

## 16. Reactions to discrimination: exclusive identity of foreign workers in South Africa

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### EXTENDING THE DISCOURSE

This research is based on 243 interviews conducted in various workplaces and with a wide variety of individuals in modern-day South Africa. The research analysis unearthed a number of themes within the diversity discipline, however, for the purposes of this chapter we had to pick one theme for discussion. This chapter therefore focuses on the negative psychological effects which foreign employees experience in post-Apartheid and democratic South Africa.

The dominant diversity discourse has been concerned mainly from a political and policy standpoint (Liff, 1996; Dandeker and Mason, 2001). However, an evolving workplace discourse is emerging, informed by a critical post-structuralist tradition which challenges the static demographic characteristics of individuals and the positive, empowering view of individuals with different capacities – in fact, it has focused our attention on how diversity operates in organisations (Zanoni and Janssens, 2004), economic efficiency (Litvin, 2002), the nature of professions (*ibid.*) and broader institutional settings (de los Reyes, 2000). These discourses, it would appear, serve mainly to control less-powerful employees, such as immigrant and foreign workers, through focusing on fixed, essential group characteristics. Unfortunately, they overlook the material structure within which such discourse occurs, rendering the system static to ensuing changes in its environment.

Social systems are produced by people's interactions, and desirable social systems require more than self-organisation – in fact it requires all participants/system members to be aware and cognisant of the psychological processes dynamically grounding individual purposes, values and ultimately discretionary effort in the emerging social reality. Understanding this process requires clarifying the role of power and identity in the

transformation of collectives into social systems. The context of these research interviews, post-Apartheid South Africa, is significant, as resonances of the social discrimination and exclusion suffered by the Black and Coloured population, and women (Black and White), during Apartheid still remain, and is therefore one of the chief focus areas for transformation of the South African workplace. However, little to no attention is given to the impact and undesirable properties of South Africa's history, as well as current focus (stated above), on the psyche of foreign employees in the country.

From our research, we note that many South African organisations have, on the one hand, failed to create the necessary opportunities for individual/self- and group reflection and, on the other, failed to increase flexibility and capacity in the system for appropriate action (emanating from such co-reflection). The necessary generative, recursive and inclusive psychological learning have therefore been lost to the organisation – as a result, it has rendered many organisational environments combative for foreign workers, and ultimately static from a sustainable competitive point of view. The consequences of such static environments are expressed in our interviewees' comments, as follows.

### **I Do Not Trust Anyone in Authority**

Anxiety distancing by the foreign employee towards the South African employer emerged as a major theme during these interviews. This involved the foreign employee physically and, more significantly, mentally distancing themselves from their employer for numerous reasons – especially when such distrust, in authority figures, has been exacerbated by previous (Apartheid) and recent unfair treatment of themselves, or others like themselves, that is, foreigners or immigrants ('I now avoid people or situations that make me feel uncomfortable'). Such wariness of certain authoritative or powerful individuals in the workplace logically resulted in foreign employees sometimes working anti-social hours ('I interact less and often try to do my work when no one is around, like early in the morning or after hours') in order to work in a lonely environment where they did not feel intimidated by the power imbalance. This arguably widened the gulf between managers and foreign employees, fortifying the manager's position as the 'authority figure' and legitimising the command-and-control relational hierarchy. One interviewee criticises the common South African practice of the 'superior telling the worker what to do and the worker obeying without question'. While it could be argued that maintaining distance from authority could at times be positive, by encouraging independence and the use of one's initiative at work, it also made

interviewees feel less comfortable in, and less attached to, the organisation – often resulting in (dysfunctional) communicative affects ('I have become extra careful during conversations at work'). In addition, it was clear that one bad experience with a South African colleague meant that foreign workers tended to expect the same from other South Africans, creating a long-term gulf of distrust and paranoia. One interviewee stated that a negative encounter 'pushes me away from having a close relationship with my colleagues. I start judging them. Today if I feel that someone has the same negative attitude of my first colleague I try to avoid that person'. Interviewees often spoke of negative experiences involving their feelings of inadequacy, and their consequent need to (over) prove their ability and worth to those higher up in the organisational structure. Distancing fuelled by anxiety and consequent resentment meant that many interviewees felt uncomfortable in the presence of top executives ('feeling on the spot to answer a question' and 'feeling as if I have to have an answer for everything, every time a senior person questions me'). Many of those interviewed complained of persistent questioning by the management as to their progress, causing them to feel distrusted and doubt their own capabilities to fulfil their job requirements.

### **I Am Not Treated as a Human Being in the Workplace**

Anxiety distancing relates to the dehumanisation of employees in the workplace. Many interviewees felt that the language barrier and cultural difference meant that they were not regarded as individuals but company workers, with set tasks to fulfil (there was much emphasis on a 'production line' mentality). Such instrumentalism was enhanced by the transactional relationships with South Africans, as they did not enquire or appear interested in communicating about the history and culture of the foreign workers – in fact, some interviewees claimed that this was only the case for foreigners from other African countries, as South Africans appeared extremely interested in all things European. While such de-individualisation is clearly negative, interestingly some individuals felt that it was a small price to pay to avoid the discrimination they felt they would have suffered if their individuality was focused upon by managers and employers. It was therefore more 'effective, to not be noticed' than being 'the special case, that always needs considering and for whom allocations had to be made'. One female employee consequently stated that 'I find it easy being in a foreign country where I have anonymity'. This perceived benefit, however, did not prevent the majority of foreign employees in this situation from feeling undervalued in the workplace, due to them being overmanaged (because of perceived risk), their individuality being stifled

and their identity being undesirable as opposed to celebrated. A male interviewee stated that ‘the lack of respect in my work environment resulted in me not actively contributing to the work environment, and feeling psychologically disconnected’. While this led to a lack of motivation and isolation from his work and his workplace due to resentment, in many cases feeling undervalued contributed to employees doubting their own self-worth and ability. It was often stated by interviewed foreign employees that their company’s cold, goal-orientated approach made them feel ‘insignificant, used and inconvenient . . . a token, as if I don’t have a brain’. This was often intensified by the lack of voice, by and on behalf of foreign workers, and support that new foreign employees receive from the management and coworkers when they entered their jobs. New careers became riddled with insecurities due to employees remaining uninformed about the nature of their company and employment duties, and their lack of social mixing outside of the workplace – thus, leaving the foreigners ignorant and sceptical of South African values and identity. One interviewee mentioned how he was forced to organise his own initiation into his new company due to a lack of structural support: ‘For two weeks I was on my own and miserable until I approached one of them, whom he helped by sharing the necessary information for my new job’.

### **People at Work Are Not Genuinely Interested in My, or Local, Success**

The lack of nurturing of, and support for, employees can be partly attributed to the attitude of certain contemporary companies, particularly those involved in manufacturing and production (a growing sector in the booming South African economy). As such jobs tend to require few qualifications and wages are relatively low, foreign interviewees stressed that companies regarded their workers as dispensable (‘take it or leave it and somebody else will fill your shoes’) and as cogs in a machine which could be overutilised without having to invest in them. As companies of this nature are mainly concerned with the development of previously disadvantaged South Africans and with the short-term performance of the company, they are generally uninterested in investing in their long-term social capital, heterogeneous innovation and social cohesiveness of South African and foreign workers which would be necessary to sustain the future competitive advantage of the company. The arguably narrow focus of affirmative action programmes within the workplace simply exacerbates the situation, with many employers embracing diversity because it improves their local image and not necessarily because they feel it is morally right or necessary for competitive sustainability. Thus, foreign employees especially are often made to feel as if they should be grateful when they receive certain

jobs, meaning that they subsequently feel undervalued as individuals. A female employee spoke of how she had been made to feel unworthy of her new post: 'My manager would see me as an empowered person [affirmative action employee] who has been done a favour by being given a position. He would see me as one of the people adding to his statistics of balanced race and gender'.

The aforementioned dehumanisation of employees and the consequent questioning of their self-worth/ability relate to their disempowerment on entry into a new work environment or throughout their time at a company. Feelings of one's inadequacy or one's rightful place in a hierarchical organisation often, as our interviewees report, led to deference due to anxiety or individual expectation. The paternalistic, Christian-National dominant mode of leading by senior managers and executives in South Africa carries with it a number of assumptions: senior managers and executives are like 'fathers to the organisation, while workers are, and should behave as children', 'leaders are in the know and have the solutions, and followers should act without question', 'education means that one is more of a human than those who are not . . . and therefore entitled to more', 'anything and anyone from Europe carries more weight and credibility', and 'younger people should be seen and not heard'. One interviewee talked of 'swallowing pride and keeping quiet in an attempt to divert attention or diffuse the moment. This is behaviour that younger employees are often expected to exhibit as a matter of course'. The fulfilment of such expectations contrary to one's wishes commonly resulted in a victimisation mentality (almost an externalisation of one's locus of control), where employees felt that speaking up and being assertive when it was expected or required would expose them to discrimination in the workplace – ultimately leading to a form of learned helplessness and unwillingness to take responsibility. Employees suffered from victimisation in numerous forms, of which condescension was prevalent ('He criticised me for mispronouncing "pronunciation"'). Therefore, individuals would often avoid doing what came naturally to protect themselves from victimisation.

### **I Tried to be More Like Them, Which I Wasn't**

Feeling victimised was indeed more common among foreign female interviewees, as their gender was often perceived as more vulnerable and less capable by their male counterparts, and within the male-engendered South African workplace. During Apartheid (and still currently in many organisations), women had to contend with, not only racial, xenophobic, ageist and disability-related prejudices but also discrimination due to gender. As a consequence, many felt excluded and marginalised in the workplace.

Many foreign female interviewees spoke of feeling unimportant in decision making as they were rarely consulted, and felt that real decision making was actually taking place in other environments (for example, in sporting environments, in social gatherings at home, in gentlemen's clubs and so on) that they were not privy to and then 'rubber-stamped in the workplace'. One interviewee stated: 'In a group with only men, nobody says something to me. I think it may be caused by the fact that I am a woman'.

Another form of reported victimisation was that felt and experienced by gay and lesbian foreigners, often referring to being gay and/or lesbian in conjunction with being a foreigner as a 'double whammy' (double disadvantage). As such, gay and lesbian employees are 'tolerated', at best, as a result of the progressive social policies and laws in South Africa but ultimately, as one interviewee put it, 'considered to be problematic to the normal functioning of society'. Derogatory, humiliating and abusive terms (which were said to, or about, them) were quoted to us by foreign interviewees, and it seems that a collective consciousness exists within the South African workplace that makes it acceptable to treat people in ways that are akin to treating them as objects and as animals – often likened to the names that they were, and are, called.

Furthermore, cognitive constraints resulting from intercultural misunderstanding interferes with workplace relations. One key dimension of such misunderstanding and feelings of exclusion emanates from language and its subsequent communicative outcomes. It sometimes was the case, in the experience of our interviewees, that what was offensive in their culture, was normal in the South African culture. One man spoke of how these different social values meant that 'even something so simple like some of the content of his South African jokes seemed to offend most of his foreign workmates'. Some of our foreign interviewees referred to their unhappiness with regard to feeling victimised as a result of their suspicion that South African colleagues were discussing them in a language they could not understand. A female interviewee stated that she thought 'people excluded me as they talked Zulu or Afrikaans. I felt they were talking about me, specifically when they spoke Zulu. You cannot pick up the tone of Zulu. In Afrikaans you could'. Another stated: 'I couldn't understand the jokes and banter, because I didn't understand the context they were made in. This made it difficult to join in'. If new foreign employees are not helped/trained to understand the language and thus bridge the cultural gap, the necessary social mixing will, at best, remain superficial and inauthentic.

Many interviewees found it very difficult to adjust their behaviour to fit with the culture of their South African company without losing much of their individuality. While many attempted to do both ('I tried basically to learn as much as I could about the culture, behaviours, way of doing

things, mentality of the people, without ever losing my identity'), the majority encountered clashes of culture which forced them to choose one approach in their workplace. One individual explained to us that he had lost all connection to his 'core' (in other words, he could no longer be true to himself), due to his constant individual adjusting of 'my modes of interaction to allow me the opportunity to build relationships and be acceptable to my colleagues . . . which ultimately means, to be more like them'. At worst, however, in a harsh and unaccepting work environment, a lack of knowledge regarding cultural nuances can lead to misunderstandings and discrimination.

### **I Learned that You Can Use Your 'Being Different' in a Way that Works for You**

While there has been much discussion regarding the negative aspects of being 'different' in the South African workplace, there has been relatively little on the positive elements. A number of foreign interviewees perceived being different in the workplace as beneficial to them, furthering their career opportunities, enabling them to provide fresh perspectives on issues and making them strive harder to prove themselves. One foreign man claimed: 'My different perspectives and ways of doing things has already led to two major innovations in my company . . . they are now seeing my value as far as creativity is concerned'. Many females spoke of the way in which they used their femininity as a strength in the workplace, as the males they worked with did not expect them to be talented. Female interviewees also turned the negative aspects of being a woman, in a male-dominated workplace, into an advantage, by working harder than men to prove themselves and thriving in their companies as a consequence – often leading to managers giving them more discretion over their work and ultimately resulting in faster promotions. In addition, females often used their different (from men) ways of working to provide their companies (which need different approaches in the 21st century) with different qualities and approaches. One interviewee stated: 'My subordinates and team mates and I often approach things from different viewpoints which I feel gives me the edge . . . as a woman I am more customer focused'.

## **DEMOGRAPHY AND COMMUNICATIVE NETWORKS**

When followers and leaders are from different cultural groups, such as foreign workers in South African organisations, ethnicity may become a

salient demographic characteristic that can influence their relationship. Tsui et al. (1992) found that an individual's attachment to the organisation is lower when there is a difference in race between an individual and the other members in a workgroup. This attachment factor is further negatively affected if the race is structured hierarchically within the organisation, that is, in our South African case where most managers are White and most foreign workers are people of colour. Wesolowski and Mossholder (1997) found that subordinates in leader–follower dyads that were racially diverse had lower job satisfaction when compared to homogeneous dyads. Our research has shown that ethnicity differences may be demographically and psychologically salient for those followers who identify strongly with South African cultural values. Furthermore, demographic similarities such as the same real or perceived root ethnicity (for instance, White foreign workers from Europe working for White South African managers) may result in in-group categorisation and preference/favouritism.

Some writers argue that convergence around collective identity leads to action by increasing organisational commitment (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Dutton et al., 1994) and strengthening organisational culture, motivating employees to work cooperatively (Schein, 1986; Saffold, 1988; Fiol, 1991). More recent work, however, highlights the importance of tensions, fluidity, and paradox in organisational identity (Gioia et al., 2000; Pratt and Foreman, 2000; Fiol, 2002). We adopt a discursive perspective, which is fundamentally more interested in the tensions and fluidity associated with collective identity. From a discursive perspective, a collective identity exists as a discursive object produced in and through the politicality of conversations, rather than as a solely cognitively-held belief – resulting in differential resource allocation, differential motivation and legitimisation with respect to inclusion and exclusion in collaboration, and differential distribution of advantage. Conversations, in this view, are partially the product of strategic individual action and power (re)negotiation.

South African organisational history was created because organisational protagonists, more specifically the economically dominant White group, selectively used available vocabulary from their memory- and developed symbolic-reservoir to interpret, reflect on, legitimise and act on their stories about self and others over time. These stories about 'the women', 'bitches' (referring to women), 'chicks/girls' (referring to grown women), 'the weak' (referring to women), 'the Blacks', 'the *swart gewaar*' (referring to the perceived Black threat), 'the coons' (referring to the Coloureds), 'the laughing drunkards' (referring to the Coloureds), 'the koolies' (referring to the Indians), 'the curry munchers' (referring to the Indians), 'the moffies'



(referring to gays and lesbians), 'the uneducated' (referring to all considered Black, and women), 'the unskilled' (referring to all considered Black, and women), and the like, often served the dominant political, societal and economic paradigms of Apartheid, for some still in the present, and serves the possible future interests of particular individuals. Therefore, for foreigners who are also women, Black, mixed race and Asian, it would be particularly difficult to maintain their root identity, without becoming targets of conversational abuse (overt and covert) as well as suffer isolation as a result of their explicit difference.

Relational demography theory which postulates that people compare their demographic features to other people in their social groups to judge whether the group's demographic features are similar to their own demographic features, we believe, provides a framework for understanding the ethnically, culturally and regionally diverse groups found in South African organisations. Tsui et al. (1992) and Riordan and Shore (1997) have shown that the level of similarity between foreign workers and locals affects attitudes and behaviours related to both their job and their co-workers – specifically that demographic similarity lead to attitudes such as commitment to the group, group cohesiveness, and high group evaluations. These similarities can help validate their personal values and beliefs and enhance their self-esteem (Zimbardo, 1994). Tajfel (1982) showed that, in forming their identity, people desire to be associated with groups that build their self-esteem, and Turner (1981) postulated that individuals use social and personal characteristics such as race, age, gender, regional origin, or organisational membership to create their self-identity and define their own groups. Thus, based on our interviewee responses, we can claim that the South African workplace is more accepting of and less psychologically damaging to foreign workers of European descent (as they are closer to the dominant senior management and executive class in South Africa, that is, White English- and Afrikaner men) as opposed to foreign workers from other regions, especially Africa.

Informal networks, the need to fit into the dominant economic group and conversational metaphors emerged as clear factors limiting the realisation of inclusion in the workplace. The restricted access to, or exclusion from, informal interaction networks (Harriman, 1996; Wajcman, 1999) for foreigners, meant that the construction of narratives about 'others', through power-differentiated jokes and comments seemed, and still seems, 'normal'. Similarly, even though South Africa has some of the most modern laws on gay and lesbian issues, much of organisational life still reveres the traditional, heterogeneous relationship – which emanates from a stance of superiority or belief in a moral high ground. The heteronormative nature of the dominant economic South African group, that is,

the majority of executives and leaders, casts homosexuality in a deviant light and makes conversations about same-sex desire, and behaviour towards same-sex individuals undesirable. Connell (1987: 183) notes that 'hegemonic masculinity is always constructed in relation to other subordinated masculinities, as well as in relation to women', and must negate other masculinities, women and other groups posing a threat to stable and self-sufficient notions of self-hood (Kristeva, 1982). The construction of language, and therefore the 'credible' mental models so prevalent with the dominant economic group legitimised, and still legitimises, the subjugation of economic- and social-minority foreigners (and doubly so for foreign gays and lesbians).

The value of such disempowered ('outgroups') or powerful ('ingroups') informal networks is found in how closely tied they are to the allocation of instrumental resources (Sheridan and O'Sullivan, 2003) that are critical for effective performance in a job and for career development, as well as the express benefits of friendships and social support (Ibarra, 1993). Not having access to powerful informal networks disadvantages individuals in terms of not being privy to all of the information about what is going on in the organisation, not having connections to help with mentoring and introductions necessary for career development (especially at higher levels within an organisation), and being on the 'short end of the stick' with respect to one's personal, and one's identity group's, organisational narrative. Only recently have researchers (O'Connor, 2004; Martens et al., 2007) explicitly recognised the role of stories, narratives and storytelling, and its accompanying gender bias (Cannings and Montmarquette, 1991), with respect to resource acquisition (dominant narrative actors often have asymmetrical access to organisationally relevant information), access to economic opportunities, and identity affirmation to the broader contextual narratives (thereby reducing the perceived uncertainty and risk in being genuine).

Kim (1991) asserts that communication competence is composed of cognitive, affective and operational levels. At the cognitive level, the individual needs to have competence in the language and knowledge of the host culture. At the affective level, competence consists of emotional capacity to deal with the challenges of a host culture and to understand the hosts' emotions and aesthetic values. The operational competence involves behavioural competence in which an individual is able to select appropriate communication strategies to interact with the host country successfully. From this we can see that high-level competence involves all-round knowledge which goes beyond general cultural patterns and skills. In other words, cultural generalisations alone will be far from sufficient to provide adequate skills for intercultural encounters.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, we claim that the psychological effects of workplace discrimination in the South African workplace on the foreign worker, especially the African foreign worker (who now makes up the largest foreign worker group in the country) are often overlooked. While companies often discriminate against employees for being different – directly and indirectly – employees unfortunately often exacerbate their exclusion as a consequence. This can be attributed to feeling distrusted, overlooked and undervalued by those in authority and their coworkers. Such negative feelings naturally lead to a loss of confidence and power in the workplace, causing foreigners to further distance and isolate themselves from authority. The lack of support structures for such employees, and the static workplace culture of many South African workplaces, mean that those new to companies and organisations fail to understand or become incorporated into what should be a dynamic, growing and mobile culture. This, at first, leads to psychological manoeuvring on the part of the foreigners.

One of the most important challenges facing modern South Africa, and at the same time one of our most significant opportunities, is the increase in ethnic and social heterogeneity. While there have been positive instances where being different in one's workplace has proved advantageous, it is clear that structures and discourses within South African organisations need to change, with management altering a top-down approach to one which is consultative, inclusive and communicative with all levels and forms of foreign diversity within the organisation. Not in the short term, but in the medium to long run, successful immigrant societies in South Africa can help create new forms of social solidarity and dampen the initial negative effects of diversity by constructing new, more-encompassing identities – a broader sense of 'we'. In other words, we are arguing for an extension of Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative interaction through the inclusion of requisite variety and identity dynamism, offered by the introduction of foreign workers and immigrants in the South African workplace.

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