-consciousness'

Burrell and Morgan (1979) contrast consensus and conflict theories of society and organizations. Consensus or regulation theories assume society and organizations are characterized by order; conflict is a pathological state or a temporary (if sometimes necessary) way of re-establishing consensus. Conflict or radical change theories assume society and organizations are characterized by conflict and pressure for change—the appearance of order and consensus are due to suppression or indoctrination. Recurrent conflict is due to structural contradictions such as the private appropriation of wealth produced by employees' labour (according to the radical structuralists) or is due to contradictions within consciousness such as oppression and alienation (according to the radical humanists).

From this point of view, Respect for People can be seen as an agenda for suppressing conflict by 'managing the ambiguities arising from the contradictions of capitalism and patriarchy' (Legge, 1995). It is a way of defusing critique, accommodating it, thus facilitating the continuation of social and economic inequality. Popular ideas about fairness and 'respect for people' may be drawn upon and even credited with a certain legitimacy while being *contained within* the dominant discourse. There is an element of concession, but the advance is contained within limits. Proposing change on the basis of a 'business case' is a double-edged sword, containing any advances within the limits of what is profitable. Noon (2007) explores the potential dangers of the business case approach to the employment of ethnic minorities, making the 'right' to fair treatment contingent upon an economic rationale which ignores concerns for social justice or moral legitimacy. There may be cases where it is in firms' economic interest to discriminate. Similarly Davis (2004), points out that there are many situations where safety does *not* pay (because victims, their families and the state bear the costs of injury and ill-health). The economic argument on safety also means the rational employer will prioritize avoiding the accidents that cost the firm most, rather than those with the greatest risks to workers' health and safety. From the specifically discursive point of view, the danger of the 'business case' approach is that in ignoring the moral argument for social justice, it reproduces the idea that it is normal to use the language of economic calculation when talking about human beings. Respect for People takes a 'progressive' view of people as a resource rather than a cost, but in doing so it reproduces an instrumental view of people.

What is being pre-empted here is not just increased regulation, or workers voting with their feet and finding alternative work, or the threat of increased power by workers, but the threat of increased class consciousness by workers (Fairclough, 1989, pp. 195–6). Respect for People does not propose a fairer and more humane economic system; it proposes to provide just enough relief from poor working conditions to prevent the 'coagulation of class consciousness'. Thus, the Respect for People initiative plays a role in masking awareness of divergent interests between employers and employees, and helps to re-conceal the fundamental violence of the labour contract, which may be laid bare by injuries and deaths at work, or when competition or recession demand the disposal of labour. To express this same point in a more humanist way, the threat to the construction employers is people thinking for themselves and becoming aware of 'what is really going on'. Apparently well-intentioned attempts to improve 'respect for people' may only serve to cover the inequalities in power between those who work for construction firms and those who own and run construction firms. There is an underlying contradiction between the market status of labour as a disposable commodity and its status as a 'valued human resource' (Willmott, 1993, p. 532). This contradiction can be managed as long as the realities of the market relationship are obscured; the essential role of the respect for people discourse is mystification.

To sum up, the emergence of the respect for people discourse served the needs of construction's dominant coalition in several ways. It was both a direct response to the need to recruit and retain more workers, and a response to possible increases in construction workers' bargaining power under conditions of scarcity. Construction employers' fear of regulation following the change of government coincided, it seems, with the government's own need for arguments to avoid being pushed into regulation. This was interconnected with responding to changes to the prevailing discourse, and attempting to influence that discourse. Finally, there was the employers' need to mask power relations and

prevent construction workers' seeing themselves in terms of conflicting interests. The aim is to overcome recruitment difficulties and head off regulation or collective action by workers: *either* by making just enough concessions, *or* simply by having the working party and producing the document, convincing people that 'something is being done' without actually needing to change anything. The velvet glove of respect for people covers the iron fist of instrumental rationality.

## Conclusion

If the appropriation of the concept of 'respect' by the construction industry were consciously mere fiction, then critical analysis could simply reveal the lies by comparing what is said with what is done, and studies of discourse would be unnecessary. However, the manifestations of power in language use are more subtle and difficult to expose than the image of the outright lie suggests. Ideology is most effective when its workings are hidden, and to some extent the process may be hidden even from the text producers. Yet people are not simply dupes. Watson (1995) stresses the way in which discourses function as menus of discursive resources which are available to individuals, and Hardy *et al.* (2000) describe a model of how discourse can be mobilized as a strategic resource. Discourse is a resource which can more easily be made use of by the dominant group, but the respect for people discourse can also be taken up by individuals and coalitions within organizations. It can be drawn on, transformed, and integrated into other discourses. In the same way, individual organizations' own policy statements (on diversity or safety for example) which may be 'meant' as empty rhetoric can be drawn on as a resource by employees. The publication of the RfP reports gives the ideas a certain authority and legitimacy, both by the status of the reports themselves and by the persuasiveness of its 'business case' arguments. This can be drawn on by those trying to advance agendas such as improving working conditions or moving towards gender equality, just as it is drawn on to mystify and legitimize existing power relations. The inherent contradictions, dilemmas and tensions within the ideology present opportunities for resistance, as well as repression.

This paper has tried to demonstrate by an analysis of the Respect for People discourse that critical discourse analysis can offer an illuminating perspective on an issue of interest within the field of construction management. CDA takes an overtly critical view, and might be criticized for being one-sided or biased. However, it has been argued that all research is, in this sense, 'biased', that is, it is not value-free. All research paradigms are based on assumptions and all have limitations. Although no claim is made that this is a 'better' research perspective, the critical approach contributes to knowledge by providing a different viewpoint to a debate on construction industry issues. The way things are now is often taken for granted, thus implicitly supporting existing power structures. The development of a critical perspective would provide different insights and help to correct the imbalance that currently exists. The role of discourse in construction remains largely unexplored and thus there are wide-ranging possibilities for research using critical discourse analysis.

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## Notes

1. Lean construction seems perhaps at odds with the concept of Respect for People, but the same contradiction can be seen in Egan's revival of Jaguar—based both on promoting the educational standards of employees, and on reducing their number.
2. There is, of course, no question of suggesting that power is *only* a matter of language. Other forms of power, including economic coercion, remain important, but in modern society power is increasingly exercised through the ideological workings of language.
3. Membership of the working group is discussed in the next section.
4. Compare with the growth of a technocratic audit culture which attempts to measure the 'value' of everything through KPIs, etc., thus deflecting attention from issues of defining value and purpose.
5. The 'business case' approach was the basis of both the 'Opportunity 2000' programme to improve women's employment, and the CRE's 'Racial Equality Standard' (Duncan *et al.*, 2002).
6. Self-employment is otherwise an 'elephant in the room' throughout this report, as its possible influence on issues such as health, safety and training is never mentioned.
7. In this case the analysis is informed by the author's 25 years' experience in construction. Fairclough (1989, p. 167) makes the point that 'the analyst must draw upon her own "members' resources" (interpretative procedures) in order to explain how participants draw on theirs. The analysis of discourse processes is necessarily an "insider's" or a member's task'.

8. 'Improving the industry's respect for people is not a high-minded aspiration; it is a business necessity' (RfP, 2000, p. 9).

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