



The Search for Identity in the New South Africa: a Psychological Perspective

Rex van Vuuren

► To cite this version:

Rex van Vuuren. The Search for Identity in the New South Africa: a Psychological Perspective. Alizés: Revue angliciste de La Réunion, 1994, The Quest for Identity in a Multicultural Society: South Africa, International Seminar, 09, pp.85-95. hal-02350297

HAL Id: hal-02350297

<https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-02350297>

Submitted on 6 Nov 2019

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

The Search for Identity in the New South Africa: a Psychological Perspective

*Pr Rex van Vuuren,
University of Pretoria¹*

I write as a white, male, married, Protestant Afrikaner. My professional life and work as a psychologist and psychotherapist make up an important part of my identity. My middle-class lifestyle can be described as privileged. My group membership is diverse. For example my political affinities are a mixed bag and my historical roots go back as far as the first Dutch and later British settlers in South Africa.

Morally and intellectually I applaud the arrival of a democratic South Africa. I have mixed feelings about who I am and where we are going. I have to find my way and exist in two worlds: the old world determined by a tradition handed down by the way in which "our" history has been narrated, and a new world which has confronted me unexpectedly from the future. This new world has a strong appeal and challenges my view on personhood and my place in the world. There are moments when I feel that I am in a crisis. This crisis confronts me to re-orientate my self in the world and in the relationships I have with my fellow South Africans.

¹ Pr Rex van Vuuren, Department of Psychology, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa.

As much as I am in search of a new identity so are many individuals and members of cultural and ethnic groups. The space created by Mr Mandela's graciousness and statesmanship as a leader, this new identity is nevertheless undefined; as indeterminate as a diagnosis of our psychic condition would be. With "psychic condition" I mean that which has to do with our thinking, our culture, politics, attitude and what we create or produce. With "crisis" I mean the transitional space we find ourselves in, that uncertain position between the past and the future. Previously one acted with certainty and a taken-for-grantedness. Now disorientation is prevalent with the threat of self-alienation. As the walls of apartheid gave way the isolation of the Afrikaners crumbled and they gravitated toward an acceptance of other cultural groups according them a significance denied in the past. This may be termed a relativizing of the own cultural group. The uncertainty of the transitional space gives rise to a range of different attitudes toward the future, one may focus on the past with an emphasis on a restoring of the past and a resistance against "change." This is the voice of, for example, the culture of the far right. Secondly, there are the utopians who place all their emphasis on a transcendent future expectation at the cost of the past and present realities. Amongst others their voice could initially be heard in the demand to nationalise the large private corporations. The property of South Africa must be given back to the original or indigenous people thereby destroying the past and the present in favour of a totally new future. Thirdly, the traditionalists could be described as those people who are rigidly and desperately trying to hold onto the status quo of the immediate past and are willing to defend the status quo at all cost. Fourthly the constructivists, a group which includes those who are less rigid or more flexible and move in an evolutionary way between the tension of the first two extremes. They want to build a better, safe future without denying the past, recognising that the past cannot be undone and that certain realities of a multicultural society cannot be denied.²

It seems as if the thinking model of the last group is holding the middle ground. The political distinction amongst the Whites has shifted toward conservative versus liberal and on a broader scale for the black-white relationship the emphasis is on revolutionary versus evolutionary integration. The ANC leadership is not entirely convinced that the process of evolutionary reconstruction of the country and the building of a new nation is well rooted and have decided not to restructure themselves as a political party but to remain a liberation movement with their armed wing, "the spear of the nation," still intact.

² F. A. Van Jaarsveld. *Omsingelde Afrikanerdom* (Pretoria: HAUM. 1978).

In the "old world" I could take many things for granted. The world presented itself as a stable, secure and predictable world with the powers of the in-group I belong to deeply entrenched. There was no dimension or aspect of existence which did not carry the traces and signs of the dominant group. So much so that groups made subordinate often seemed to internalise a wider social evaluation of themselves as "inferior" or "second class citizens." Legalised discrimination underlined and produced a consensual inferiority or self-derogation. These status differences tended then to accentuate the intergroup conflicts of interest and created hostility.

This kind of reasoning, which emphasises the relationship between intergroup discrimination and social categorisation, makes sense, even on an intuitive level, but fails to account for the rapid processes of social change we are experiencing.³

I notice the changing of the old world and the movement to the transitional world on the way toward the new world and its accompanying tensions on many levels. Places and place names are changing and with it my social identity. The intimate relationship between place and identity are well known. These changes are noticeable through, for example the changing and redrawing of the boundaries of provinces, names of cities, suburbs, towns, airports, roads, dams, recreational places, game reserves etc.. Old institutions such as parliament, health services, education, public broadcasting and the police and armed forces have changed and new institutions such as the Constitutional Court have been put in place. These changes are in the process of changing the rules and norms of interpersonal and intergroup relations at every conceivable level of interaction. Let me mention and comment on a few other typical experiences and situations.

1. Ethnicity : a continuing concern

I notice that so far my description gives emphasis to my (the individual's) sense of placement in historical time — the relationship between one's sense of historical origins, one's current state of well-being or anxiety, and one's expectations of possibilities for the future. Perhaps a few comments on the phenomenon of ethnic identity as an aspect of our social identity and as an aspect of our times needs to be made. Ethnic identity is unavoidable in a multicultural or multiethnic society, inseparable from a society's undergirding so-

³ H. Tajfel and J. Turner. "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict" in W. G. Austin and S. Worchel (Eds.), *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1979), 33-47.

cio-political forces. Despite the denigration of the concept of ethnicity and the pre-eminence of a democratic ideology with its emphasis on assimilation, ethnic identity remains a continuing concern. This concern was particularly prevalent in the debate on group rights during the writing of the interim constitution. In this unfinished debate we see the validity of the idea of ethnicity as a controlling feature of identity — a means to maintain or gain political power or escape the domination of an oppressive minority or majority.⁴

2. Individualism and collectivism

The levelling of the political, economic and social playing fields has highlighted more than before two different world views: individualism and collectivism. Individualism extols development and maintenance of a separate personal identity; the importance of striving for self-actualisation is highlighted. Differences between the group and the individual are clearly delineated, and individuals are supposed to discover and attain their own "true" selves.

On the other hand, collectivism focuses attention on maintenance of social norms and performance of social duties as defined by the in-group. The importance of common attitudes and practices and co-operation with in-group members is underlined. Attempts to distinguish between the personal and the communal are likely to appear false and be suspect.⁵

The power of collectivism has announced itself not only through the armed struggle and the elections but presently also through the continuing consultations, negotiations on all levels of the public domain and the mass actions of the unions of the labour movement. At present there is no possibility of maintaining the status quo and the implementation of any programme or policy must go through a collectivist process of consulting and negotiating. Further on I will return to the phenomenon of "we-talk."

⁴ K. Chun, "Ethnicity and Ethnic Identity: Taming the Untamed" in T. R. Sarbin and K. E. Scheibe (Eds.), *Studies in Social Identity* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1983), 184-203. G. A. DeVos, "Adaptive Conflict and Adjustive Coping: Psychocultural Approaches to Ethnic Identity", in T. R. Sarbin and K. E. Scheibe (Eds.), *Studies in Social Identity* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1983), 204-230.

⁵ D. Oyserman, "The Lens of Personhood: Viewing the Self and Others in a Multicultural Society" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 65(5), 993-1009. (1993).

Black South Africans are more likely to endorse a collectivist perspective which to my mind reflects among others the severity of the past and present conflict. For collectivists the flexibility and non-conformity of individualists may be viewed negatively as connoting lack of commitment to group goals and concerns. Many across culture studies suggest that individualism and collectivism are essentially independent perspectives. Oyserman points out that either individualism or collectivism can be cued depending on the perceptions of the self and intergroup conflict.⁶

3. The debate on language choice

Language choice in South Africa used to be a clear-cut issue. There were two official languages: English and Afrikaans. The socio-political changes of the past few years have led to the dissolution of old norms. The present language debate on how to accommodate eleven languages is redefining the norms of public communication. Suddenly, in the place of the unconsciously and semi-consciously taking for granted of a language medium in everyday life there is an extreme awareness of language. This debate is especially intense in the area of Public Broadcasting and primary, secondary and tertiary education.

Clearly the language debate comes from the symbolic role language has in political life, and from the social value it has acquired as an obvious characteristic of the social groups involved in the sifting out of positions in the community at large. The debate on language has to do with judgements of personal treatment, that is, how one expects to be treated in such situations. But such judgements are dependent upon social knowledge, knowledge about intergroup relations and group boundaries and ways of signalling them, and knowledge about other social differences tied up with personal and social identity.

4. Intergroup communication in committee negotiations

Committee meetings with their delays, procrastinations, and inconsistencies, form an essential and in many ways a crucial aspect of the process by which policy is made in industry and public affairs. The call to accountability and transparency requires all deci-

⁶ Oyserman, *ibid.*

sion-making processes to be open to public inspection and control. Ethnically distinct styles of discourse strategies complicate the accomplishments of negotiated talk.⁷

Whatever a committee is talking about (women's issues, student issues, labour issues) the process requires from both sides a familiarity with the intricacies of this communicative style with its many situational constraints. Many hard and difficult lessons are being learnt as explained by Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz:

Given the situational constraints, we suggest that the rhetorical strategies of committee talk can perhaps best be characterised by the term defensible reasoning. This is a form of reasoning where acceptable arguments rely on establishing a single point of articulation between a rule and the behaviour to which it applies. This discourse-created rulefulness then becomes a strategy with which to gain further control or negotiating power.⁸

These strategies become conventionalised and over time become the standards by which effectiveness is judged. The same process applies to everyday interpersonal interactions in the public domain. New rules and new conventions of the formal and informal reconstruction of South Africa are a discourse-created construction. These conventions can be learned only through face-to-face interactions. Any person, irrespective of group membership and social identity, can now be advantaged or disadvantaged in different situations.

From these examples one could argue that the fundamental dynamic at work in South Africa is power and power relations. It would be true to say that the empowerment of individuals and communities has been raised to a high level of consciousness thereby contributing to the enhancement of the self-esteem, especially of the members of the disadvantaged communities. But I would like to propose that another thread running through this transitional period is our awareness of the ways in which personal and social identities are ascribed identities and are embedded and afforded a voice within a discourse. The creation of a new nation and the reconstruction of South Africa within which identities are also created is not just linguistic but textual, to the extent that already established and new forms of communication are being used. Old and new texts furnish us with the resources which both enable and constrain the construction of our selves. For example, the new interim constitution and the bill of rights have given rise to new forms of speaking and writing and their moral significance: dignity and human rights talking and writing. This brings me to the central theme of my paper: It is not gender, ethnicity, class and culture which we

⁷ J. J. Gumperz and J. Cook-Gumperz. "Interethnic Communication in Committee Negotiations" in J. Gumperz (Ed.), *Language and Social Identity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 145-162.

customarily take as the given parameters within which we create our social and personal identities. Rather, language as interactional discourse demonstrates that these parameters are not constants that can be taken for granted but are communicatively produced. To understand the issues of identity and how they are affected by social, political, religious, ethnic and cultural divisions we need to understand the communicative processes by which they arise.⁹ And then not only how communication is structured but what communication does.

In the humanities this line of thinking has been informed by many thinkers such as Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur. It is a more recent development for psychologists to contextualise these ideas for psychology.¹⁰ We not only language our living but we also live our languaging.

In that light I want to move to a different level by summing up my present position: psychologists for all their disagreements appear to have reached a consensus that the individual person, psychology's subject, is the proper object for psychological enquiry. Whatever else we might do, psychology's task is to study the individual. Much of South African psychology remains rooted in the values of individualism with its assumptions of the subject as a naturally occurring reality. This entails the view of the subject as a self-contained, firmly bounded entity — a highly individuated conception of personhood. Paraphrasing Geertz,¹¹ we have been influenced by three key ideas about being a person: the person as

- 1) a centre of awareness;
- 2) as an integrated universe and a distinctive whole;
- 3) as a bounded entity set contrastively against other such entities.

My personal experience of the changes in South Africa has challenged these assumptions. And, over the past few years I have academically and theoretically been confronted to consider seriously at least six discernible challenges about the human subject and consequently personal and social identity.¹²

⁸ Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz, *ibid.*.

⁹ Gumperz, *ibid.*.

¹⁰ See for example: E. L. Murray. *Imaginative Thinking and Human Existence* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1986). J. Shotter and K. J. Gergen. (Eds.). *Texts of Identity* (London: Sage, 1989).

¹¹ Geertz, C., *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

¹² Sampson, E. E., "The Deconstruction of the Self" in J. Shotter and K. J. Gergen (Eds.), *Texts of Identity* (London: Sage, 1989), 1-19.

- 1) Cross-cultural investigation points to the peculiarity of the highly individuated North American view of the person. The African suspicion of this view is expressed in its criticism of Eurocentrism.
- 2) Feminist reconceptualisations of the masculine and patriarchal version of social, historical and psychological life introduce a different view of personhood.
- 3) Social constructionism, a further development of Mead (1934), argues that selves, persons, the idea of individual psychological traits, etc. are social and historical constructions and not naturally occurring objects.
- 4) For a long time phenomenologists and more recently systems theorists have presented an epistemological position in which ontological primacy is given to relations rather than individual entities.
- 5) Critical theory has forced us to consider the possibility that the American view of psychology's subject is a character designed to advance and serve a capitalist ideology.
- 6) Deconstructionism, which developed within post structuralist literary criticism and linguistic analysis is challenging all notions that involve the primacy of the author (or the subject). Derrida's logic of the Supplement challenges the logic of identity. And his deconstruction of the Western conception of personhood would then read something like this: a person is and is not an integrated whole, is and is not a centre of awareness. And the person as an entity is both what it is and also what it is not.

These challenges provide for a view of the reality of the life-world and one's identity as changing, indeterminate, opaque and open-ended. The life-world is the ground of all that is empirical and certain sources of data remain especially close to that world as it unfolds. Sources that may contribute to our understanding of identity include biography, autobiography, written accounts by professional therapists, teachers, adults and the powerful narratives of novelists and poets. What is needed most of all is cross-cultural scenes, episodes, moments. The goal is to glean something of the texture of the establishment, maintenance and transformation of identity through various cultural conditions. The reality of personhood cannot be grasped either at the extreme pole of individualism or at the pole of mechanical collectivism. There is an essentially dialectical interpenetration of subject and object in which neither has full primacy. Society constitutes and inhabits the very core of whatever passes for personhood and in acting a person reproduces or potentially transforms that society: each is interpenetrated by its other.

Taking this notion seriously I would like to relate the I and We as each is interpenetrated by the other. For this purpose I refer cursorily to David Carr's answer to the

question of how we initiate an investigation of social reality,¹³ centred on the group, whose point of departure is neither the phenomenological I nor the straightforward treatment of an it. He proposes that we treat the group not as object but as subject. But groups as subject must then not be taken as "persons writ large" nor focus on the subject of the group as a "group mind" or as a "big subject." The use of "we" enters into the picture not through an external classification alone but is constituted by the mutual recognition and conscious participation of its members. It must be said that this is an over-idealization because we gradually come to an awareness of which groups we count ourselves as belonging to and which not. Thus one can objectively belong to a group and not know it; or one can know it and consider it a matter of indifference or indeed reject it. Such groups may be important and in many different respects play an important role in society but we cannot characterise them in subjective terms. Only groups distinguished by the active and conscious participation of their members qualify as we-subjects. A we-subject exists in so far as individuals take it to exist and act accordingly. If the self is the unity of a series of overlapping projections made from different temporal points of view then the identity and existence of groups are no less and no more stable than those of individuals. Groups not only contain individuals but in some ways are analogous to them. To sum up: a community exists wherever a narrative account exists of a we which has continuous life through its experiences and activities. By "exists" Carr means that it gets articulated or formulated, perhaps by one or more of the group's members, in terms of the we, and is accepted or subscribed to by the other members. It is their acceptance that makes them members and constitutes their recognition of the others as fellow members, and determines their participation in the action, experience, and life of the community. To be a participant or member in this sense, and to posit a we as group-subject of such a communal story, is really the same thing. In this sense a community exists where it is constantly in the process, as an individual is, of composing and re-composing its own autobiography. Like the autobiography of an individual, such a story seeks a unifying structure for a sequence of experience and actions. An individual's life-story is provided by birth and death. Likewise a community can trace themselves to an origin or foundation such as the "founders" of families and nations. Each community is likewise faced with the constant possibility of its own "death," either from without or within. A spokesperson embodies the subjectivity of the group by speaking and acting on its behalf.

The different groups in my life and the varying importance these groups hold for me and the questions of identification, adherence, rejection, participation, conflicting loyalties etc., are part of my life-story; they figure in the implicit autobiography that I am con-

¹³ D. Carr. *Time, Narrative and History* (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986, 1991).

stantly composing and recomposing and in which the coherence of personal past, present and future is at issue. I am the protagonist of this story. It is I who am constituted in the unity of the story made up when I tell it.

But my belonging to a community projects me into a different temporality with a different subject. "We" are the members of the community. The experience we have, the action in which we are engaged, always take place in time. The pronoun "we," speaking for more than one, the trans-individual subject, nevertheless always remains in concert with the individual. It seems as if culturally diverse concepts of self and the language of person-referential terms, particularly pronouns, mirror one another. One can only be and have an identity as an individual person "to and for" another. In this sense the singularity of an individual is determined by the other. "We" does not dissolve the individual into a corporate being but should result in both its singularity and its plurality.

From a practical point of view a study of the group as a subject allows for group solutions to problems in the modern world, for which individualism cannot offer a viable solution.¹⁴ Only we can give our co-operation. We have to search for co-operative solutions to overpopulation, exploitation of natural resources and pollution of the air, the rivers and oceans and land littered with waste. Also equity in labour-management relations, surplus agricultural production in technologically advanced nations and the underproduction in developing nations, the use of performance-enhancing drugs in sports, price-fixing among businesses and negative political campaigning. A spokesperson embodies the subjectivity of the group by speaking and acting on its behalf.

The challenge which faces us in this unfolding drama in the new South Africa is to renovate our own formulations. This renovations must begin at its very base, the understanding of the human subject with methodologies appropriate to this new venture. In this way the subject will become a new and different character, and we in the humanities and social sciences will have helped contribute to the creation of the identity of a new subject.



¹⁴ D. Granberg. (1992). "Emerging Problems Individualism Cannot Solve" in D. Granberg and G. Sarup (Eds.), *Social Judgment and Intergroup Relations: Essays in Honor of Muzafer Sherif* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1992), 203-219.

REFERENCES

- Carr, D., *Time, Narrative and History* (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986, 1991).
- Chun, K., "Ethnicity and Ethnic Identity: Taming the Untamed" in T. R. Sarbin and K. E. Scheibe (Eds.), *Studies in Social Identity* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1983). (184-203).
- DeVos, G. A., "Adaptive Conflict and Adjustive Coping: Psycholocultural Approaches to Ethnic Identity". in T. R. Sarbin and K. E. Scheibe (Eds.), *Studies in Social Identity* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1983). (pp. 204-230)
- Geertz, C., *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).
- Granberg, D., (1992). "Emerging Problems Individualism Cannot Solve" in Granberg D. and Sarup G. (Eds.), *Social Judgment and Intergroup Relations: Essays in Honor of Muzafer Sherif* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1992) (pp. 203-219).
- Gumperz, J. J. and Cook-Gumperz, J., "Interethnic Communication in Committee Negotiations" in J. Gumperz (Ed.), *Language and Social Identity* (New York: Cambridge University Press. 1982).
- Murray, E. L., *Imaginative Thinking and Human Existence* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1986).
- Oyserman, D., "The Lens of Personhood: Viewing the Self and Others in a Multicultural Society" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 65(5), 993-1009. (1993).
- Sampson, E. E., "The Deconstruction of the Self" in J. Shotter and K. J. Gergen (Eds.), *Texts of Identity* (London: Sage, 1989).
- Shotter, J. and Gergen, K. J. (Eds.). *Texts of Identity* (London: Sage, 1989).
- Tafjel, H. and Turner, J., "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict" in W. G. Austin and S. Worchel (Eds.), *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1979).
- Van Jaarsveld, F. A., *Omsingelde Afrikanerdom* (Pretoria: HAUM, 1978).

