Social change in South Africa: opportunity or crisis?

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This article reports on a research project which was initiated with the aim of finding out how South Africans are coping with the radical changes that are taking place in their country. Two hundred postgraduate students of the University of South Africa participated in the research that was carried out from May 1996 to October 1997. A total of 3200 respondents were reached and their responses as purposive samples were regarded as representative of the relevant population.

The people of South Africa have to face the changes brought about by worldwide societal forces such as technological progress, ecological changes, changes in the career world and career planning for the 21st century, economic progress and catastrophe and a drastic change in norms and value systems. They also have to face challenging and daunting changes in the country's political, educational and social frameworks. The aim of the investigation was to determine their experience of and meaning attribution to a new social order and a complete new way of life.

Findings indicate that many people of all cultural groups and of all different areas in the country, urban to far-off rural, are suffering the severe trauma of too much change and too radical changes. They experience communal life as insecure, unsafe, violent and corrupt. Their vision of the future is mainly negative and without hope. Insecurity, mistrust and a loss of moral values are causing renewed tension between racial and ethnic groups. Findings also indicate that at the time of research a large number of people in the country were in many ways rootless, degenerated and confused. At this stage the new social order seems to generate mainly negative expectations and experiences. There are, however, early signs of optimism from students and respondents that after the initial period of adjustment, circumstances in the country will change for the better.

Orientation and introduction to the problem

The dramatic political, economic and social reforms which have been sweeping through South Africa in the last decade of the 20th century have had an unavoidable impact on the country's social system and structures. A complete new way of life and relationship formation has been established to serve the interests of all South Africans. The ultimate aim of the new social order is to cre-
ate and uphold a just and democratic society with a shared macroculture within a multicultural society. The ideal is that every individual should have the opportunity to fully realize his or her potential within the framework of the own culture and should acquire an awareness and understanding of other cultures in order to live and work together harmoniously in a multicultural society.

This is such a complete and radical change from the policy of the previous political dispensation that South African society is suffering from future and culture shock. The problems accompanying the vast series of change seem overwhelming. Many people are unable to cope with all the societal political and economic changes. Some have become disrupted and corrupt to the extent that they resort to crime, and violence on a hitherto unknown scale. Others resort to unreasonable demands for expected privileges, or to the indifference of complete hopelessness. This inability to cope with drastic continuous changes is not an unknown phenomenon. Researchers such as Toffler (1974 & 1980), Toynbee (1958 & 1967), Naisbitt (1984) and Huxley (1959) have exposed and discussed negative behavioural changes as a typical human reaction against the disappearance of everything people know well. The discussion of the findings of this research project in different communities of South African society should also be seen in this light.

**Statement of the problem**

The changes sweeping through South Africa are mostly unique to the country because of the dramatic change of the political regime. There are, however, also vast changes taking place throughout the world, changes which now at the end of the 20th century, affect the lives of people in all countries. These changes are brought about by societal forces such as overwhelming technological progress, demographic shifts, economic progress, ecological changes, changes in the career world and recreational pursuits and a complete change in norms and value systems. Certain aspects of these changes have brought progress, others have brought disaster. The focus point in this research project falls on the following problem: how do South Africans cope with the wave of change from all sides and how do they manage their lives amidst continuous change in the patterns of their communal life?

**Aim and method of research**

Two hundred of the adult students in Socio-education (Honours level) of the University of South Africa participated in the research in their own communities. The aim of the investigation was to find out in what way the people in their communities are adapting to the South Africa of the 21st century. Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used as instruments to determine the experience of and meaning attribution to a new social order and a new way of life of the people in their communities. Questionnaires were used because a well constructed questionnaire ‘opens the gates of communication that allows the meaning of words, behaviour and perceptions to come through from respondents to researchers and vice versa’ (Labaw 1980:11). In the search to determine in what way respondents attributed meaning to societal changes, questionnaires formed an integral part to collect meaningful data. Questionnaires were followed up by qualitative research in the form of semi-structured interviews to verify data and to gain deeper insight into the emotional and intellectual experience of the respondents. Each fieldworker had to use the following individuals as respondents: the minister of the local church, the headmaster of the local primary or secondary school, two teachers, two other community leaders and both parents of five households. This range of participants was regarded as representative of the experience of each specific community. ‘Purposive samples may be regarded as representative of the relevant population’ (Huysamen 1994:44). Questions in the questionnaires and interviews were focused on the following areas of change:
- technological progress,
- demographic shifts,
- economic progress,
- ecological changes,
- changes in career world,
- changes in recreational pursuits,
- changes in patterns of communal life, and,
- changes in norms and value systems.

Data analysis entailed the meticulous interpretation of questionnaires and interviews by student researchers and project leader. The mechanistic positive/negative responses in the questionnaires were analysed and the underlying meaning was interpreted. Broad tendencies in the responses to the semi-structured interviews were isolated.

The students who acted as field workers/interviewers represented the population and the communities of South Africa in the following way:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population:</th>
<th>Communities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>16 Urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>18 Semi-urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coloured</td>
<td>21 Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>145 Far-off rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>200 Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All nine provinces in South Africa were represented.

**Outcome of the research and discussion of results**

Students' analysis and interpretation of the answers on the questionnaires as well as of the interviewees' reactions and discussions during the interviews, indicated that societal life in many communities in South Africa is hovering on the brink of disaster. There are, however, signs of hope for a positive experience of a changed future. Community leaders and parents in the above-mentioned communities reported as follows:

**In the area of technological progress**

In urban, semi-urban and rural areas people mention the improvement of their life-styles brought about by the provision of electricity. The use of media such as the radio and television, cellular phones, fax machines and especially computers and computer networks have made education, business and everyday lifestyles easier and more progressive. Urban and semi-urban representatives praise the improvement of medical care and mention the positive impact of laser and sonar technology that makes sophisticated operations and health treatment possible.

Student researchers reported, however, that poor communities and especially those in far-off rural areas, do not share in the advantages and
progress of technology. Although they have the basic comforts of the use of electricity, poverty prevents the possession of luxury articles. One of the researchers from a far-off rural town reported the following:

‘Our place is far from the advanced places where there is electricity, transport facilities, communication and proper educational facilities. In many ways we live in the dark. There is one school for the primary and secondary children but not enough classrooms or teachers. Teachers sacrifice themselves to help pupils in both school levels but their teaching is not effective. We have no clinic or health centre. When people get sick they have to go to the nearby village which is 47 kilometres away’.

Conclusions drawn from all the different reports indicate that technological progress has opened exciting opportunities for many communities in South Africa. Although no exact statistics are available as yet, there are just as many communities and a greater percentage of people who have no access to these advantages.

Demographic shifts

Representatives of all communities report a fear of the uncontrolled population growth in the country. Black community leaders from all participating communities - urban to far-off rural - are busy with the compilation and conveyance of birth control programmes. One of the researchers from a rural area reported the following:

‘Each and every year the schools are visited by nurses from the hospital who are delegated to preach the gospel of family planning.’

In spite of a general realisation of the dangers of overpopulation, numbers in the country are reported to be growing. A lack of job opportunities drives people - many of whom are emigrants from other African countries - to the cities. Urbanisation resultantly escalates out of control. South Africa’s major cities are becoming dangerous and unhealthy places to live in. High density living areas and squatter camps have become threatening with regard to health, personal safety and the safety of the possessions of all who live nearby.

Middle-class citizens of black townships are the worst affected by this. They are afraid to leave their houses, children and old people to go to work in the mornings. They never know what they will find when they return.

Community leaders and parents complain about the strain on health services and educational facilities. There are more and more poor and unemployed people who lack the money to pay school fees and buy books, clothes and food for their children. This puts an added strain on welfare services. Transport services are also degenerating because of a growing number of pirate travellers. The general standard of living is dropping rapidly in middle and lower economic class households and insecurity, hunger and fear are causing increased ethnic and racial tensions leading to serious riots and killings. Of all the interviewees, 62% expressed negative expectations of the future because of the rapid population growth, and uncontrolled urbanisation.

Economic progress

The previous apartheid regime in South Africa was much criticised and worldwide sanctions were experienced which influenced the economy negatively. When the new democratic government came into power in April 1994 great expectations arose in the minds of ordinary South Africans. Almost all expected to reap financial and material rewards in some way or other.

This frame of mind causes many problems for the new government and has a very detrimental influence on the moral standards of the people.

Of the respondents 59% reported conflict and bitterness in relationships arising from this desire for wealth and possessions. Greediness and selfishness have changed people’s values instead of the ubuntu spirit - which implies that everyone was ready to help anyone else and was prepared to work together for the welfare of all - a spirit of
‘as much as possible for myself’ has pervaded people's minds. Many respondents report financial stress and a lack of basic necessities and attribute it to a lack of interest to create opportunities – especially job opportunities – for all the people of the country.

Communities criticise the government’s inability to create new jobs and the Reconstruction and Development Plan which was supposed to uplift the underprivileged, has failed to such an extent that it is scarcely mentioned and then with little enthusiasm.

Respondents in urban and semi-urban areas mention the negative influence of the informal business sector on the formal sector. Affirmative action is criticised by all Indian and Coloured respondents. They complain that competent people lose jobs and unskilled and unqualified ones get appointed in their place. The result is a noticeable destruction of previously well-functioning infrastructures.

Economic decay following on the vandalistic destruction of schools, libraries, cinemas, parks and playgrounds is mentioned by 74% of black and coloured respondents. The culture of non-payment of bonds, loans and municipal accounts which is destroying many previously well-functioning communities is much criticised. Respondents in urban and semi-urban areas expressed concern about the violence and high crime rate. It brings fear and insecurity for the people of the country and causes overseas investors to lose interest in South Africa resulting in a further loss of jobs and a greater poverty in the country. Much criticism is expressed against the illegal immigrants (an estimated number of between two and eight million) who are putting increasing strains on the country’s economic structures.

Coloured respondents mention an alarming tendency amongst their people to resign from their jobs to get their hands on their pension money. They use this money to pay debts and to put up small businesses of their own. Few of these businesses are successful and when they fail, people are without jobs, money or any prospects for the future.

The general attitude towards the economic future of the country is fairly pessimistic.

Ecological changes

The worldwide consciousness of the dangers of soil, air and water pollution has found its way into the minds of many South Africans. Respondents in the higher socio-economic classes complain about erosion, the chopping off of trees, about air and water pollution by industries and about health risks and diseases because of pollution. Squatters and large industries are earmarked as the greatest culprits. The most general complaint in all communities is against littering. ‘We are living in a rubbish bin’ runs like a refrain through 69% of the responses.

Important is the continuous references by respondents to courses in nature preservation that are presented in schools and educational facilities. These courses enjoy strong support from all communities.

Changes in the career world and in career planning

The worldwide change in outlook on career planning had to influence the South African scene as well. The information era requires a different attitude and viewpoint concerning the career world. South Africans had previously sought security in careers like teaching, nursing, policing, the defence forces, the civil service and other governmental institutions as is indicated in the answers of the respondents. Since five years ago, a rethinking of the future, also in terms of the career world, has started. Criticism of education and training is rife with remarks like the following from the respondents:

‘Education is engaged in preparing people for a society which does not exist any more.’

‘Education suffers from a gap between content and the life experience of pupils between the system of values it preaches and goals set up by society.’
‘Education and especially tertiary education is a waste of tax-payers’ money. Too many students receive diplomas and degrees and can’t find jobs in any case.’

‘Focus ought to fall on problem-centred learning that prepares students for their careers and not so much on tuition where teachers do all the work.’

The South African government is aware of this criticism and introduced a new education system in March 1997 (Curriculum 2005). It will take six years to be fully implemented and it attempts to foresee and cater for the needs of pupils and students of the information era. Much emphasis is placed upon creative thinking, problem-centred learning, the training of skills – career skills, life skills, survival skills and communication skills – and upon entrepreneurship.

Representatives of urban, semi-urban and rural communities report a new interest in mathematics, science and computer skills. Two semi-urban communities have started with a ‘Maths bus’. This bus is equipped with all necessities to introduce primary and secondary children to the wonder and career possibilities of Mathematics. The bus drives from school to school to reach as many children in the mentioned areas as possible.

Respondents from all areas report a renewed interest in basic adult education amongst black people.

The career world of the 21st century will differ vastly from the world we have known during the agricultural and industrial eras. South Africa is trying to rise to the challenge of preparing the children to be adequately equipped with initiative, innovation, entrepreneurship and life skills to meet the information era with self-confidence.

Changes in recreational pursuits

Urban and semi-urban respondents of white and Indian communities report an increased interest in passive recreational pursuits such as watching television and videos, going to the cinema and playing computer games. Amongst the black and coloured respondents only nineteen of all who were interviewed mentioned movies and videos. Black and coloured respondents in all areas report that they spend time with their families – going to game reserves, parks, libraries and eating out at Holiday Inn hotels. Of these respondents in urban, semi-urban and rural areas, 69% mentioned attendance of soccer games, beerhalls, taverns and informal bottle stores. Dagga smoking, the taking of drugs and gambling are also mentioned. One of the black community leaders in a semi-urban area expressed himself strongly and said that his people were much inclined to ‘drinking, drug-taking, fighting and fornication’.

A lack of recreational facilities, especially sports fields and libraries, is mentioned by 39% of respondents in black and coloured areas.

Leisure time is often used by South Africans of all population groups to take on a second job to supplement inadequate incomes.

Changes in communal life

All communities report changes in lifestyle. Fear of violence and criminal activities restrict people more and more to their homes. Ethnic groups are growing more suspicious and more intolerant of one another. Fear and insecurity are the main reasons for this. The abundant possession of dangerous weapons disrupts the peace in all communities and seems to enthuse more violence. There were many complaints (71% of all respondents) because of the little effect and influence of policing – these respondents are also concerned about the growing number of people who take the law into their own hands because they have lost faith in the government’s ability to secure peace and safety.

Previously well-ordered communities are losing their peace and prosperity because of an influx of people and squatter settlements mushrooming in and around cities, towns and townships. Sporadic outbreaks of contagious diseases are reported in these settlements. Black respondents reported a renewed interest in the worshiping of the forefathers. Western culture and Christianity are losing its stronghold in favour of traditional life. One of the respondents from a rural area reported as follows: ‘By day we are
Christians but at night we slaughter goats to honour our ancestors.’

Coloured respondents complain of the strong grip of gangs and gangleaders on their communities. They have to obey the rules and commands of the gangs or suffer the consequences of being terrorised. Of these respondents 49% mention the total control of their communal life by gangleaders. Parents are very upset by the fact that children from primary school age are influenced by the activities of the gangs and that some of them as young as eight years of age join these gangs.

Respondents from all areas report that civic organisations are coming to the fore and are playing a more and more responsible role in the lives of the people in their communities. Many civic organisations are working on the growing problem of street children and are raising funds to provide shelter and training opportunities for these children.

The general impression created by all answers and responses is that the people of all areas and communities in South Africa are afraid of violence, abuse, poverty, insecurity and a breakdown of infrastructures brought about by the phenomenal changes on the political, economic and social fronts in South Africa.

Changes in norms and value systems

Researchers and respondents report an increasing loss of honesty, integrity, chastity, diligence, a pride in work well done, and respect for the lives and possessions of others. The rising wave of crime, corruption, violence, moral licentiousness and the negative influence of these factors on the morale of all South Africans are mentioned by 87% of respondents.

Parents in all areas, and specifically black parents, complain of an unbridgeable generation gap between them and their children. They report that children are becoming more and more uncontrollable and disrespectful of their elders. It seems to them as if the children have been led to interpret the meaning of democracy in a completely erroneous way. They say that:

‘Children regard themselves as equals to adults because of a misunderstanding of democracy.’

‘Young people think they can do what they want, when they want and how they want.’

‘People and especially the younger ones think democracy means freedom to relax and receive everything you need without working for it. They do not want to hear about responsibility.’

Another factor that was strongly criticised by 48% of the black and 41% of the coloured respondents, is a perceived negative effect of the emancipation of women. Community leaders are very upset by the change of attitude that emancipation has brought among women. They report that a growing number of wives are extremely irritated with their husbands. In overreaction against their earlier unprivileged status, they refuse to obey their commands, they may not even ask ‘for a cup of coffee to be brought to me’. Women refuse to respect men and divorce their spouses for the flimsiest of reasons.

The divorce rate in the country is rising and so are the numbers of children in single parent families. A general trend of being distrustful and selfish and of having no care for the welfare of the community has settled in many communities. Emphasis falls on individualism and the satisfaction of own personal needs.

Community leaders complain that people have grown greedy and materialistic to a fearful extreme. They report that ‘material wealth is valued. Anyone with a lot of money is respected and honoured.’

Moral and sexual licentiousness have also reached extreme limits. People are growing more and more promiscuous. Marriage and family life is no longer respected. Venereal diseases, aids and teenage pregnancies are on the increase.

Leaders and many parents blame this on the influence of the media. Films, videos, TV shows,
and magazines promote sexual licentiousness and flaunt pornographic material.

Many people have become extremely confused because they are exposed to different value systems. This confusion is intensified by the conflict between traditional and modern value systems. Everyone wants to be modern and successful but they do not know how to achieve their ideals in a secular world without sacrificing traditional and spiritual values.

Conclusion

An overview of all questionnaires and interview responses leaves the impression of a distinct negativism and even despair of all aspects of communal life in the country at present. Social change and future shock have brought greater disaster than opportunity for many South Africans. Findings indicate that a large number of individuals have been assimilating too much change in too short a time and as a result have become stressed and disoriented. The complex, rapidly changing multi-faceted social structure of the new South Africa has in the words of Engelbrecht (1996:88) resulted in 'rootlessness, degeneration and confusion.'

Noticable, however, is the fact that community leaders and civic organisations, in both urban and rural areas are accepting greater responsibilities for the welfare of their communities. Resultant care services, fund raisings and developing of opportunities seem to be instilling hope in the minds of many disoriented South Africans. The necessary courage and perseverance to change disaster and negativism into an opportunity for a better future, lie well within the grasp of the people of South Africa.

Opsomming

Sosiale verandering in Suid-Afrika: geleentheid of krisis? In hierdie artikel word daar verslag gelewer van 'n navorsingsprojek wat ten doel gehad het om uit te vind op watter wyse Suid-Afrikanners die huidige veranderinge in die land beleef en hanteer. Tweehonderd nagraadse studente van die Universiteit van Suid-Afrika het die ondersoek geloods in die tydperk Mei 1996 tot Oktober 1997. 'n Totaal van 3 200 respondente is bereik en hul response is beskou as verteenwoordigend van die relevante populasie.

Suid-Afrikaners moet radikale veranderinge wat deur wêreldwyse sosiale kragte teweeggebring is verwerk: Tegnologiese vooruitgang, ekologiese veranderinge, veranderinge in die beroepswêreld en loopbaanbeplanning vir die 21ste eeu, ekonomiese vooruitgang en verval en 'n drastiese verandering in norme en waardestelsels is enkele van hierdie veranderinge. Daarby moet hulle uitdagende en veleisende veranderinge in Suid-Afrika se eie politieke, onderwys en sosiale raamwerk verwerk. Die doel van hierdie onderzoek was om vas te stel hoe mense die nuwe sosiale orde en nuwe lewenswyse ervaar en watter betekenis hulle daaraan toekom.

Beverdinge dui daarop dat mense van alle kulturele groepie in die verskillende dele van die land – stedelik tot verafgeleë platteland – ernstige trauma beleef as gevolg van te veel en te ingrypende veranderinge. Die mense van Suid-Afrika beleef hul lewe in die gemeenskap as onveilig, ongeborg, geweldadig en vol korrup-sie. Hul toekomsvisie is oorwegend negatief en sonder hoop. Onskeerheid, wantroue en 'n verlies aan morele waardes veroorsaak hernieuwde spannig tussen etniese en rassengroepie. Beverdinge dui daarop dat 'n groot aantal mense ten tye van die ondersoek ankerloos en verward was. Die nuwe sosiale orde skep op hierdie tydspan hoofsaaklik negatiewe verwagtings en ervaarings. Daar is egter tekens van hoop by studente en respondent die dat die aanvanklike tydperk van verandering, opgevolg sal word deur beter sosiale omstandighede vir almal.

Note

1. Pirate travellers are passengers who refuse to pay and then threaten the lives of officials who confront them.
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