

***Homelessness Constructions in Johannesburg Inner-City: Questions of Power,
Human Dignity and Social Justice***

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Abstract

This paper draws from my doctoral research on homelessness in Johannesburg Inner-City, aiming at developing understandings of how homelessness was socially constructed in South Africa - using Social Constructivism as an explanatory conceptual framework. My point of departure is that homelessness in South Africa is a problem for the government and civil society, an issue of enormous dimensions deeply inter-related with questions of power, the economy, human dignity, and social justice. I argue that there are at least two discourses on homelessness in South Africa: the official/ public and the hidden. To underline my claims, the central point about Social Constructionists, the *how* and *what* including the concepts 'Unmasking Constructionism' and 'looping effect of interactive kinds' are engaged using, mainly, Ian Hacking's (2000), The social construction of what?

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Introduction

This paper draws from my doctoral research on homelessness constructions in Johannesburg Inner-City, aiming at developing understandings of how homelessness was socially constructed in South Africa. I would like to use Hacking's (2000) perspective as a key to explore *Homelessness Constructions in Johannesburg Inner City* and engage Social Constructivism as an explanatory conceptual framework. In this discussion I give the reader a sense of the history and how homelessness plays itself out in South Africa. This is in preparation for the subsequent discussion in the section on Social Constructivism as explanatory conceptual framework. In that discussion I present and discuss the concepts 'Unmasking Constructionism' and 'looping effect of interactive kinds' in relation to South Africa's homelessness discourse.

Using my introduction as the basis, my presentation and discussion will include the following:

Hacking's concepts of gradations of Constructionists commitment, namely, Historical, Ironic, Reformists, Unmasking, Rebellious and Revolutionary (ibid: 19-20). In this discussion, I argue why I chose the concept 'Unmasking' initially, instead of 'Revolutionary' for example. Also, I explain how Hacking's ideas on '*Unmasking*' are different from other conceptions of unmasking. Additionally, I present and discuss Hacking's ideas of '*looping effect of interactive kinds*', including how I could possibly apply them in my doctoral research and beyond.

My point of departure is that homelessness in South Africa is a problem for the government and civil society: an issue of enormous dimensions which is deeply inter-related with questions of power, the economy, human dignity and social justice (Daya and Wilkins, 2012; Morrow, 2010; Naidoo, 2010; Cosser, 2000; Constitution, 1996). To underline this claim, Morrow (2010: 61), aptly notes that 'Any attempt to confront homelessness in contemporary South Africa must start with a sober recognition of the formidable, many-faceted and historically rooted nature of the problem'. The tone of the above-cited studies goes to show that many researchers agree that there are many different dimensions of South African homelessness, with regard to actual living situations, how homelessness is experienced and grappled with, in my opinion.

In this paper I argue that, essentially, and as a basic human right guaranteed by the South African Constitution, Act 106 of 1996, everyone in South Africa must be enabled to put down roots in safe, affordable homes in viable communities on land with secure tenure (cf. Cosser, 2000; Constitution, 1996). This notion is captured by (Cosser, 2000, p.1), who observes that 'Homelessness is about lack of safety, secure land tenure, affordability, and rootedness'. What is concerning is that where street homelessness is concerned, some government-commissioned studies reveal that the situation is worsening. 'Street homelessness sits at a chokepoint for metropolitan city regions' development planning, and is set to increase as recessionary unemployment rises. The problem cannot be ignored in a developmental South Africa' (Cross and Seager, 2010, p.157).

Additionally, (Phiri and Perron, 2012, p.161) maintain that, 'while change in the socio-political context in South Africa since 1994 has brought positive change in the lives of millions, chronic street-dweller homelessness, particularly in the Inner City

of Johannesburg remains a compelling problem'. And to emphasize the extent and serious nature of homelessness in South Africa, (Cosser, 2000, p.1) asserts that

'Homelessness affects both those who have homes and those who do not. It is an issue at the heart of society and, most certainly at the heart of the Church. People cannot live out their God-gives ability and responsibility of being fully human without homes; nor, without homes, can they be fully useful and productive members of society and the economy. Neither rands nor dollars, politicians nor clerics, slogans nor policies, alone can redress the current situation. This is because homelessness is a complex reality concerning the processes, structures and values in our society'.

Moreover, according to (Cross, Seager, Erasmus, Ward and Donovan, 2010, p.5) 'homelessness on the streets in South Africa is a slow moving tragedy that arouses anxiety in government and civil society'. With the latter notion in mind, I assert that although most researchers agree that homelessness and street homelessness in particular is a social problem in South Africa, some of them make wrong conclusions, claiming that homelessness is attributed to individual or personal deficiencies including poverty (cf. Daya and Wilkins, 2012; Naidoo, 2010; Cross et al., 2010; Cross and Seager, 2010). This perspective situates the causes of homelessness in South Africa at a personal level, calling for micro-level interventions, which in my view run the risk of not being sustainable. This perspective is mistaken, ill-informed and too simplistic - and at best, lacks depth, in my opinion. Instead, I argue, homelessness as a social problem in South Africa is systemic in its very nature; and therefore macro-level policy interventions seem more appropriate. Also, recognizing homelessness as a social justice issue and developing a National Action Plan seems to be a reasonable starting point in my opinion.

Furthermore, I argue that there are at least two discourses on homelessness in South Africa: (1) the official/ public and (2) the hidden one, also known as the 'peoples history'. The latter mirrors an active protest against the official version. To demonstrate this active protest in their everyday life, it is common knowledge in South Africa that the street homeless people have from time immemorial invented an emancipatory language called 'tsotsitaal' or code language. This is meant to keep 'outsiders' forever puzzled at their mannerism.

Given South Africa's legislated violence-rigged past, I argue, homelessness is a compelling problem; and intervention initiatives that consider criminalizing homelessness (micro-level) as an option are mistaken and ill-informed, and in essence undermine the Spirit of *Ubuntu* (humaneness) and the eight *Batho Pele* (People First) *Principles* meant to demonstrate a caring, accessible and accountable public service in South Africa. (Phiri, 2008, p. IV) defines *Ubuntu* as

'A social and locally (South African) constructed concept for an expressed community inspired spirit, coupled with appropriate corporate action, motivated by fundamental human needs of the individual member(s) with an end to sharing what little resources there are'.

The following South African eight *Batho Pele Principles* are a strategy to kick start the transformation of public service delivery, and are applied to demonstrate a caring accessible and accountable service; namely, consultation, service standards, access,

courtesy, information, openness, transparency and redress (Department of Public Service and Administration, 1997).

With these insights in mind, I argue that the phenomenon of homelessness in South Africa with its multi-dimensional aspects is a depiction of human nature and as such it needs to be perceived and engaged as a special interest for social work education - given that mainly, social work as an applied social science concerns itself with people and how they interact with their respective varied environments.

Historical overview of homelessness constructions in South Africa

In this paper, I claim that homelessness constructions and the attendant discourse or roots in South Africa may be traced from three historical contexts (1) The Pre-colonial (1652), (2) Colonial and (3) The Transition to Democracy (1994) and beyond. My argument is that the historical process, as it is interpreted today, whereby cattle, pastor lands and property previously owned by indigenous Africans, stolen through a series of legislated processes, the displacements and evictions of many often resulting in death to both people and their livestock constitutes the overarching character of the South African homelessness constructions. This is how homelessness was socially constructed in South Africa, in my opinion. Furthermore, I argue that the socially constructed ancient concept of *Ubuntu* and the *Batho Pele Principles* are particularly relevant concepts to elucidate these claims.

The history of homelessness in South Africa is multi-faceted. And to emphasize this claim, (Cross et al., 2010, p.13-14) argue that

‘from the date when the Cape’s Vagrancy and Squatting Act of 1878 legislation was passed, all the colonies tried to force the wondering homeless ‘vagrant’ into resident labourer status. By the early twentieth century, the problem of squatting and displacement was enormous. Thus, as numbers increased, the homeless rural population gravitated to the towns in search of work to substitute for the land-based livelihoods to which they no longer had access’.

The outcomes in terms of street-dweller homelessness are not well known and statistics were never kept on ‘vagrants’ or the ‘floating population without shelter’ (Cross et al., 2010; UN Centre for Human Settlements, 2001). Given these insights, in this paper, I maintain that homelessness in South Africa is a compelling problem, and that there is an urgent need to develop a series of collaborative and complementary programs aimed at ‘Unmasking’ the official discourse.

Social Constructionism as explanatory conceptual framework

The central point about Social Constructionists: the how and why

According to (Hacking, 2000, p.50) the central point about Social Constructionists is the *how* and *why*. The preceding sections of this discussion was aimed at explain *how* homelessness was socially constructed in South Africa. In that discussion, my argument is that the overarching character of the South African history is how cattle and pastor lands previously owned by indigenous Africans were stolen through a

series of legislated processes, the displacements and evictions of many often resulting in death to both people and their livestock. For the *why* part, I argue that homelessness in South Africa is a problem for the government and civil society. I cited South African studies (among others) to underline my claims and why, in my opinion, homelessness in South Africa is an issue of enormous dimensions deeply inter-related with questions of power, the economy, social justice and human dignity.

The notion I am seeking to '*Unmask*' in this discussion, in some ways, is that the official/ public discourse of homelessness constructions preferred by the government of the day was 'a made up lie' used as a strategy to displace, evict and forcefully remove indigenous people from the land they legitimately owned before Jan van Riebeck and company ever set their feet on South African soil. This explains the reason why the South African government is currently embarking on a mission to re-write the history of South Africa (www.SAHO.co.za).

Building Constructionists argument: homelessness Constructions in South Africa

Constructionists concern themselves with the Construction of reality and social problems. Their primary focus is examining *how* typifications of social problems and processes proceed and *why* they take the form they do. They examine the warrants upon which typifications are constructed and accumulated over time. In the context of this discussion, Constructionism refers to the claims making process; *how* claims makers in South Africa know what they claim to know about homelessness as a social problem. To explain the criteria for building Constructionists argument, (Hacking, 2000, p.50) holds that 'Anything worth calling a Construction has to have a history. But not just any history. It has to be 'a history of building'. In this discussion I engage this notion to explain my understanding of the 'two discourses' on homelessness in South Africa, and how they each have their respective histories, namely, the official/ public and the hidden one.

Highlights and perceptions of the official discourse of homelessness in South Africa

Mainly, the official/ public discourse was popularized, incorporated into the curriculum of all South African schools and presented to the general public (national and international) as an official government version during the pre-colonial (1652), the colonial and Apartheid dispensations. The overarching theme of the official/ public discourse is that the South African history starts in the year 1652 when Jan van Riebeck and company from Netherlands, Germany and France (calling themselves Afrikaners because they did not have a common nationality) – 'discovered' Cape Town (called Cape Colony at the time), and by implication, owned the entire Colony including all the properties, pasture land, and livestock. In this discourse version, virtually nothing is mentioned of the indigenous people (mainly, the Koi and the San tribes) - and *how* and when they, being foreigners, acquired the untold wealth they claimed as their own.

At the time, mainly, the Koi and the San were the indigenous people of the Cape Colony area the Afrikaners first occupied, and according to this official/ public discourse, all indigenous Africans were illiterate and knew nothing about land ownership, property and livestock issues. They were taught by 'Afrikaners' that White people are born superior than indigenous Africans and as such the latter were

to forever remain servants/ slaves to their ‘racially superior’ masters. They were barbaric and would amount to nothing in life; that is what they were made to believe. Those that were courageous enough to stage a protest against the status quo were literally killed, period. Thankfully, those that survived obliged, under duress though, hence in South Africa today, it is common knowledge that protests of different kinds were recorded and archived. This includes, a collection of poems and ‘tsotsitaal’ (protest/ code language) which is still a huge part of the world of the homeless people today (www.tsotsitaal.wikipedia.com).

The pre-colonial cutting of ties with particular areas through a systematically legislated process of ‘forced removals and land dispossessions by Afrikaners’ has been a traumatic experience for the majority of indigenous South Africans. This assertion has been adequately summarized by (Patel, 2005, p.67) who maintains that

‘The foundation of racial discrimination, denigration of indigenous ways, paternalism in social services and the distorted nature of social welfare policies favoring whites as the welfare elite, were laid during colonial times...Colonialism imposed enormous social changes on traditional societies, but no responsibility was taken for the social costs of such large scale social disruptions’.

On a more positive note though, the current Constitution has clear-cut guidelines on the question of Homelessness Constructions, and it is the implementation part that seems to pose a problem for the government. Section 26 of the Bill of Rights states ‘Everyone has the right to have access to adequate housing’. Given the latter insights and the plethora of information geared at ‘*Unmasking*’ the official discourse on Homelessness Constructions currently available from different sources including South African History Online (www.SAHO.co.za), these multiple empirical evidence depict how homelessness was socially constructed in South Africa.

Perceptions of official and hidden discourses: Reactions from concerned South African social workers and Higher Education Institutions

Regarding the two discourses of our history, social workers have been reminiscing about their implications for the present and future of social work education and the practice of the profession in South Africa. Moreover, making a case for the need for social workers to be politically informed, I would like to cite issues, concerns and debates that social work research-practitioners are grappling with in a Post- 1994 dispensation. Scholars engaged with social work education and research often have debates around what is perceived as a Euro-centric (as opposed to an Afro-centric) bias in social work research, literature and education in South Africa. They highlight denigration of indigenous ways, racism in social services and the distorted nature of social welfare policies favoring whites as the welfare elite – and how all these were laid during colonial times (Freedman and Couchonmal, 2006; Patel, 2005; Sewpaul and Holscher cited in Holscher 2008, 2004). Meaning, these issues, they aptly observe, continue to be inculcated in respective social work curriculums and that social work literature and the attendant research rarely provides examples that adequately mirror the Pre-colonial and colonial past.

Higher Education Institutions are no exception in this regard. Today, debates are commonplace in Education Management and Policy Studies circles. Schoole (2013, p.7), justifiably observes,

‘Universities have the responsibility of creating the capacity for sustainable development and democratization of knowledge which is key to the advancement of democracy. The omission of African perspective by our education system in general, and universities in particular, has contributed to the Afro-pessimism that is prevalent in South Africa [Higher Education Institutions]. It is time for South African Schools and universities to educate the whole child and embrace knowledge systems that include appreciation and advancement of our Africanness in this increasingly globalized world’.

Fixing my gaze on sustainable solutions, and for social work education part, I argue, this echoes a need to ‘*Unmask*’ the official discourse of homelessness in South Africa, among others; ensuring that the latter is integrated in the social work education programs and the attendant research agendas/ programs. Today, the need for contextual social work education in South Africa cannot be overemphasized. To complement the latter, as an example, (Sewpaul, 2003, cited in Holscher, 2008, p.101), argues that ‘Becoming conscious of and identifying external forms of oppression, and how these become internalized, and then ‘re-scripting or re-authoring’ the self will enable planning for praxis’. To underline this argument (McLaren, 2001, p.128), asserts that

‘Regardless of the personal, epistemological, ontological, and moral paths that we choose to take as educators, at some point we have to come face to face with the naked reality of capitalist social relations in local and global contexts. We cannot ignore these relations, and if we are to engage in a revolutionary educational praxis, we need to do more than rail against the suffering and tribulations of the oppressed and instead seek ways of transforming them’.

The latter highlights the overarching need to redress the racially biased past social work education and the attendant research agenda in South Africa.

Hacking’s concepts of six gradations of Constructionist commitment

The following are grades of Constructionists commitment:

1. Historical
2. Ironic
3. Reformist
4. Unmasking
5. Rebellious
6. Revolutionary

According to Hacking (ibid: 19), the gradations of constructionist commitment arise from increasingly strong reactions to the abovementioned (1), (2), and (3): (1) was the claim that X is not inevitable; (2) that X is a bad thing; and (3) that the world would be a better place without X.

1. *Historical*: This is the least demanding grade about X in that someone presents a history of X and argues that X has been constructed in the course of social processes. Far from being inevitable, X is the contingent upshot of historical events. Also, a *historical constructionist* could be quite noncommittal about whether X is good or bad.

Additionally, people begin to argue that X is socially constructed precisely when they find that: In the present state of affairs, X is taken for granted; X appears to be inevitable.

2. *Ironic*: The irony about X is the recognition that X is highly contingent, the product of social history and forces, and yet something we cannot, in our present lives avoid treating as part of the universe in which we interact with other people, the material world, and ourselves

The *ironist* is a powerful intellect, well able to understand the architecture of the world that pertains to X, but ironically forced to leave it much as it is.

3. *Reformists*: The *reformist* constructionism takes (2) seriously and reasons that: X is quite bad as it is. Agreed, we have no idea at present how to live our lives without X, but having seen that X was not inevitable, in the present state of things, we can at least modify some aspects of X, in order to make X less of a bad thing.

Reformist constructionism about X, like every kind of constructionism, starts from (0).

4. *Unmasking*: The *Unmasker* does not seek to refute ideas but to undermine them by exposing the function they serve. The notion is that once one sees the ‘extra-theoretical function’ of an idea, it will lose its ‘practical effectiveness’. *Unmaskers* believe not only (1) that X is not inevitable, but also (2) that X is a bad thing, and probably (3) that we could be better off without X. We ‘Unmask’ an idea not so much to ‘disintegrate’ it as to strip it off its false appeal or authority. With the mask removed, we become rebellious, and a few become revolutionary.

Important to note is that a reformist may be an unmasker, or may not be; an unmasker may or may not be a reformist. Unmasking is nevertheless an intellectual exercise in itself.

5. *Rebellious*: A constructionist who actively maintains (1), (2), and (3) about X will be called *rebellious* about X.

6. *Revolutionary*: An activist who moves beyond the world of ideas and tries to change the world in respect of X is *revolutionary*.

Hacking’s ideas on ‘Unmasking’ is clearly different from conventional conception of unmasking. When we unmask something, he asserts, we remove the false covering from something – so that the true character of that thing is laid bare and exposed. This exercise may or may not be an end in itself. Hacking goes further to emphasize that, first and foremost, unmasking is an intellectual exercise in itself and includes the following aspects as the purpose for unmasking:

1. We unmask an idea not so much to ‘disintegrate’ it as to strip it off its false appeal or authority.
2. The notion is that once one sees the ‘extra-theoretical function’ of an idea, it will lose its ‘practical effectiveness’.
3. With the mask removed, we become rebellious, and a few become revolutionary.
4. Moreover, ‘Unmasking’ has, in addition, an overtone of exposing something that was deliberately covered in order to conceal its true nature (ibid: 53). This adequately summarizes my ambition to ‘Unmask’ the official discourse of homelessness in South Africa (as alluded to earlier in this discussion). The latter sums up my claim that the historical process, as it is interpreted today, whereby cattle and pastor lands previously owned by indigenous Africans, stolen through a series of legislated processes, the displacements and evictions of many often resulting in death to both people and their livestock constitutes the historical roots and the overarching character of the South African homelessness constructions. This is how homelessness was constructed in South Africa, in my opinion. This reality was deliberately covered by Afrikaners in order to conceal the truth about livestock, land and property ownership by indigenous African people; a matter which has over the years, contributed immensely to the state of homelessness in South Africa today, any which way one conceives of this.

Considering the preceding (1), (2), and (4), my own reflections of Hacking’s ‘Unmasking constructionism’ are that it is possible to strip an idea of its false appeal and authority, even though it is an intellectual exercise, initially. In my case, the official discourse of homelessness in South Africa which is my overarching ambition as a doctoral student. Initially, my pre-occupation is to ‘Unmask’ with the natural progression being the revolutionary grade. Overall, Hacking’s conception that ‘with the mask removed, we become rebellious, and a few become revolutionary’ resonates with me.

The ‘looping effects of interactive kinds’

According to Hacking, interactive kinds do not just happen. They happen within matrices, which include many obvious social elements and many obvious material ones. Furthermore, ways of classifying human beings interact with the human beings who are being classified. Meaning, interactive kinds are relational in nature, and classifications do not exist only in the empty space of language but in (1) institutions, (2) practices, (3) material interaction with things and other people. So that only within such a matrix could there be serious interaction between the ‘kind’ of person and peoples who may be of that kind; in the case of my research, the street-dweller homeless people. In this sense, the latter are aware of (1) what is said about them, (2) thought about them and (3) done to them, in relation to them being potential/beneficiaries of social security services provided by various service providers, being they discriminatory or inclusive.

Additionally, the ‘street-dweller homeless individual’, which is a kind of classification, can be called an interactive kind because they interact with people of that kind; who knowing how they are classified by social workers, for example, can modify their behavior accordingly in order to qualify for certain social security services, as a way to make-do with the harsh realities of sleeping rough. The classifications of the social sciences are interactive because they are conscious interactions between a kind and a person; something which does not hold true of natural sciences. Moreover, according to Hacking, when I talk about the social construction of homelessness for example, I am referring to a matrix that includes (1) the idea [of homelessness], (2) the individuals falling under the idea [the homeless street-dweller], (3) the interaction between the idea and the people [e.g. discriminatory practices by social workers as service providers, whether they are real or perceived], and (4) the manifold social practices and institutions that these interactions involve [e.g. the existence of homelessness policy interventions or lack thereof].

To explain homelessness constructions as depicted in the preceding sections of my discussion, (Hacking, 2000, p.34) uses the concept the ‘looping effect of interactive kinds’ to also mean that what was known about people of a kind may become false because people of that kind have changed in virtue of what they themselves believe about themselves. This is true of indigenous Africans in a Post-1994 democratic South Africa, and the current transformation process the country is embarking on to restore the stolen (pastor) land to the rightful owners, namely, indigenous South Africans. Hopefully, this will be realized without the shedding of blood as was the case when Jan van Riebeck and company displaced the indigenous people, as I indicated earlier in this discussion. Today, as a result of the democratic dispensation, indigenous South Africans are making concerted efforts to ‘*Unmask*’ the official/public discourse, and as such the notion of them being barbaric and all, does not hold any more because it was never true in the first place.

Criticisms of Social Constructionism

This section covers an explicit appraisal of criticisms leveled against the Constructivism as an explanatory conceptual framework used for this paper. The most common charge being that Constructionism rests on the presumption that ‘the real world’ is nothing but objects constructed by groups of people, a stance that Non-Constructionists find absurd. Noteworthy is that there are two schools of thought that emerged within the developing Constructionist tradition, namely: Strict Social Constructionists (those who only study the claims-making process) and Contextual Constructionists (those who take into account what is known about the objective conditions of social reality or social problems). And for the Hostile Critics of Social Constructivism: their argument is that it makes no sense to ignore ‘objective conditions’ which constitute the core of social problems. They claim that Social Constructionists ignore the harm and suffering social problems cause, only focusing on intellectualizing social problems. To this the Sympathetic Critics: answer that years of studying the objective aspects of social problems have yet to alleviate suffering let alone produce a genuine sociological theory of social problems. Still, other Sympathetic Critics argue that constructionists either make assumptions about objective conditions or worse, believe they know when objective conditions have changed or not.

My response to the latter is that there is room to disagree with these critics. To know the harm and suffering social problems cause, one needs to investigate the *how* and *why* of those social problems with a view to conceptualize timely, appropriate and collaborative intervention initiatives, in my opinion. Otherwise, how else can one conceptualize sustainable and collaborative interventions for human nature in the face of such varied social problems including their ever-changing dynamics in this rapidly globalizing world (in this case, homelessness)?

Concluding remarks

My point of departure is that homelessness in South Africa is an issue of enormous dimensions deeply inter-related with questions of power, the economy, human dignity, and social justice. I contend that essentially, and as a basic human right, everyone in South Africa must be enabled to put down roots in safe, affordable homes in viable communities on land with secure tenure. In this paper my argument is that there are at least two discourses on homelessness in South Africa: the official/ public and the hidden. I engage the central point about Social Constructionists, the *how* and *what* in the discussion in an effort to explain the tentative two discourses of South African Homelessness Constructions. To underline my claims, and as an aid, I cite relevant South African studies on homelessness and the concept 'looping effect of interactive kinds'. I present and discuss Hacking's ideas on six Gradations of Constructionist commitment, concluding with a motivation for choosing, at least initially, the concept 'Unmasking' instead of any other. Throughout this discussion I use Hacking's notion of the concept 'Unmasking Constructionism' to present my conceptions and reflections of how I could possibly 'Unmask' the official discourse using my positions as faculty within the employ of the University of Venda Social Work Department, and the homelessness stakeholders as strategic partners within South Africa and internationally. For social policy purposes, I maintain and pursue my belief that homelessness in South Africa is a social justice issue.

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