

"South Africa and the World at the Dawn of 2008"



Pretoria

Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

MAJOR THEMES

1. We live in a split community
2. A strong sense of disconnection
3. Concerns about leadership

Theme 1. We live in a split community

The community is characterised by an ingrained bad / good split which is presently manifesting as a type of national neurosis, which is called (the new) 'apartheid in the mind'. These splits are kept alive through constant media coverage and has become highly politicised. Individuals experience the situation as being objectified and they feel deprived of their dignity as citizens.

Some people are longing for the past with its (sometimes only) positive memories and an idealised future. Other people are trying to find meaning in the present reality with its challenges of living in a new and growing democracy with issues around identity and troubled relationships. Some people experience intense and difficult feelings such as guilt, fear, anger, hostility and rage, while others experience hope and are proactively working towards changing systems. Most citizens live in poverty and struggle with illiteracy and limited opportunities, mostly aware of their immediate needs and surroundings, while others live amongst affluence and abundance in terms of resources, aware of and enjoying global opportunities such as travelling and working abroad and seeing the world. The split seems to become an economic polarisation – the rich becomes richer and the poor becomes poorer.

People seem to live in fear of the integration of diversity dimensions such as race and poverty / affluence. On the superficial level it is said that 'we are all similar and have to be friends'. Yet, in reality the connection across difference does not take place.

Hypothesis: The politicisation and constant awareness of differences, keep the nation immobilised and stuck in splits and acutely aware of how different 'the other' is. In this mind-set it is difficult if not impossible to move out of the safe boundary of 'the own' and to connect with 'the other' in a way where sameness within difference is realised, and where choice and responsibility can be exercised.

Theme 2. A sense of disconnection and flight

The experienced splits lead to a sense of disconnection and various flight responses. On a practical and physical level, the lack of personal and community safety manifests in

the building of electrified fences around property and possessions. Psychologically, many people are realising that they also build walls around themselves to protect them from outside threat. This disassociation leads to the belief that there is a normal world somewhere outside of the own where life is safe and meaningful. Some people move from the cities to live in small towns and some immigrate to other countries.

Some people find hope in the disconnection, in also seeing the positive side and to be able to deal with both sides. These individuals seem to authorise themselves towards having meaningful personal relationships with sameness and difference.

Hypothesis: Fear of connection across difference leads to detachment from the immediate realities of life and meaningful relationships across difference. Thus, the sane society exists in the mind's fantasies and the hope 'is a place somewhere else'.

Theme 3. Concerns About Leadership

The nation's pre-occupation with differences and splits also manifests in the leadership arena. Leadership is split into camps – the old, stable, conservative and assertive versus the new, radical, rebellious; the educated versus the uneducated; the emotionally distant, cold, uninvolved and exclusive versus the emotionally connected, interested and inclusive.

The agendas, competence and behaviour of national and corporate leadership, are constantly questioned by followership. The impression is that leadership is oscillating between being authorised and being de-authorised by the different sides of the split. There is a strong longing for a new leader to represent both sides and take away the discomfort of difference by integrating everything and everyone. If this is not possible, people are willing to forgive leaders their misconduct, as long as they address the practical issues of safety, poverty, health as well as the symbolic issues of identity formation.

The hope is carried by the community projects initiated and administered by corporate leadership. Although some of these projects seem to be failing because of organisations wanting to impress the government in terms of their social responsibility endeavours, many are making a difference in the quality of life of the poor and deprived masses.

Hypothesis: The obsession with difference reflects in the splitting of leadership into camps. Followers do not realise that they project their own uncertainty and insecurity onto (and maybe also into) leaders, which makes it very difficult for any one to effectively lead the country or the organisation.

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Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

The discussion began with a story about a member whose daughter had given birth to a baby with a rare condition. The baby's mother was concerned despite the doctor not paying attention to the mother's observations. The group member became highly anxious which seemed to relate to the lack of clarity and communication regarding the baby.

This led her to wonder about heightened anxiety that is apparent in the community and society and which might have something to do with information being withheld by authority figures.

Another member then spoke about a speeding fine that had arrived in the letter box and not disclosing this to the husband because what he did not see he could not fuss about. This led her to wonder about what her children did not tell her and the anxiety that was linked to known facts. Children may be taking responsibility in not disclosing or may be protecting the parents. There is anxiety both in knowing and not knowing the facts. It is also hard for parents to let go of their children as they grow up and begin to separate from the parents.

When children then marry and have their own families, the parents are displaced as they no longer belong in the new family. Much of this is appropriate and healthy development and there are still feelings of displacement and exclusion.

Two highly educated and intelligent patients in a local hospital setting were diagnosed with Schizophrenia but not told. The doctors wanted to see the response to medication before the diagnosis divulged. In the group setting they asked repeatedly what was wrong and wanted the name of the illness. When they were told, one committed suicide and the other is going on with her life.

Another story was told of a client who was desperately lonely and alone. Her husband was terminal with cancer and when he heard that he was to be admitted to Hospice he committed suicide.

In a university setting it was mentioned that people do different things with information. The parents of a student who had failed asked questions of the head of department which indicated that they had not been given the facts by their daughter. The facts were also not that simple to convey or understand. Attendance at all practical sessions were no indication of competence.

It was also interesting what people did with information even when it is known for example a student was told that he would not pass if he did not improve and he did nothing to remedy the situation. There are different responses to knowing and not knowing.

A member who has lived in South Africa for many years returned to her home country for a holiday in 2007. While there she had a real sense that she no longer belonged there and belonged in South Africa. On her return she was dropped from two activities in which she had been involved and this opened up a chasm for her and a precarious sense of belonging and a sense of displacement and statelessness.

Kenya, and a huge exodus, was referred to and the apparent ease with which people were replaced in the midst of huge numbers being displaced by emigration.

A personal experience was shared by a member. An Aunt treats her as a child until the Aunt's own children arrive and the member is then displaced and the children favoured.

A young Kenyan student was talked about who copes academically very well but is not coping socially or emotionally and indulges in risky behaviours such as refusing to see a doctor but overdosing on tablets. Foreign students are battling with heightened anxiety and seem to lose their normal coping skills when there are problems at home. It was

also wondered what was happening with regard to family support for the student as this seemed to be absent.

The discussion moved to South Africa and the political situation and that in the midst of so much uncertainty there was a need for information and communication but it was wondered how much could be trusted. There was only some certainty in the uncertainty that prevails and seems to be consistent. In the past 'authority' held and contained anxiety but in the present climate this is not happening. There is huge anxiety and uncertainty around the elections and the Zuma - Mbeki saga. Escalating numbers of people of all races have their passports ready to leave if Zuma is elected. Many people in high places have been arrested, suspended and charged with or about to be charged with corruption fraud, mismanagement and other similar crimes. This leads many to consider the future to be precarious.

Some apparently irrational decisions seem to be made in the midst of the positioning, games and falseness that is being propagated. People feel betrayed when previously trusted figures lend support to Zuma. It is felt to be a populist move and is paradoxical that he was supported by screaming women in the face of allegations of rape and unusual views in HIV/ AIDS.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

- Nothing is as it seems
- There is always some unknowing in the knowing
- Lack of taking responsibility which leads to lack of trust
- Loss, displacement, replacement and emptiness
- Promoting one's interests at the expense of integrity and broader society – Basic Assumption me-ness
- Move away from ubuntu of group culture to self-aggrandizement.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

The authoritarian structure of the past created a shared defense against individual psychological awareness about how vulnerable it was to be a singleton. Without this structure, the world is seen as a treacherous place and where:

- What is seen is not what materializes
- Little and few can be trusted
- Increasing experiences of aloneness and loneliness that lead to escalating levels of anxiety

These increasing levels of aloneness, loneliness and anxiety are an appropriate response in the world as it is and reveal greater psychological maturity. In the past the defense used was paranoid-schizoid but has currently moved more to the depressive position. Developmentally speaking then this is a step forward.

Convener: Lorna Brown