

Exploring the (k)not of relationship between lecturers and management at a historically Black university: The lecturer's perspective

Authors:

Michelle S. May¹
Frans Cilliers¹
Vasie van Deventer²

Affiliations:

¹Department of Industrial and Organisational Psychology, University of South Africa, South Africa

²Department of Psychology, University of South Africa, South Africa

Correspondence to:

Michelle May

Email:

mayms@unisa.ac.za

Postal address:

PO Box 392, UNISA 0003, South Africa

Dates:

Received: 25 June 2011

Accepted: 19 Dec. 2011

Published: 22 Mar. 2012

How to cite this article:

May, M.S., Cilliers, F., & Van Deventer, V. (2012). Exploring the (k)not of relationship between lecturers and management at a historically Black university: The lecturer's perspective. *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology/SA Tydskrif vir Bedryfsielkunde*, 38(2), Art. #998, 10 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/sajip.v38i2.998>

© 2012. The Authors.

License: AOSIS OpenJournals. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Orientation: Within the new South African socio-political context this research focussed on lecturers' at historically Black universities who were confronted with unresolved experiences in their relationship with management. The analysis of these experiences provided an in-depth understanding of systems psychodynamics in tertiary education.

Research purpose: The purpose of the research was to describe the experiences of nine lecturers in a particular historically Black university (HBU), in order to analyse and interpret the conscious and unconscious dynamics operating in their relationship with management.

Motivation for the study: The researchers were interested in the in-depth psychological experiences of lecturers at this HBU as a platform towards understanding present day South African lecturing experiences.

Research design, approach and method: Qualitative, descriptive research was used. Hermeneutic phenomenology, using the systems psychodynamic perspective, allowed for the description and interpretation of the lecturers' experiences of their relationship with management. In-depth interviews with nine lecturers were thematically analysed which resulted in five themes. Five working hypotheses were formulated and integrated into the research hypothesis.

Main findings: Five themes manifested, namely, the (k)not of performance, mutual disqualification and mistrust, White lecturers and Black management, power struggle and the (k)not of relationship.

Practical/managerial implications: The research highlighted the importance of understanding the psychodynamics operating in the relationship between lecturers and management as a result of certain ineffective socio-technical aspects in the organisation.

Contribution/value-add: The research contributed towards knowledge about inter-group relations between different role players in HBUs and how these dynamics impact on the performance of both lecturers and management.

Introduction

According to Enslin (1990) education:

'is inescapably political, nowhere is it more starkly so than in South Africa where the educational system is at once a cornerstone of the apartheid system and a primary site of struggle against it.' (p. 77)

The historically Black and White universities in South Africa were shaped by apartheid policies (Abdi, 2003). Within this complex socio-political context, this research project studied how lecturers at historically Black universities (HBU) were confronted with unresolved experiences concerning their relationship with management. On the one hand lecturers experienced violent interactions with students during which they were manhandled by students. On the other hand lecturers perceived passivity from management when they were threatened with violence by students in social and academic settings. When lecturers asked management to discipline certain unruly students, they received no reaction from management. Thus, socio-historical factors and the experiences between students, lecturers and management are pertinent to this research. The experiences of lecturers at a historically Black university are pertinent; in particular the relationship between lecturers and management.

By exploring and describing the relationship between lecturers and management from the lecturers' perspective, using the systems psychodynamic (SP) perspective (Campbell & Huffington, 2008; Cytrynbaum & Noumair, 2004), the awareness of the lecturers' conscious and unconscious experiences at the HBU was developed. These unconscious dynamics can then be

used by lecturers, management and other stakeholders in tertiary institutions to form an in-depth understanding of conscious and unconscious dynamics, that impacted the relationship between lecturers and management in the HBU specifically, and universities in general currently.

The South African educational landscape

The education systems that existed more than 300 years ago were effective and addressed the need of the African population (Abdi, 2003). In 1652 the European settlers brought a colonial education impacting the existing education system. Three distinct phases of (colonial) educational policy are identified between 1652 and 1880, firstly religiously focused educational practice and policies which supported the Dutch East Indian Company, secondly schooling that was locally controlled and state aided and thirdly the centralisation of education under departments of education and superintendents of education. From 1940 to 1980 a fundamental pedagogy was implemented by the National Party government to institutionalise apartheid education. The purpose of this education system was to develop a workforce for separate homeland governments, workers for a small Black middle class and workers for the civil service of the apartheid government. In the current education landscape stakeholders aim to provide an integrated system of education and training, through education policy, that provides opportunities to all South Africans (May, 2010).

The educational system up to the 1980s can be considered a deliberate programme of educational, economic and socio-cultural underdevelopment for Black people. Simultaneously, the educational system can also be seen as a place where stakeholders were able to express dissatisfaction with the oppression and domination that existed at the time. In the HBU students protested against management and lecturers, who were mainly White, as agents of an oppressive state. Black lecturers and management were also mistrusted by the students (Abdi, 2003).

The legacy of this education system has continued and has impacted the relationship between students, lecturers and management. The lecturers' experiences in the HBU are more clearly understood by exploring the transactions, as described by the lecturers, between lecturers and management from the SP perspective. Some thought should be given to how these unconscious dynamics reverberate into current tertiary institutions.

The purpose of the research was to describe the experiences of nine lecturers in a particular HBU, in order to analyse and interpret the conscious and unconscious dynamics operating in their relationship with management.

The systems psychodynamic perspective

Systems psychodynamics has, as its theoretical underpinnings, psycho-analytic roots; it is based on the work of Freud, Klein's object relations theory, Bion's work on groups, Jaques

and Menzies Lyth's work on organisations as social defenses, group relations theory and also open systems theory (Fraher, 2004). Systems psychodynamics allows for the study and interpretation of collective, interdependent unconscious and conscious individual, group and intergroup processes resulting from the interconnection between different groups and subgroups within a social system (Sievers, 2009). It also affords the opportunity to attend to unconscious phenomena within people, the organisational context (tasks, structures, boundaries) and the complex interaction between these (Amado, 1995; Nutkevich, 1998).

The relationship between socio-technical and psychosocial aspects

Rice, by using the processes and activities of an enterprise, applied the open system theory of organisations to individual and group behaviour (Fraher, 2004; Gertler & Izod, 2004). Working with aspects from the open systems and psychodynamics theory the relationship between psychosocial and socio-technical elements of purposeful behaviour (working group and basic assumption group), and also the relationship between the different parts (lecturers and management) of the HBU were explored. This was carried out by exploring the boundaries, authority and tasks in order to explicate task-related (conscious and rational) and non-task related (unconscious and irrational) behaviour in the HBU (see Cytrynbaum & Noumair, 2004).

Boundaries

Boundaries are socially constructed, complex, shifting, negotiated and tested lines and spaces between systems and objects (Heracleous, 2004; James & Huffington, 2004). Boundaries are also areas of tensions which arise from unconscious behaviour within and between groups, as well as an organisation's structure (Lawrence, 1999). Boundaries are important in the containment of emotions, such as anxiety (James & Huffington, 2004). Therefore, boundaries are inter-subjective because they are constructed and negotiated through the decisions and actions of the members, such as lecturers and management of the organisation (Heracleous, 2004). Exchanges take place across boundaries between different systems, and also subgroups within a system, for example an HBU, departments in an HBU, and its environment. These exchanges should be regulated through the management of the boundaries, also referred to as maintaining the boundary conditions, which presupposes that the management of a system is responsible for creating an environment, by providing necessary resources, which enable the working group, namely the lecturers, to complete their task (Miller, 1993; 2004). Thus, boundaries are areas across which exchanges take place in a system, and are also transitional or potential spaces filled with unconscious dynamics which exist when groups meet (Campbell, 2007).

Authority

Organisational authority is defined as the authority, delegated to roles, which gives the employee or manager

the right to work within the boundaries of the role towards the effective completion of the primary task or shared tasks (Eisold, 2004; Jarrett & Kellner, 1996). Authoritativeness implies a depressive position state of mind in which the person is in contact with the source and sanctioning of his or her authority, as well as the limits of this authority. During authoritarian management, a person operates from the paranoid-schizoid position (Lapierre, 1993).

Authority is awarded from below (subordinates), above (those more senior), from one's peers and from oneself (self-authorisation). Management is mostly authorised from below, however, the same individual who has endorsed the authority could be relentlessly involved in attacking that authority. The ambivalence experienced by the individual in relation to authority figures points to the difficulty of taking up the follower role in relation to, and in supporting, leaders and managers from below (Eisold, 2004). Authority from above is considered the formal authority that is derived from an individual's role in a system. The individual exercises this authority on behalf of the system. Regardless of authorisation from above, authority figures could experience helplessness in the face of particular tasks, which can be considered as impossible or result in unspecified outcomes. Furthermore, centralised or hierarchical forms of authority are handicapped in turbulent circumstances (Eisold, 2004). It should also not be ignored how an individual's diversity characteristics impact on authorisation from above, and the extent and way in which this occurs (McCrea, 2004). These are some of the factors that could affect the appropriate authorisation from above within organisations. An individual's sense of his or her personal authority, that is the authority from within, influences the extent to which he or she takes up organisational roles, feels authorised to implement initiatives and to accomplish objectives (Armstrong, 2005).

Power and authority are different yet related concepts (Obholzer, 2001). Power refers to having and controlling the resources required for enacting and implementing one's decisions (Lapierre, 1993). Power can be task or not task-related. When power is not used towards the effective completion of the task, abuse towards individuals is usually present. Power exercised in a punitive, dictatorial or rigid manner can provoke submission and conformity, resulting in stable dynamics, or it can provoke rage, rebellion and sabotage resulting in dynamics of disintegration (Stacey, 2001). According to Stacey (2001) power relationships producing stable dynamics could be thought of in terms of basic assumption dependency and pairing behaviour, whilst those producing disintegrative dynamics might be thought of in terms of basic assumption fight-flight behaviour (Campbell & Huffington, 2008).

Task

Many of the difficulties experienced by organisations are linked to the definition versus defences against the primary task (Cytrynbaum & Noumair, 2004). The primary and work tasks refer to the sophisticated tasks of the institution. The

primary task becomes the survival task in case the system experiences high levels of survival anxiety. The primary task can be performed on both the conscious and unconscious level to fulfil certain social and psychological needs, as well as for defense against anxieties (Miller, 1993). A university is a multiple-task system (see Rice, 1970; Cherns & Clark, 1976) with three primary tasks:

- educating students
- producing research publications
- providing relevant community service.

The institution's survival could be threatened if its members (students, lecturers and management) disagree about the definition of the primary task or if they inadequately appraise internal and external demands and forces (Miller & Rice, 1975).

The anti-task activity of an institution denotes work in accordance with basic assumptions; these are its internal demands and anxieties regarding its psychological survival. The value of exploring the anti-task behaviour lies in creating awareness about the underlying anxieties, defences and conflicts in the institution which result from inappropriate task definition and the concomitant dysfunctional boundaries (Wrogemann, 2002). The HBU, as a public sector institution, contains certain anxieties for society as a whole (Obholzer, 1994). One societal anxiety contained in HBUs is whether or not they will be able to prepare Black students, of whom the rumour was that they learn with difficulty and that they are aggressive and part of the lost generation, to become members of a competent and successful workforce (see Van Niekerk & Meier, 1995). Thus, the HBU should contain the aggression of a disadvantaged and marginalised youth on behalf of society. Society also expects universities to produce the next generation of leaders for its immediate communities, and society in general (Rice, 1970). The above demands on the tertiary institution, to which these pressures and projections of society were aimed, add to its primary task of teaching difficult students, and caused education to become the impossible task (see Kets de Vries, Korotov & Florent-Treacy, 2007). In summary, the HBU had formal conscious tasks for which it had a particular structure and roles. It also had irrational, unconscious tasks for which it had developed a different structure and roles. Both of these tasks and the difference between the sets of structures and roles, caused high levels of anxiety amongst the stakeholders, particularly the lecturers and management, and contributed to the inefficiency of the university (Coren, 1997).

The core research problem was formulated as follows: What were the conscious and unconscious experiences, of a particular group of lecturers, in their relationship with management at a HBU? Research often explores the conscious experiences of students and other stakeholders in tertiary institutions. This research offered an in-depth description of the lecturers' unconscious experiences of a particular relationship, and specifically how these experiences influenced the unconscious dynamic processes of the transactions between lecturers and the management of

the institution. The objectives of this research were to explore the above and to report on the conscious and unconscious experiences of the lecturers of their relationship with management in a HBU.

The potential value-add of the research is to provide a description of lecturers' unconscious experiences of their relationship with management, in order for lecturers and managers to be aware of the unconscious dynamics operating in their relationship, as they work together to provide learning opportunities for students and develop the tertiary institution.

The rest of the article is structured as follows: The research design is presented with reference to the research approach, and strategy. This is followed by the research method consisting of the setting, roles of the researcher, sampling method, data collection, recording and analysis. Lastly, the strategies employed to ensure quality data are mentioned. Thereafter the findings are presented as manifested themes. The discussion contains the research hypothesis followed by the conclusion, recommendations, limitations and suggestions for further research.

Research design

Research approach

A qualitative and descriptive research approach was chosen. Through hermeneutic phenomenology (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2002) an in-depth description of the essence of the lecturers' experiences of their relationship with management was developed, followed by the systems psychodynamic interpretation of these experiences. The unit of analysis, based on the work of Armstrong (2006), was the (emotional) experiences of the lecturers, with emphasis on unconscious processes at work in their relationship with management.

Research strategy

A single case study was used (Chamberlayne, Bornat & Apitzsch, 2004) for its instrumental value, that is to gain an in-depth understanding of the lecturers' experiences of their relationship with management (see Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Research method

Research setting

The research was set within a particular HBU as a microcosm of South African universities specifically and organisations generally. Given that HBUs do not exist anymore, the concept organisation-in-mind was used to explore lecturers' experiences within the HBU. Based on the work about the organisation-in-the-mind, namely the relatedness that the person has to an organisation (see Armstrong, 2006), the stories that the lecturers told about the HBU, in this theory, denotes the HBU within them. Consequently, in analysing and interpreting their stories, the HBU-in-the-mind that forms part of the educational system-in-the-mind was explored.

Entrée and establishing researcher roles

The first author was a lecturer at the HBU and conducted the empirical research at this university. The second and third authors were lecturers at a large historically White university and took up the roles as supervisors of the research. All three researchers are Psychologists (categories Clinical and Industry) and trained in qualitative research design and methodology, specifically in systems psychodynamic consultancy and research (beneath the surface – see Clarke & Hoggett, 2009).

Sample and Sampling

Based on the work of Endacott (2005) a sample of convenience was used. The sample consisted of nine lecturers. Their biographical information is provided in Table 1.

Data collection methods

In order to obtain an in-depth understanding of the lecturers' experiences of their work context (see Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2002), in-depth interviews were used. Each interview started with a single open-ended question – namely, 'please tell me the story of your experiences as a lecturer at this university'. Questions based on what the lecturers were saying were generated thereafter. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Recording of data

The recordings of the interviews were transcribed and kept secure.

Data analyses

Data analysis entailed the familiarisation with voluminous amounts of data, categorising and coding the data and eliciting themes from the data (see Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2002). In the analysis, interpretation and reporting of the findings, the interpretive stance as proposed by Shapiro and Carr (1991) was used. Through this stance working hypotheses were generated. A working hypothesis is a statement of tentative understanding, from a meta-position, based on evidence from the data reflected upon from the SP perspective, that uses the self as instrument, and this can be reassessed in the context of further evidence and subsequently explored by others (Schafer, 2003).

Strategies employed to ensure quality data

Scientific rigour was ensured through focussing on validity, reliability, transferability and ethics (Denzin & Lincoln,

TABLE 1: Biographical information of the sample ($N = 9$).

| Race | Gender | Position | Age |
|----------------------|-----------------------|---|---|
| White ($n = 8$) | Female ($n = 6$) | Management / senior lecturer ($n = 1$) Senior lecturer ($n = 1$) Lecturer ($n = 4$) | Above 40 ($n = 2$) Between 30 and 40 ($n = 1$) Below 30 ($n = 3$) |
| | Male ($n = 2$) | Senior lecturer ($n = 1$) Lecturer ($n = 1$) | Between 30 and 40 ($n = 1$) Below 30 ($n = 1$) |
| Black ($n = 1$) | Male ($n = 1$) | Lecturer ($n = 1$) | Below 30 ($n = 1$) |

n , number.

2005; Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2002). Reliability and dependability were ensured through the careful planning and execution of the research project, for example, in the way that the sampling, data gathering, analysis and interpretation were performed by the researchers, as knowledgeable in this field.

The plausibility, truth value and transferability of the analysis were negotiated with the lecturers and certain experts in the systems psychodynamic field, by presenting the analysis and interpretation of the data to them (Kvale, 1996). They reported that they considered the analysis and interpretation to be plausible. By providing a clear description of the sampling, data collection, data analysis and interpretation and direct quotes from the interviews, the reader could decide about the validity of this project, whether or not she or he would be able to replicate (reliability) the research and transfer the findings to his or her context.

In terms of ethics, informed consent was verbally obtained from the lecturers by describing the project and explaining that the data will be interpreted from the systems psychodynamic lens. The lecturers' confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by storing the audio-tapes and transcripts of the data safely, as well as excluding certain identifying aspects from the data (see Christians, 2005).

Reporting

The research findings were reported and interpreted per theme by integrating the findings with relevant literature. In the discussion, working hypotheses were formulated per theme and integrated into the research hypothesis. This was followed by the conclusions, recommendations, limitations and suggestions for further research.

Findings

Five themes manifested, namely, (1) the (k)not of performance, (2) mutual disqualification and mistrust between lecturers and management, (3) White lecturers and (4) Black management and (5) the power struggle. These themes resulted in the (k)not of relationship between lecturers and management. In Figure 1 the interconnections between the themes operating in or within the relationship between lecturers and management was illustrated.

The (k)not of performance

The lecturers found themselves drawn into issues which fell outside their core function. Ongoing bickering had developed between management and lecturers about how the students should be handled, and how the university should be run. Thus, lecturers found themselves involved in politics, power play, broader societal change processes and in counter accusations and in defending themselves against students and management. The lecturers' involvement in these activities often resulted in them not attending to the appropriate tasks of the HBU, thus they were involved in anti-task behaviour. L2 highlighted that 'lecturing facilities

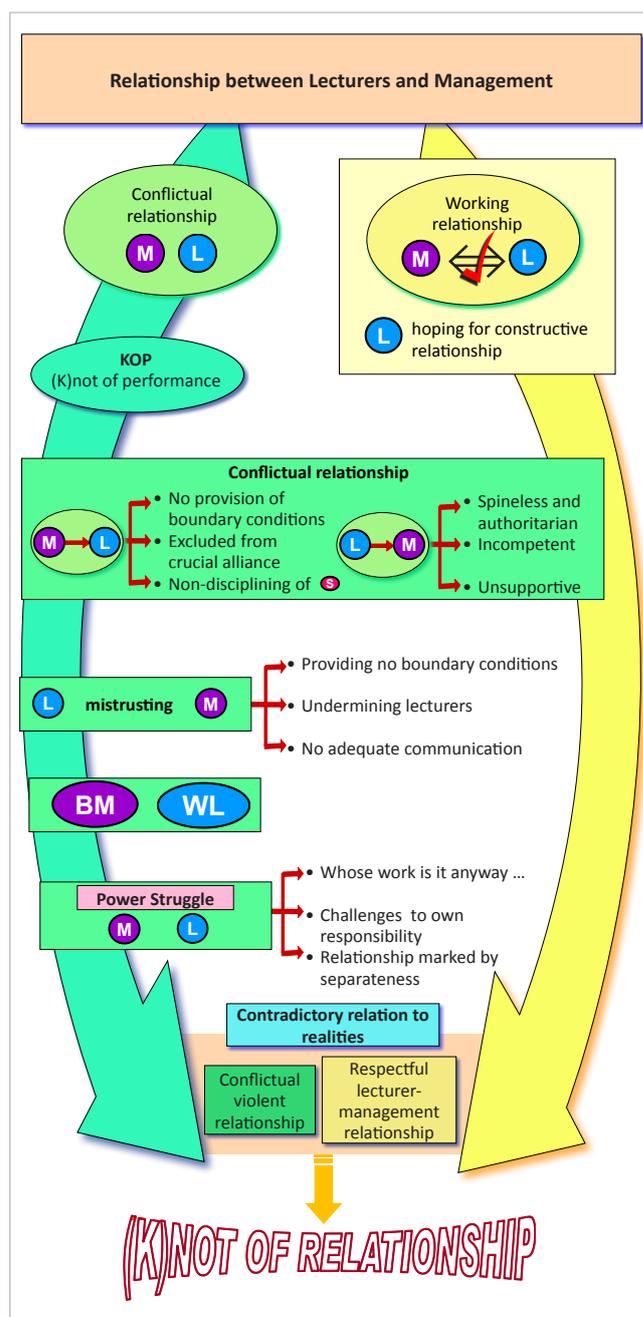


FIGURE 1: Interconnections between themes, operating in the relationship between lecturers and management of historically Black university.

are sometimes taken away for [other] occasions which are [considered to be] so much more important' (Lecturer 2, lecturer at historically Black university). This was echoed by L1, L2, L3, L7 and L9. Management failed to provide the appropriate support and boundary conditions as required – and therefore also became involved in anti-task behaviour.

It is suggested that the impossible task, and the management's inability to determine the priorities of the multiple tasks in the university, increased anti-task behaviour (see Miller & Rice, 1975). The literature (Freud, 1921; Cytrynbaum & Noumair, 2004) suggests that the impossible task of the education system is to prepare all students to become leaders in the country and make some contribution to the South African society. It was also evident that lecturers, as demanded by

management, should pacify the violent students (Campbell, 2007). This was compounded by the societal demand from lecturers and management alike to pacify and control the violent and threatening students, who have acquired struggle skills against the apartheid regime and authority figures that they perceived as thwarting their progress in society. It is possible that the relationship between management and lecturers were affected by the impossible task and the anti-task behaviour (see Miller, 1993; 2004; Miller & Rice, 1975).

The (k)not of performance seems to be based on the constant accusation, this was a mutual projection, between lecturers and management that the other group was incompetent and did not perform their work appropriately. The to and fro ricocheting of projections could result in a situation where the lecturers, at least, may have begun to consider the accusations against them as valid, that they are incompetent and to be blamed for the (k)not of performance in the HBU. This may indicate that as the projections flew to and fro at some point identification with projections took place, to the extent that the lecturer began to doubt their own competence (Campbell & Groenbaek, 2006). Once the lecturers identified with the projection of inadequate performance, unconscious energy was used to ensure that the projection did not stick, by projecting inadequate performance onto management. This process may also have occurred from management onto lecturers, as illustrated mainly by the accounts of lecturers, that they found themselves in situations where management joined students in accusing lecturers of not performing certain activities successfully, whether these activities fell within their domain of responsibility or not (Campbell & Huffington, 2008).

Mutual disqualification and mistrust between lecturers and management

The mutual disqualification between lecturers and management was indicated by L6 who remarked on three occasions that 'management disqualify the academics a lot.' On two other occasions she voiced that 'academics actually also disqualify management' (Lecturer 6, lecturer at historically Black university). The disqualification of management by lecturers occurred when lecturers labelled management as spineless and authoritarian. Lecturers experienced management as either authoritarian (having too much power) or spineless (being disempowered and de-authorised). The metaphor used to describe management as authoritarian is that of a soldier with a high rank. Another image a lecturer used was that management 'play the tune and the lecturers just have to jive to it' (Lecturer 8, lecturer at a historically Black university). These two images point to the lecturers working under the control of management without any free will, which possibly results in lecturers experiencing a command that they should obey management without question; this probably resulted in the experience that followership was a de-authorised and therefore a dangerous position in the HBU. The danger of followership was further enhanced by the lecturers' experience that management was spineless – 'the SRC got power by threats, by imposing on a

spineless management' (Lecturer 7, lecturer at a historically Black university).

The lecturers' were also of the opinion that management lacked the skills to manage the university or discipline the students. L6 declared that 'we have already seen the struggle (by management) to cope with the everyday tasks that are supposed to happen, like exam timetables, lecture timetables, examination dates' (Lecturer 6, lecturer at historically Black university). This preoccupation with management's lack of skill, namely incompetence, raised the question whether or not lecturers possess the skill to deal with volatile students. Perhaps by disqualifying management, lecturers could project their incompetence and lack of skill in handling the volatile students onto management (Hirschhorn, 1997).

The lecturers were disqualified by management because management did not provide them with the boundary conditions required for the day to day functioning of the university, in which the lecturers could take up their role and complete their primary task (see Lawrence, 1999; Miller, 1993; 2004). The lecturers also experienced management as unsupportive, who ignored requests to discipline violent students. L9 stated that:

'I feel you have to be able to defend yourself, you have to cover yourself, because the support structure (management) that is supposed to be there is not a support structure, it's an opposition structure.' (Lecturer 9, lecturer at a historically Black university)

Being ignored by management on important matters probably resulted in lecturers feeling undermined and de-authorised. It also seemed that lecturers experienced themselves as denigrated and shamed by management in the presence of students. During this public denigration, management painted lecturers as uncaring, irresponsible and unconcerned about students (Campbell & Groenbaek, 2006). Given that lecturers found themselves in a threatening, uncontained work environment, in which management was not trusted, was possibly a disqualifying experience for the lecturers (Campbell, 2007).

The disqualification of lecturers by management was further evident from the perceived exclusion of (White) lecturers from the alliance between (Black) students and (Black) management. This may have resulted in the lecturers being frustrated and perhaps even enraged with management. It was not said in as many words, but it is evident from the vehement complaints they lodged about management, associated with this alliance (Huffington, Armstrong, Halton, Hoyle & Pooley, 2004). Thus, mutual disqualification seemed to be a central theme within this HBU – whose work (ironically) it is to qualify students into professional citizens.

White lecturers and Black management

Incompetence, as a projection, was ricocheting back and forth between lecturers and management, as indicated by the reported mutual disqualification between lecturers and management. Incompetence and competence were linked

to conversations about inferiority and superiority, which again were linked to conversations about being Black or White in the world (Cilliers & May, 2002; Foster, 2004). For example, management being seen as spineless suggests that incompetence was being projected onto management. Conversely, management being seen as authoritarian and holding a powerful position in the HBU might suggest that competence was being projected onto management. Furthermore, the incompetence to manage the impossible task of the HBU, tossed to and fro between lecturers and management, resulted in the (k)not of performance which impacted on the (k)not of relationship between lecturers and management (Cytrynbaum & Noumair, 2004).

The lecturers were working within an organisation in which the culture seemed emotionally and psychologically deadening, numbing and brutal. This is indicated by the behaviour of management, which was marked by acts of threat, intimidation, public humiliation, ineffective communication and unplanned, non-participatory decision-making and changes in aspects of the organisations that directly influenced the lecturers. The conflict between lecturers and management was probably impacted upon by (White and Black) historical conflicts. L4 articulated that:

‘some of these people in the management positions used to be students or junior staff members and they were part of the struggle against the previous management system. They were embroiled in that, it’s a historical thing.’ (Lecturer 4, lecturer at historically Black university)

On the other hand she also highlighted that:

‘the perception that the lecturer body is still to a large extent, although not totally a remnant, it’s changed a lot, but it is still in a way a remnant or a symbol of the previous regime.’ (Lecturer 4, lecturer at historically Black university)

Factors pertaining to the exclusion of (White) lecturers from the relationship between students and management were prevalent. In these exclusions the lecturers experienced no care, no support and thus not a holding environment. This exclusion also occurred publicly where management reinforced rumours that lecturers were not providing enough for students, probably resulting in lecturers feeling not-good-enough. This served as further evidence that management was not providing a holding environment for lecturers – and possibly preventing them from providing a holding environment for students (see Alford, 2001; Foster, 2004; Foster, Dickinson, Bishop & Klein, 2006).

The power struggle

A power struggle between the lecturers and management seemed to be linked to those who actually managed the university. Therefore this apparent power struggle occurred in the context of tasks, roles and boundaries which were relevant to the relationship between management, lecturers and the university-as-a-whole (see Lawrence, 1999; Wells, 1980). It appears that lecturers were constantly challenging management to fulfil their tasks and take up their role as

management of the university, in order for the university to operate. This intention is captured in a statement made by L4, ‘for a lot of things they (management) just hand the responsibility to us but we don’t take what is not ours’ (Lecturer 4, lecturer at historically Black university). However, it also seemed that lecturers were seduced, probably by management, to overstep the boundaries of their roles and tasks, especially when roles and tasks were unpopular with students and led to confrontation between the students and lecturers (see Sievers, 2009). The nature of the power struggle changed when lecturers rejected inappropriate roles and tasks, and demanded that management take ownership of their managerial roles and tasks. Thus, the power struggle changed because lecturers considered how they and management should own their authority appropriately (Campbell & Huffington, 2008).

Another consequence of this power struggle appears to have been the separateness and alienation that the lecturers experienced towards management, entrenching the relatedness between lecturers and management. This difficulty, in forming an alliance with management, was further entrenched by the split within the lecturers group. This split was described as those who remained silent because they ‘do not want to rock the boat’ (Lecturer 1, lecturer at historically Black university) and others who tried to challenge the status quo by voicing their dissatisfaction with how management handled several matters (Huffington, *et al.*, 2004).

Regardless of this conflictual relationship, the lecturers seemed to preserve some of the members of management in order to form a positive link with management. Given this, it is evident that lecturers projected three characteristics onto management, as either being spineless, authoritarian or on their side. By doing this they seemed to form a tenuous, constructive relationship with the good management, which they considered to be on their side (Cytrynbaum & Noumair, 2004). This relationship was tenuous and was derived from the mutual disqualification between lecturers and management and the mistrust in the HBU.

The (k)not of relationship

The lecturers’ efforts to preserve a certain member of management implies a wish for a constructive relationship with management. L3 articulated that she:

‘doesn’t want to alienate [the chief executive officer] and so on, because I feel a great need for connections to be made there. [Conversely] I have a feeling or I sense that the [chief executive officer] also wants to make connections.’ (Lecturer 3, lecturer at historically Black university)

However, the discussion of the themes up to this stage primarily points to the existence of destructive psychodynamics in their relationship with management. It seems that each moment held the potential for both constructive and destructive activity (Campbell & Groenbaek, 2006). Thus, the relationship between these lecturers and

management seemed to be marked by several contradictions resulting in the (k)not of relationship.

Discussion

The purpose of the research was to describe the experiences of nine lecturers in a particular HBU, in order to analyse and interpret the conscious and unconscious dynamics operating in their relationship with management.

The research was seen as important to enlighten present and future developments in the relationship between lecturers and management, as well as tertiary institutions and organisations in general. From a systems psychodynamic perspective these developments relate to the structural and human factors operating in the HBU.

The five manifesting themes relating to the psychological experiences of lecturers were the (k)not of performance, mutual disqualification and mistrust between lecturers and management, White lecturers and Black management, and the power struggle. These themes lead to the (k)not of relationship between lecturers and management (the fifth theme).

For theme 1 (the (k)not of performance) the following working hypothesis was formulated. The impossible task in the HBU is for lecturers and management to ensure that the students, who were ill-prepared for tertiary education, who have not been prepared to make a contribution to the broader South African society, and who had acquired struggle skills, were contained and pacified. It seems that the impossibility of the task of the HBU enhanced the anti-task behaviour, as evident in the power struggle between lecturers and management, resulting in the (k)not of performance.

For theme 2 (mutual disqualification and mistrust between lecturers and management) the following working hypothesis was formulated. Lecturers, by projecting two discrepant labels onto management, namely their being authoritarian (too much power and authority) or being spineless (too little power or authority), de-authorise, disqualify and attack management. Management, by not providing boundary conditions and by creating a threatening, non-containing work environment for the lecturers, make it nearly impossible for them to fulfil their daily tasks, and in this way de-authorise, disqualify and attack lecturers. Thus, there seems to be a to and fro splitting, projecting, introjecting and identifying with incompetence and inadequacies (mutual disqualification) as is evident in the constant back and forth accusations between management and lecturers about the other not doing their work, in an attempt to be rid of that which is despised within their own group. Subsequently, lecturers and management cannot trust each other in the HBU.

For theme 3 (White lecturers and Black management) the following working hypothesis was formulated. Issues pertaining to race are projected onto the relationship between

lecturers and management. The issues pertaining to race seem to be linked to the change in the socio-political scenario where mainly Black management have more political and positional power than White lecturers. This scenario seems unfamiliar and might lead to particular expectations and disappointments for lecturers and management alike, thus entrenching the (k)not of relationship.

For theme 4 (the power struggle) the following working hypothesis was formulated. The power struggle between lecturers and management about who actually runs the university, and who fulfils which tasks and roles, prevents the lecturers from forming a working alliance with management in order to deal with the volatile, unruly students as required in the HBU.

For theme 5 (the (k)not of relationship) the following working hypothesis was formulated. The (k)not of relationship between lecturers and management was marked by the (k)not of performance, based on diversity characteristics of race and position within the HBU, mutual disqualification and mistrust and a power struggle between lecturers and management on the one hand. On the other hand, as indicated by their efforts to preserve certain aspects of management, there were several attempts on the part of the lecturers to develop a constructive working relationship with management.

The above was integrated into the following research hypothesis. It seems that in the HBU the mismanagement of several socio-technical aspects of the organisation has entrenched the destructive psychodynamic elements in the relationship between lecturers and management, with the result that the organisation remains a stormy and uncontained work context for all the stakeholders. The importance of dealing with the ineffective socio-technical aspects and the unconscious dynamics of the HBU, to keep both in the mind in order to make the HBU operate effectively, were not realised by the system.

Through the explication of the themes, the presented working and research hypotheses, this research offered, to the world of tertiary education as well as organisations in general, the opportunity to reflect on the socio-technical aspects and psychodynamic processes operating in organisations, and how employees collude with the psychodynamics in their own organisational systems. The findings confront the stakeholders in the university, in education in general and in organisations in general, with the idea that they are not only involved in daily conscious tasks (see Armstrong, 2005). They are also actively involved in the psychodynamics of their organisations, which have constructive and destructive elements. This research highlighted the important challenge for stakeholders in universities, in education in general and in other organisations in South Africa and globally, to attend urgently to the unconscious, destructive elements in organisations in order to ensure real and meaningful work relationships in the context of appropriately structured organisations.

It was recommended that external holding environments should be created for difficult conversations, to work through anxiety and concomitant destructive elements in universities – primarily between lecturers and management, and additionally among lecturers and among management. This is also an opportunity for psychologists and others to make a contribution. This does not mean that students cannot be involved in these conversations. Seeing that the lecturers are responsible for containing the students' anxiety around learning, and management is responsible for containing the lecturers and students (as an overly simplistic description), it seems important that the lecturers and management urgently start these conversations. By doing this, these stakeholders will be working on resolving the unconscious dynamics, for example splitting, projections, introjections and projective identification, positively affecting their relationships and their ability to address the challenges within the universities and in education in general. By dealing with the psychodynamics in the university, they will be more able to address difficulties pertaining to the organisational context (tasks, structures, boundaries). This will afford lecturers and management the opportunity to attend more effectively to the unconscious phenomena within people, the organisational context (tasks, structures, boundaries) and the complex interaction between them (Amado, 1995; Miller, 2004; Nutkevitch, 1998). This is also applicable to the relationship between management and their subordinates in any other organisation.

As a limitation of the research it needs to be mentioned that the researchers' transference and counter transference to the data we worked with, could have influenced the findings. Thus, using the self as instrument that assisted in working with the lecturers' experience could also have prevented the researchers from seeing other salient aspects of the lecturers' experiences. However, all three researchers tried to determine which projections probably belonged to them, and through discussion, they tried to not read them into the findings. Their willingness to work with transference and counter-transference, provided an opportunity for in-depth analysis of data.

The five working hypotheses and the research hypothesis also provide further opportunities for qualitative and quantitative research projects. Future qualitative research could focus on and obtain a more in-depth understanding of the systems psychodynamics operating in the relationship between lecturers and management in current South African universities. Based on the hypothesis that the psychodynamics in a particular organisation are a microcosm of the psychodynamics of the broader society (Czander, 1993), research projects in which one simply asks, *what are your experiences in this organisation?*, will add to the understanding of the systems psychodynamics in South African organisation. These will also add to the understanding of the (k)not of relationships among diverse employees and employers. This understanding can then be used in developing organisations and relationships between employees and management in these organisations.

Quantitative research projects could focus on establishing clearer causal or descriptive links between specific variables suggested in the themes and hypotheses generated through this research.

Acknowledgements

Competing interest

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) which may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this paper.

Authors' contributions

M.M. (University of South Africa) conducted the empirical research at this university. F.C. (University of South Africa) and V.v.D. (University of South Africa) took up the roles as supervisors of the research.

References

- Abdi, A.A. (2003). Apartheid and education in South Africa: Select historical analyses. *Western Journal of Black Studies*, 27(2), 89–97.
- Alford, C.F. (2001). Leadership by interpretation and holding. *Organisational and Social Dynamics*, 2, 153–173.
- Amado, G. (1995). Why psychoanalytical knowledge helps us understand organisations, a discussion with Elliot Jaques. *Human Relations*, 48(4), 351–358. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/001872679504800402>
- Armstrong, D. (2005). *Organisation in the mind. Psychoanalysis, group relations and organisational consultancy*. London: Karnac.
- Armstrong, D. (2006). Psychoanalysis and work with institutions. In R. French (Ed.), *Organisation in the mind: Psychoanalysis, group relations and organisational consultancy* (pp. 29–43). London: Karnac Books.
- Campbell, D. (2007). *The socially constructed organisation*. London: Karnac.
- Campbell, D., & Groenbaek, M. (2006). *Taking positions in the organisation*. London: Karnac.
- Campbell, D., & Huffington, C. (2008). *Organisations connected. A handbook of systemic consultation*. London: Karnac.
- Chamberlayne, P., Bornat, J., & Apatzsch, U. (2004). *Biographical methods and professional practice. An international perspective*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Cherns, A.B., & Clark, P.A. (1976). Task and organisation: militant and civilian. In E.J. Miller (Ed.), *Task and organisation* (pp. 173–192). London: John Wiley.
- Christians, C.G. (2005). Ethics and politics in qualitative research. In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd edn., pp. 139–164). London: SAGE.
- Cilliers, F., & May, M. (2002). South African diversity dynamics. Reporting on the 2000 Robben Island Diversity Experience. A Group Relations event. *South African Journal of Labour Relations*, 26(3), 42–68.
- Clarke, S., & Hoggett, P. (2009). *Researching beneath the surface. Psycho-social research methods in practice*. London: Karnac.
- Coren, A. (1997). *A psychodynamic approach to education*. London: Sheldon.
- Cytrynbaum, S., & Noumair, A. (2004). *Group dynamics, organizational irrationality, and social complexity: Group relations reader 3*. Jupiter: A.K. Rice.
- Czander, W.M. (1993). *The psychodynamics of work and organizations*. New York: Guilford.
- Denzin, N.K., & Lincoln, Y.S. (2005). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research*. London: Sage.
- Eisold, K. (2004). Leadership and the creation of authority. In S. Cytrynbaum & D.A. Noumair (Eds.), *Group dynamics, organizational irrationality and social complexity: Group Relations Reader 3* (pp. 289–302). Washington, DC: A.K. Rice Institute.
- Endacott, R. (2005). Clinical research 4: qualitative data collection and analysis. *Intensive and Critical Care Nursing*, 21(2), 123–127. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.iccn.2004.10.001>, PMID:15778077
- Enslin, P. (1990). Science and doctrine: theoretical discourse in South African teacher education. In M. Nkomo (Ed.), *Pedagogy of domination: Toward a democratic education in South Africa* (pp. 77–92). Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.
- Foster, A. (2004). *Living and working with difference and diversity*. Paper presented at OPU, London.
- Foster, A., Dickinson, A., Bishop, B., & Klein, J. (2006). *Difference: An avoided topic in practice*. London: Karnac.
- Fraher, A.L. (2004). Systems psychodynamics: The formative years (1895–1967). *Organisational & Social Dynamics*, 4(2), 191–211.

- Freud, S. (1921). *Group psychology and the analysis of the ego. Complete works of Sigmund Freud*. London: Hogarth.
- Gertler, B., & Izod, K. (2004). Modernism and postmodernism in Group Relations: 'A Confusion of tongues.' In S. Cytrynbaum & D.A. Noumair (Eds.), *Group dynamics, organisational irrationality and social complexity: Group Relations Reader 3* (pp. 81–98). Jupiter, FL: A.K. Rice Institute.
- Heracleous, L. (2004). Boundaries in the study of organisation. *Human Relations*, 57(1), 95–103. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0018726704042716>
- Hirschhorn, L. (1997). *Reworking authority. Leading and following in the post-modern organisation*. London: MIT.
- Huffington, C., Armstrong, A., Halton, W., Hoyle, L., & Pooley, J. (2004). *Working below the surface. The emotional life of contemporary organisations*. London: Karnac.
- James, K., & Huffington, C. (2004). Containment of anxiety in organisational change: A case example of changing organisation boundaries. *Social and Organisational Dynamics*, 4, 212–233.
- Jarrett, M., & Kellner, K. (1996). Coping with top teams: A psychodynamic perspective on the work of top teams. *The Journal of Management Development*, 15(2), 54–68. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/02621719610147850>
- Kets de Vries, M.F.R., Korotov, K., & Florent-Treacy, E. (2007). *Coach and couch. The psychology of making better leaders*. New York: Palgrave.
- Kvale, S. (1996). *Interviews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.
- Lapierre, L. (1993). Mourning, potency and power in management. In L. Hirschhorn & C.K. Barnett (Eds.), *The psychodynamics of organisations* (pp. 19–32). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Lawrence, W.G. (1999). *Exploring individual and organisational boundaries. A Tavistock open systems approach*. London: Karnac.
- May, M.S. (2010). *The unconscious at work in a historically black university: The (k)not of relationship between students, lecturers and management*. Unpublished Doctorate thesis, University of South Africa, Pretoria.
- McRea, M.R. (2004). Class, race and gender: Person-in-role implications in taking up the directorship. In S. Cytrynbaum & D.A. Noumair (Eds.), *Group dynamics, organisational irrationality and social complexity: Group Relations Reader 3* (pp. 225–237). Washington, DC: A.K. Rice Institute.
- Miller, E.J. (1993). *From Dependency to Autonomy: Studies in organisation and change*. London: Free Association Books.
- Miller, E.J. (2004). "The 'Leicester' model" revisited. In L.J. Gould, L.F. Stapley & M. Stein (Eds.), *Experiential learning in organisations: applications of the Tavistock Group Relations approach* (pp. 11–18). London: Karnac Books.
- Miller, E.J., & Rice, A.K. (1975). Selections from: "systems of organisation". In A.D. Colman & W.H. Bexton (Eds.), *Group Relations Reader 1* (pp. 43–68). Washington, DC: A.K. Rice Institute.
- Nutkevitch, A. (1998). *The Container and its Containment: A Meeting Space for Psychoanalytic and Open Systems Theories*. Paper presented at the Annual Symposium of ISPSO, Jerusalem. Retrieved April 06, 2005, from <http://www.ispso.org/Symposia/Jerusalem/1998nutkevitch.htm>.
- Obholzer, A. (1994). Managing social anxieties in public sector organisations. In A. Obholzer & V.Z. Roberts (Eds.), *The unconscious at work: Individual and organisational stress in the human services* (pp. 29–38). London: Routledge. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9780203359860>
- Obholzer, A. (2001). The leader, the unconscious, and the management of the organisation. In L.J. Gould, L.F. Stapley & M. Stein (Eds.), *The systems psychodynamics of organisations: Integrating the group relations approach, psychoanalytic, and open systems perspective* (pp. 91–114). New York: Karnac Books.
- Rice, A.K. (1970). *The modern university a model organisation*. London: Tavistock Publications.
- Schafer, R. (2003). *Insight and interpretation: The essential tools of psychoanalysis*. London: Karnac Books.
- Shapiro, E.R., & Carr, A.W. (1991). *Lost in familiar places: creating new connections between the individual and society*. London: Yale University Press.
- Sievers, B. (2009). *Psychoanalytic studies of organizations. Contributions from the International Society for the Psychoanalytical Study of Organizations (ISPSO)*. London: Karnac.
- Stacey, R. (2001). Complexity at the "edge" of the basic-assumption group. In L.J. Gould, L.F. Stapley & M. Stein (Eds.), *The systems psychodynamics of organisations: Integrating the group relations approach, psychoanalytic, and open systems perspective* (pp. 91–114). New York: Karnac Books.
- Terre Blanche, M., & Durrheim, K. (2002). Interpretive Methods. In M. Terre Blanche & K. Durrheim (Eds.), *Research in practice: Applied methods for social sciences* (pp. 123–146). Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press.
- Van Niekerk, L., & Meier, C. (1995). The origin of sub- and counter-cultures among black youth: A historical-educational analysis. *Educare*, 24(1), 68–80.
- Wells, L. (1980). The group-as-a-whole: A systemic socio-analytical perspective on interpersonal and group relations. In C.P. Alderfer & C.L. Cooper. *Advances in experiential social processes*, 2, 165–198.
- Wrogemann, G.C. (2002). *Intergroup relations in organisations*. Unpublished master's thesis, University of South Africa, Pretoria: University of South Africa.