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Social disruption in South Africa: strategies towards conflict resolution

Summary

In most countries where different racial and ethnic groups live together, society is characterised by conflict. One of the most important reasons for this is the fact that ethnic groups are usually minority groups. The crux of the matter concerns minority group membership and the attitude of the dominant group towards minority rights. This article attempts to analyse the South African situation in terms of factors contributing to the current climate of social disruption. Its focus, however, is on the search for effective means of combatting inter-group antagonism and creating a harmonious and prosperous future for the inhabitants of the country.

Sosiale ontwrigting in Suid-Afrika: strategieë om konflik op te los

In die meeste lande waar verskillende rasse en etniese groepe saamwoon, word die sosiale orde deur konflik versteur. Een van die belangrikste redes hiervoor is die feit dat etniese groepe gewoonlik minderheidsgroepe is. Die probleem lê by minderheids-groep-lidmaatskap en die houding van die heersende dominante groep teenoor minderheidsregte. Hierdie artikel poog om die Suid-Afrikaanse situasie in terme van die aanleidende oorsake tot sosiale ontwrigting, te ontleed. Die fokus val egter op die soeke na effektiewe oplossings om interetniese antagonisme te bekamp en om 'n harmoniese en voorspoedige toekoms vir die inwoners van die land te verseker.

For many years it was believed that the major social problem in South Africa was tension between whites of European descent and black African inhabitants. This is not the complete truth. South Africa is an inherently heterogeneous country characterised by geographic diversity, a multi-ethnic population, and a cultural mosaic of intellectual and artistic expressions, thus lacking a sense of national identity. South Africa also has one of the most diverse racial and cultural mixes in the world. Along with eleven languages acknowledged as official and thirteen more used in various areas, there are almost as many European, African and Asian cultures to be accommodated in the social, political and educational systems. During the colonial and apartheid eras, social structures made little provision for tolerance or encouragement of this diversity of cultures. Afrikaners, English, Coloureds, Indians, Xhosas, Zulus, Sothos, Tsongas, Vendas, Tswanas, Ndebeles, Swazis and other cultural groups have little understanding of one another's language, religion, disposition, customs and ultimate aims in life. This is one of the reasons why the country has been torn apart by intolerance and violence. A new social order will, as a matter of urgency, have to devise ways of dealing with this situation of alienation and conflict.

The African National Congress (ANC) government now in power has created new social, political and educational policies to address these problems. To allow for the development of national unity and a common culture as the antithesis of alienation and conflict, the new government has attempted to present cultural pluralism as a viable model of society. Cultural pluralism aims at the acknowledgment of the reality of various ethnic, cultural and religious groups; mutual interaction between cultural groups in a multi-ethnic nation state, and the creation of equal opportunities for every member of society.

Against this background the question remains: what factors contribute significantly to social disruption in South Africa and what can be done to combat intolerance and conflict among the various ethnic groups in the country?

1. Inter-group relations: sowing the seeds of alienation

Prejudice, stereotyping and aggression among ethnic groups are deeply rooted in South African society. This, however, is not a problem unique to South Africa. In most countries where different ethnic groups live together, life in society is characterised by conflict and strife. One of the most important reasons for this state of affairs is the fact that ethnic groups are usually minority groups. (Minority is used here in the sense of having fewer member or less status, as a result of their level of education and training or other criteria). Because plural societies tend to have only one dominant group and many subordinate groups, it follows that most ethnic groups occupy subordinate rather than dominant positions (Schermerhorn 1971: 21). And it is in minority group membership and the attitude of the ruling dominant group towards minority rights that the possibility of conflict is centred (Toffler 1981: 431-6).

To understand the extent of the conflict that can arise from the struggle of minority groups for recognition, one must consider the meaning of minority group status within the context of the state.

Definitions of the minority group abound in the postmodern research literature. Henrard (1996: 2-16) describes a minority group as a distinctive grouping within a country's population which exhibits stable ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics differing significantly from those of the rest of the population. Capotorti (1991: 7) gives the following definition:

A group numerically inferior to the rest of the population of a state, in a non-dominant position whose members — being nationals of the state — possess ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics differing from those of the rest of the population, and show, if only implicitly, a sense of solidarity, directed towards preserving their culture, traditions, religion or language.

Claassen (1997: 186) maintains that it is usual to define a minority group in the context of a state. Minority groups exist in nearly all states in the world — the United Nations has only 186 member states while there are approximately 600 linguistic groups and 5000 ethnic groups in the world. This fact confirms the cultural heterogeneity of most states. A minority group is not a separate

category on the level of an ethnic, religious or linguistic group. Differences in terms of any one of these three factors may constitute a minority group, according to Claassen (1997: 186).

Wagley & Harris (1985: 58-60) suggest five criteria which describe the essence of the problem of minority group membership:

- minorities are subordinate segments of complex societies;
- minorities have special physical or cultural traits which are held in low esteem by the dominant segments of society;
- minorities are self-conscious units bound together by special traits which their members share — and by the special disabilities which these traits incur;
- membership of a minority is transmitted by rule of descent, which is capable of affiliating succeeding generations even in the absence of readily apparent special cultural or physical traits, and
- people belonging to minorities tend to marry within the group, whether by choice or by necessity.

Membership of a minority group entails the many social consequences of being unlike the majority. It also implies suffering the structural disadvantage of being relatively deficient in power and resources. This implies that members of a minority are excluded from taking part fully in the life of the society because they differ in certain ways from the dominant group. Often, this tends to develop attitudes of discrimination and prejudice against members of the minority, which in turn serves to strengthen the internal cohesion and structure of the minority group.

Throughout its modern history South Africa has been a society dominated by a white minority. Whites of European descent were convinced of their superiority in the sense of education and training, individual ambition to succeed, the ability to govern a modern Western-oriented capitalistic system, and the traditional paradigm of white Western (Anglo-Saxon) superiority. To preserve their privileged position in the face of the country's large black population, black South Africans were denied the franchise and excluded from white schools, suburbs, transport facilities, government employment, and so forth. This discrimination, and the perpetual stereotyping as inferior, united all black ethnic groups and served to strengthen internal cohesion against a common enemy.

Their struggle against the injustices of apartheid discrimination triumphed in 1994 when the first democratically elected government — elected by all South Africans — was inaugurated in Pretoria.

Within the first year of the ANC's gaining political power, it became clear that the new government was determined to reverse discrimination. Policies of affirmative action and reconstruction and development were and still are aimed at eliminating the societal models, education systems and economic policies introduced by the previous government. In due course South African whites became an unimportant minority. The majority of members of the government belong to one specific ethnic group. Another perturbing factor soon emerged: not only the white minority, but also all other black ethnic groups, were reduced to 'subordinate segments' with little power or resources. Members of all minority groups were and still are systematically eliminated from positions of power in central and provincial government. The result: a new cycle and pattern of strife and violence. Instead of a working system of cultural pluralism, which was the ideal, South Africa is once more caught up in an upsurge of ethnic prejudice, aggression, stereotyping and conflict.¹

The climate of aggression and conflict is aggravated by four important factors:

- Internal cohesion among the nine black ethnic groups in the country — the result of their united struggle against the apartheid policy — has disappeared. Cultural differences between Xhosas, Zulus, Sothos, Tswanas, Tsongas, Swazis, Ndebeles and Vendas are emerging and gaining momentum. Various religious groups (*e g* Muslims) as well as smaller indigenous groups (*e g* the Griekwas) are also demanding the protection of their minority rights (Claassen 1997: 186).
- Within the white minority group in the country, there is a growing perception that they are deliberately being stripped of power and access to resources. Within their frame of reference, they attempted (by means of a specific political system) to create

1 Cf *Finance Week* 1996; *Finansies en Tegnies* 1999.

prosperity for the whole population; realised that their policies were not viable, and transferred political power willingly in favour of majority rule. The overt suspicion, discrimination and powerlessness which they experience under the new government are difficult to accept and create tension.

- There is a world-wide acceptance of the idea that minority groups should be accommodated and that they should not be assimilated in the greater nation-state. Cultural pluralism is generally accepted as a societal model for multicultural states. Many countries recognise the corporate or group rights model, where the state protects group rights and the active vindication of identity. India and Malaysia are examples of Third World pluralistic countries that maintain this model. Nearly all states in the world are multi-national and accept the fact that state and nation are not synonymous (Omotoso 1997: 10). Where various nationalities and ethnic groups are not accommodated, the potential for conflict increases. Any endeavour to promote or impose uniformity is a definite foundation for group conflict (Degenaar 1995: 9).
- Recent developments in postmodernist ideologies indicate that there has been a reconceptualisation of the modern state. Naisbitt (1994: 5-50) describes an ostensible global paradox: through trade, technology and communication, the world has become a global village (globalism). This tendency, however, has not lessened group affiliation but rather strengthened the desire to find a refuge in one's own group (localism) (Green 1987: 155). Global economic and political powers, along with internal group demands for autonomy, are changing the power structures of individual states (Green 1997: 155-70). Recent events in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape Flats confirm the fact that where the diversity of groups and the legitimate rights of minorities are regulated, conflict arises. As a rule, conflict and turbulence have the potential to cause civil society to develop into anarchy, where traditional norms and values are superseded by crime and violence (Sunter 1990: 35-6).

2. Towards a solution: combatting the causes of inter-group antagonism

2.1 Heeding the past

There is plenty of evidence of instances where inter-group tension has led to violent political agitation or has threatened the stability of the political structure of the State. The civil war between the southern and northern regions of the Sudan between 1956 and 1972, the civil wars in Nigeria during the period 1967-1970, the Kurdish rebellion in Iraq in the early 1970s, the continual internal strife in Northern Ireland, the ethnic conflict in Yugoslavia in the 1990s and the rioting in Malaysia during its post-independence period are dramatic manifestations of inter-group conflict situations. What can South Africa do to avoid the pitfalls of conflict, violence and perpetual unrest when there are so many cultures, religions and languages in the country?

It would appear from information gained over many years of research that harmonious relations among the various ethnic, religious and linguistic groups within a country depend to a large extent on the attitude of the dominant political forces of the society as well as on their willingness to allow members of each group to pursue their economic, social and cultural development according to their own traditions in an atmosphere free of discrimination.

South Africa initiated a policy of cultural pluralism in 1994. The ideology of the 'rainbow nation' acknowledged ethnicity and saw ethnic minority groups as an essential and edifying part of the mosaic of national life. What has not been achieved as yet, is the protection of minority groups from discrimination and the establishment of equal opportunities for them in all walks of life. South Africa's history of apartheid, which still casts a shadow over minority rights (the suspicion that they may possibly perpetuate apartheid discrimination), remains a substantial obstacle to the country's acceptance of postmodernist and globalist views on minorities (Claassen 1997: 190).

2 Cf Capatorti 1979; Dinstein 1993; Taylor 1994; Glazer 1995.

Fundamental to this suspicion is the implicit assumption — or fear — that a high degree of identification with a minority group precludes significant identification with the majority. Hutnik (1986: 158) reports that the outcome of many years of research has verified that the two dimensions of cultural adaptation, namely ethnic minority identification and majority group identification, must be used in conjunction in order to arrive at a successful solution. Hutnik (1986: 158-65) stresses the importance of the dynamic nature of the four styles or types of cultural adaptation of individuals, and the ways in which these styles can contribute towards positive self-categorisation, positive identificational assimilation and positive cultural adaptation. His four types of adaptation are the passing (or assimilative), the chauvinistic (or dissociative), the marginal and the mediating (or acculturative). The individual who adopts a style of cultural adaptation that is assimilative, rejects the culture of his/her origin and embraces the cultural norms and practices of the majority group. In the dissociative style, the cultural norms of the ethnic group increase in importance, while those of the majority group are spurned. The marginal individual vacillates between the two groups: the norms of both cultures are perceived as important but somewhat incompatible, which results in a low level of identification with both groups. For the individual who adopts an acculturative style, the norms of both cultures are perceived as important and as capable of being synthesised or integrated (Hutnik 1986: 158).

Although it is theoretically possible to classify individuals as consistently manifesting more of one style than of another, practice shows that within minority groups there is usually a dynamic exchange of characteristics of all four styles. Many individuals belonging to an ethnic minority are well acculturated or even assimilated into the surrounding culture, but nevertheless feel very strongly identified with their own ethnic minority group in terms of their self-categorisation. Such an individual may, for example, feel strongly South African but also be very Swazi, Zulu or Afrikaans in his/her behaviour and attitudes. What is important for South Africa in this situation is to enhance the factor of 'feeling strongly South African' while at the same time respecting that of 'being Swazi, Zulu, Afrikaner', and so on. Social action arising from a strategy of

acculturation should be strongly encouraged. Such action is likely to be less defensive, less violent and more effective, since the acculturative individual serves as a mediator between cultures. Evidence from research literature verifies that the acculturation model narrows the gaps between different cultures.³ Wherever minority group status has been rejected in favour of an assimilation model, failure in the form of conflict or even civil war has been the result. Acculturation, on the other hand, is a viable model for South Africa because it requires the individual belonging to an ethnic minority to develop a level of competence in the cultural norms of the majority in order to function appropriately in the context of South African society. When this function is combined with a strategy of co-operation, it can be expected to reduce prejudices, discrimination and intergroup conflict.

2.2 Searching for effective remedies

In contrast to the traditional view that racial and ethnic behaviour will change only once cultural attitudes change, modern psychology emphasises, and practice proves that altered behaviour is more often the precursor of altered attitudes. Behaviour is shaped in important ways by the situation in which it occurs. Major remedies for ethnic minority group conflict are based in varying degrees on the premise that shaping behaviour by shaping situations is more successful than direct attempts to change deeply held attitudes such as racism and ethnic prejudice (Pettigrew & Martin 1989: 190). Governmental, provincial and local organisational structures in South Africa should facilitate ethnic interaction in all task settings by encouraging common goals and stressing the reality of inter-group interdependence.

Of all theories of inter-group relations the contact hypothesis is most directed towards prejudice reduction. It is a theory of change where co-operative interdependence is the most important condition for the reduction of ethnic prejudice. Allport (1954: 281) reported as early as the 1950s that prejudice may be reduced by equal status contact between majority and minority groups in the pursuit of

3 Cf Dinstein 1993, Taylor 1994; Glazer 1995; Claassen 1997.

common goals. The effect is greatly enhanced if this contact is sanctioned by institutional supports (*i e*, by law, custom or local atmosphere) and of a sort that leads to the perception of common interests and common humanity among members of different groups. Racial and ethnic interaction can be facilitated by means of tasks set at school, in the civil service and at the provincial and government levels where common goals and group interdependence are encouraged. Racial and ethnic interdependence should be maximised by redesigning team assignments so that teams can work effectively together.

Slavin (1985: 45-62) applied the theory of co-operative interdependence to school settings in the United States and achieved a great measure of success. The theory is most applicable to the South African workplace and to South African schools where individuals from different racial and ethnic groups confront one another for the first time in a formal situation. Slavin (1985), Oskamp (1984) and Johnson *et al* (1984) have all verified that relations between black and white scholars and students cannot be improved merely by bringing them together in one school. Their studies suggest that co-operative learning generally leads to improved inter-group relations. Co-operative learning implies that the learning process in the classroom takes place mainly through teamwork. The requirements for such settings are:

- role equality in the teams;
- the official sanctioning of interracial and inter-ethnic groups by teachers, and
- opportunities to find out that other groups' beliefs are less peculiar than expected.

Where these requirements are met, hostility decreases and rival groups work together to achieve a mutually desired goal. This reduces social distance, decreases hostile outgroup attitudes and stereotypes, and makes future inter-group conflict less likely (Van Oudenhoven & Willemsen 1989: 204). Co-operative learning forms an integral part of South Africa's new education policy and the expectation is that as Curriculum 2005 is incorporated in the various school grades, teachers and learners will become more skilled and confident within the co-operative, interdependent situation. It

should, however, be borne in mind that the achievement of success is a necessary factor in the early phases of inter-group co-operation — particularly when the social climate is still conflicting and competitive.

According to Turner (1981: 74-5), the best strategy for conflict-resolution is to attempt to minimise or, if possible, directly eliminate ingroup-outgroup distinctions. This can be accomplished by creating superordinate social identifications, for example 'We are all Vryburgers', 'We are all rugby fans', 'We are all women', or 'We are all labourers'. This tends to produce cohesiveness between conflicting groups, such as strikers and non-strikers, and facilitates the perception of co-operative interests among the members of the former subgroups (Turner 1981: 99). Nevertheless, it will always be difficult to form superordinate groups with common interests in situations where groups differ in religion, race and language, as is the case in South Africa.

However, research revealed several ways in which the importance of social categories may be reduced or the negative consequences of social categorisation mitigated.⁴ One of these methods is a procedure called the Culture Assimilator, which suits the South African situation very well. In essence, the Culture Assimilator is

a programmed learning experience designed to expose members of one culture to some of the basic concepts, attitudes, role perceptions, customs, and values of another culture (Fiedler *et al* 1971: 95).

Where South Africans meet more and more on the multicultural scene, it may well prove very successful to improve inter-ethnic relations by recognising ethnic differences. The aim is that people should learn to understand and appreciate other cultures in such a way that they are able to explain the behaviour of others in terms of what members of the other culture would do and not only in terms of their own culture.

4 Fiedler *et al* (1971: 90-9); Badenhorst & Claassen (1996: 100-4); Santhiram (1996: 385-94); and Schierle (1996: 395-400).

The training procedure during this learning experience is directed at the development of more appropriate expectations about the behaviour of members of other groups. Trainees should gradually become competent in explaining behaviour of others in terms of what members of the other group would do, thus to make isomorphic attributions (Triandis 1975: 39). The types of information about other cultures which ought to be provided by this training relate to the often unrecognised, implicit value premises, roles, norms, and attitudes of other groups. This information concerns:

- norms for different kinds of situations;
- differing role perceptions among the different cultures;
- links between general intentions and specific behaviours;
- frequently found self-concepts;
- valued and disvalued behaviour with their frequently associated antecedents and consequences;
- the influence of norms, roles, self-concepts and, general intentions, as well as their effect on behaviour, and
- the kinds of reinforcement expected in various situations (Triandis 1975: 69).

Van den Heuvel & Meertens (1989: 223) report on the outcome of this training procedure. As a result of the training procedure, the subjects acquired a better understanding of the other culture. They learned to make isomorphic attributions, and therefore developed more appropriate expectations about the behaviour of the members of the other group. Consequently, the subjects should be more able to predict the behaviour of those with whom they interact and should also experience less anxiety during actual interaction with members of other groups. They should also develop a more positive attitude, which in turn should lead to more positive and mutually reinforcing behaviour, with less ignorance, difficulty and misunderstanding.

Where the emphasis in all South African institutions and organisations falls strongly on training and on the acquisition of necessary skills, this kind of training programme can easily be adapted and incorporated into life-skills acquisition programmes. The complete programme, with methods and examples as developed by Triandis (1975), can be adapted to suit the specific circumstances

of any multicultural situation. There are, however, certain guidelines that should be adhered to in all circumstances. For instance,

- trainees should have some personal or professional interest in the training procedure;
- besides differences, similarities between groups should also be stressed;
- besides differences between the groups, differences within groups should also be emphasised, and
- the content of the programme should include not only attributions concerning the behaviour of members of the 'other' culture but also contributions and behavioural alternatives of members of the group's own culture.

In the final analysis, conflicts between members of different cultural groups should be discussed and handled openly. Where training in harmonious inter-ethnic relations takes place, the natural assumption must be that the various groups must be dependent upon one another for eventual success — the reality of self-interest in good inter-ethnic/multicultural contacts should always be clear. In the case of the ultimate success and welfare of the various groups in South Africa there is no doubt that the self-interest of each group can be furthered in harmonious relationships.

The problematic relationship between theoretical viewpoints and the applied social psychology of inter-group relations will always remain. It is a *fait accompli* that deeply ingrained prejudices and behaviours cannot be changed completely. The aim of training and expectations in inter-group relations should therefore be a modification of behaviour towards a level of mutual tolerance. Apart from aspects of cognitive knowledge, emotional aspects should also be considered. The regulation of thoughts and bodily changes associated with emotion must be addressed.

3. Conclusion

Maintaining cultural diversity in combination with mutual respect between various groups is the optimal situation and is rarely achieved. However, where the political, economic and social success of a country depends on whether it can find a solution to

intercultural conflict, there is no choice but to discover a solution. In view of research findings, it seems clear that the following strategies could contribute to the elimination of the discriminatory practices which lead to frustration and violence:

- Where the cultures of ethnic groups vary greatly and there is a history of negative relationships, cohesive, structured peace and life-skills programmes are required in order to create the atmosphere of tolerance which is essential to harmonious inter-group relations.
- Programmes should be introduced on a national basis and should have the support of all political, economic and social structures in order to ensure the successful transformation of a divided society.
- The emancipatory processes can be facilitated by means of research projects at tertiary institutions.
- South African society should be made to realise that human dignity, the rights to associate freely, to live out one's culture and practise one's beliefs, along with all the other rights and freedoms which ensure the full recognition of human worth, stem from universal values (Wiechers 1997: 2). Once we are able to share in a common humanity, we shall also be able to overcome the conflicts which stem from racial and ethnic division:

Given a clearer grasp of the problems and more intelligent control of certain key processes, we can turn crisis into opportunity, helping people not merely to survive, but to crest the waves of change, to grow, and to gain a new sense of mastery over their own destinies (Toffler 1970: 338).

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