

On communication in a divided society.

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ON July 2nd 1985 the Human Sciences Research Council released its main report on intergroup relations in South Africa, *The South African Society: Realities and Future Prospects*. This paper provides an overview of this investigation with specific reference to the role of communication in intergroup relations. The background to this study is first discussed, followed by some of the more salient conclusions contained in the main report. Specific issues concerning communication and intergroup relations are dealt with in conclusion.

Background

The Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in co-operation with researchers and South African universities, in July 1985 concluded a comprehensive social scientific investigation into the nature and dynamics of intergroup relations. This investigation had been initiated in 1981 and it involved more than 200 researchers and another 500 support staff members. It covered a wide spectrum of issues involving more than 20 disciplines, such as law, political sciences, economics, industrial relations, religion, communication, etc.

There were three levels in the management, organization and execution of the HSRC investigation into intergroup relations, viz. the levels of the main committee, working committees and contract researchers. The main committee was responsible for the policy and management of the investigation as a whole and for the compilation of the final report. The main committee appointed 13 work committees to assist it in the thematization and operationalization of specific research areas, the supervision of the



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quality of the research and the integration of the research done under such a work committee's auspices into a consolidated working committee report that was submitted to the main committee. The research projects operationalized by the working committees were publicised as widely as possible and the entire research community was invited to submit tenders for the undertaking of research projects on a contract basis. The way in which the investigation was organized thus yielded 120 indivi-

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dual project reports, 10 working committee reports and one main report.

Main Conclusions

The analysis of the information indicated the following:

- The reality of groups and group differences in South Africa and the consequent complex structure of society;

- The endogenous nature of tension and stress in a deeply segmented country like South Africa;

- A relatively high level of conflict intensity in this country and indications that this level was increasing.

One of the most important sources of conflict in South Africa was found to be the way in which intergroup relations have traditionally been arranged, namely by focussing exclusively on the group as unit for planning and policy formulation. Due to various causes such as rapid urbanization, upward educational mobility, the widespread availability of mass communication, etc. the ideal underlying the resultant policy of segregation, namely separate but equal, could not be realized. The result of this was that the conflict inherent in any deeply segmented society could not be sufficiently and permanently reduced or redirected into constructive directions.

At the same time the findings also strongly suggested that no simple model for the arrangement of intergroup relations would probably have succeeded in the past. It would therefore be a logical fallacy to infer from the preceding conclusion that alternative proposals of the past would therefore necessarily have succeeded.

The traditional emphasis on the group as *only* basis for planning and policy formulation has led to a number of core problems which independently and in interaction with each other lie at the root of conflict in this country. One of the most important of these core problems is that of isolation and insulation, the others being the tension between diversity and segregation, group membership and inequality. South African society can be characterized by people who have become isolated from one another, although they are interdependent upon one another. South Africans have consequently forfeited the opportunity to perceive

one another not only as members of conventional categories of people, but also as individuals with personal needs and aspirations, fears and hopes and diverse and common characteristics and interests. The social scientific literature is unanimous that isolation and insulation of people can give rise to mistrust and suspicion between groups and prejudice ultimately leading to what can be described as vicarious or indirect perspectives of one another. The empirical studies undertaken for this investigation substantiated his link unambiguously. It goes without saying that none of the above processes can be conducive to good or constructive human relations.

An alternative objective

Given problems such as the above, as well as the other factors operating in society, the question arises as to what alternative objectives could and should be pursued? Or should an historical determinism be accepted passively? The Main Committee of the *HSRC Investigation into Intergroup Relations*, however, unequivocally rejected the assumption that developments inevitably follow a particular set course.

On the basis of the findings in respect of, on the one hand, the reality of ethnicity as a social force and the concomitant group differences, and on the other the disfunctions inherent in a traditional over-emphasis on the group as unit for policy formulation, it was concluded that the *dynamic balance* should be found between the interests, rights and privileges of the group on the one hand and those of the individual on the other. In this way common value systems can be promoted which would contribute towards the development of *constructive* human relations. This alternative objective can be obtained to the extent that the focus is switched from differences to communalities, from uniqueness to universality, from the particular to the general and from those things that differentiate to those that all share, without thereby denying differences and group identity where they exist.

It is of course one thing to identify an ideal situation, but altogether a different issue to specify the ways by means of which that ideal could at least be approached, if not reached. On the basis of its analyses of the nature and dynamics of this society it was possible to identify a number of minimum conditions or prere-

quisites which should be met in order to attain the elusive balance between individual and group as units for planning and policy formulation.

Principles or prerequisites

Briefly stated the principles identified to facilitate a dynamic balance between group and individual are the following:

- Voluntary association with other individuals and groups which include the right to non-association.
- The right of every South African to participate at least in all those decision-making processes in the public arena involving his/her interests.
- Every South African should have equal access to all the resources of the country.
- Public institutions should be legitimized through participation.
- The human dignity of all members of society should be recognized and respected.
- Group identity should be recognized and observed.

Communication

Limited spontaneous communication, and sometimes even the lack of communication at all levels between members of the various population categories, lies at the root of the isolation and insulation referred to above. The report of the working committee for Communication to be published shortly, is therefore of central importance. The following represents some of the core findings from that report: the following themes are summarized here: languages, inter-personal communication, mass communication, gatekeepers and facilitators.

Languages

At least in multilingual countries like South Africa language should be seen as an important variable, irrespective of whether it is defined as a moderating or an independent variable. In this sense language was defined as a pre-condition to communication. The following information is proof of the potential importance of the role of languages in communication and intergroup relations in this country. Although there are two official languages in South Africa, English and Afrikaans, census statistics show that there are 10 languages each used by at least 1 per cent

of the population as home language. The census questionnaire provide for 25 home languages. Of these 25 home languages, 11 are acknowledged as written languages.

The home languages of 67 per cent of the total population is a Black language while 20 per cent use Afrikaans and 11 per cent English. Not a single Black language is used by all the Africans in the country; in this respect it was found that 31 per cent of all Africans between the ages of 15 and 54 could not understand Zulu, the most popular language. (The terms agreed to by the Main Committee are used here. For a discussion on the sensitive nature of group labels the reader is referred to the first chapter of the main report.)

Especially if the important role of the press in intergroup relations is considered the question of literacy becomes important. Of the urbanized population 97 per cent of the whites, 77 per cent of the Coloureds, 81 per cent of the Indians and 63 per cent of the Africans are literate, i.e. defined as having obtained an educational level of standard 3 or higher. In the urban areas, the literacy level of whites is more or less the same as that in the urban areas, while that for the Coloured and black people is approximately 50 per cent lower, namely 38 per cent and 29 per cent respectively. Of the rural Indians 66 per cent are literate. For the total population 97 per cent of the whites are literate, 68 per cent of the Coloureds, 79 per cent of the Indians and 45 per cent of the Africans. Although approximately 5,6 million Africans in South Africa are illiterate South Africa as well as Lesotho can still boast to be the only countries in Africa of which half of the population is literate.

It was concluded that the communication problems in a country like South Africa are complex functions of the number of languages spoken in that country, the language ability, language attitudes and the extent of literacy of the entire population. It was further clear that there was an urgent need for all South Africans to be able to speak at least one Black language. As such language and language preferences reflect the nature of intergroup relations in South Africa.

Interpersonal communication

A multi-purpose countrywide survey was undertaken specifically for this investigation. The survey included a number of questions on the

extent of real contact or communication with members of the various population groups. The main question in the survey read: approximately how much contact have you had since yesterday evening with members of the different population groups? A number of subsequent questions entailed a closer specification of this general contact question in terms of the situations in which the contact took place as well as an evaluation of such contact. A preliminary analysis of the responses to these questions showed the following:

● Between a half and two-thirds of the respondents had had no contact with members of other population-groups on the previous day. The largest percentage of intergroup communication took place between English-speaking and Afrikaans-speaking whites, while the African respondents were the least involved in intergroup communication, namely 33 per cent. Africans were most frequently the indicated receivers of intergroup communication, namely 58 per cent, while Indians were indicated to have received the least such communication, namely 29 per cent. Analyses of variance, however, showed that intergroup communication was not simply a function of the population group of either the sender or that of the receiver but that it was a complex function of the sender's own population group as well as that of the receiver.

● Most of the intergroup communication that took place, occurred in structured vertical situations such as the workplace (supervisor-worker) and in commerce (e.g. shop assistant-customer). These situations are characterized, of course, by the fact that contact is limited to formal topics, that the persons concerned fulfill clearly defined roles and that the relations towards one another are prespecified. Very little or no contact on the basis of equal status took place in spontaneous social situations.

● Not only did the various population groups differ from each other in terms of the extent of their communication but they also differed significantly in their evaluation of such contact. An analysis of variance here showed that, in general, whites were significantly more satisfied with their communication with other groups than were these groups with their communication with whites — an a-symmetrical situation.

The asymmetry referred to above, seems to

indicate a vicious cycle in the relationship between whites, on the one hand, and the other population categories on the other, to the extent that whites evaluate their communication with other groups as positive; no reason exists for them to change or adapt their communication with such groups in any way. In fact, it is quite conceivable that they are not aware of the fact that these other groups do not find this communication very satisfying. Conversely, it can be expected that, to the extent that communication with others is found to be unsatisfactory, one's communication with such groups may be limited (to the extent that limiting one's communication can be afforded).

Mass Communication

The role of mass communication; specifically newspapers, magazines, books, radio and television in intergroup relations was studied in terms of the following parameters: extent, coverage, access, control and effects. In this process use was made of information contained research commissioned for this study, the AMPS reports as well as other studies like dissertations.

There is no doubt that the media in South Africa are the most highly developed in Africa and that South Africa enjoys a comparatively large degree of communication freedom, albeit not unrestricted. In this sense the media in South Africa offer a forum for discussion and at the same time fulfills a watchdog function.

Content and other analyses showed that to varying degrees the various media promote sectional interest. These can vary from the alternative press which is strongly outspoken against the white-oriented government to the other extreme of the conservative Afrikaans press, which in fact, pleads for a return to a Verwoerdian model of apartheid. The analyses and interpretations indicated that the average South African who has to rely on only one medium of communication receives a one-sided view of groups, their mutual relations, policy and alternative perspectives on policy.

A larger proportion of the total South African population has access to the different media than is the case in any other country in Africa or even in all the African countries put together. This exposure, however, is not proportional for the different population groups. Examples of

the skewed and asymmetrical distribution of access to the media are the following: the Coloured population category has the widest spectrum of exposure, while the Afrikaans-speaking whites have practically no access to the black media. At the same time 21,4 per cent of the Afrikaans-speaking whites claim to read English language papers, while only 5 per cent of the English-speaking whites claim to read Afrikaans newspapers. The asymmetry found in media exposure implies that notwithstanding the wide spectrum of media available in South Africa, individual population categories are exposed to a relatively narrow spectrum of opinions and information on groups and their relations. One of the primary factors responsible for this asymmetry is the relatively large number of home languages found in this country as well as the issue of ownership or control over the media. Concerning the latter, it was found in this investigation that groups other than whites exerted practically no control over the media inasmuch as that they were not represented on the boards of control of the major media. This conclusion clearly has implications for the potential effects of the media vis-à-vis intergroup relations: The pattern of mass communication seems to indicate that it only serves a reinforcing function — reinforcing existing stereotypes, expectations, and perceptions of the various groups in this country and thereby not contributing significantly to an improvement in intergroup relations.

Gatekeepers and facilitators

The analyses of gatekeepers and facilitators indicated that there were many gatekeeping factors influencing intergroup communication in this country while there was nearly a total lack of facilitators. Probably one of the most important gatekeeping functions in South Africa is the forms through the publications act. Probably one of the most debilitating aspects concerning the application of this act is the fact that the white population category predominates in all activities. In this sense the legitimacy of, e.g., the Publications Board is often questioned. It was noted, though, that many of the gatekeepers and gatekeeping functions are also to be found in other countries and that even industrialized Western countries often encountered dysfunctions associated with the gatekeeping process.

Although conflict is practically endemic to South African society a nearly complete lack of mediating and facilitating organizations was found. In fact, only one independent mediating organization operating in the industrial sphere was found, while one academic institution is also involved in conflict resolution. To put this finding in perspective it should be kept in mind that the USA boasts literally hundreds of organizations and groups involved in conflict resolution. Clearly a very real need exists in this area.

Conclusion

The work committee on the communication aspect concluded that very little real and authentic communication took place between members of the different population groups — irrespective of whether it entailed face-to-face or mass communication. On the interpersonal level communication is typically task orientated while mass communication is characterized by the one group communicating about, rather than with, the other. Because of the limited communication between the various groups and especially in view of the group-centric intentions of such communication one can hardly expect that groups would get to know each other better. It is unlikely that the one group would understand the other's perceptions better, appreciate the other's needs more properly or form a more veridical conception of expectations and aspirations, ideals and fears, levels of tolerance, uniqueness and universality, breadth and depth of experience. The communication patterns found in this investigation seem to indicate a vicious cycle in which existing stereotypes are reinforced. In this way the risk of distorted communication becomes very real.

From the preceding summary it should be clear that communication could be one of the factors contributing towards resolving the intergroup conflict in this country. Of course, this conclusion is not very original and there is even a danger that it could be described as a cliché. Furthermore, such a statement is not necessarily valid across situations. The social scientific literature clearly shows that communication per se does not necessarily lead to an improvement in human or interpersonal relations. Indeed, under certain circumstances it could even contribute to a deterioration of such

intergroup relations. A conclusion about which there can be no doubt whatsoever, however, is that a lack of, or a breakdown in communication leads to a worsening of intergroup relations, assuming that they are interdependent upon one another. Every South African should therefore make creative use of opportunities for intergroup communication, and where they are lacking they should be created in consultation with all concerned. Creating open communication channels should obviously be a top priority at government level, but is certainly not restricted to that level.

In addition this study emphasizes the need for the development of communication skills. In view of the multi-cultural nature of the popula-

tion it must be assumed that such communication makes considerably greater demands on the participants than would normally be the case. The development of such skills should also include the training of communication specialists who can perform a mediating function in conflict situations. In this respect the universities, and other educational institutions, have a great responsibility. It seems essential that the school system pay more attention to intercultural communication skills, while tertiary educational institutions should undertake in-depth research in this area. In this field departments of communication could make significant contributions.

