# *Forum*

## *SOUTH AFRICA AT THE DAWN OF 2006*

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### Introduction

On January 11, the 2006 OPUS International Listening Post took place. Twenty two countries around the world participated, including South Africa. The aim was to provide a snapshot of the social dynamics of each country at the dawn of the new year. Individual countries offered their data to OPUS where the collective was integrated in a report on the Global Dynamics at the Dawn of 2006 (see Stapley, 2006b). (For examples of previous reports, see Stapley, 2003; Stapley & Collie, 2005.)

A South African group of 11 participants met in Pretoria, shared their experiences of being a citizen in South Africa, and identified three major themes, namely living in a split society, crime and AIDS. From these themes, three working hypotheses were formulated. These are explored further in this article.

### OPUS

OPUS (An Organisation for Promoting Understanding of Society – see www.opus.org.uk) was founded in 1975 as a registered charity in the UK. Its aim is to encourage the study of conscious and unconscious processes

in society and the institutions in it. OPUS undertakes research, organises conferences, promotes study groups (called listening posts) and publishes bulletins and papers (Stapley, 2006a).

**The listening post**

A listening post consists of a set of group events for a small group of participants who have the opportunity to think about the society of which they are part (Nahum, 2005). Participants generate, analyse and interpret their own information, which makes the listening post different from a focus group (see Litosseliti, 2003).

The listening post has developed as a way of engaging with the experience of the reflective citizen in order to understand society (Dartington, 2000). The first OPUS listening post was conducted in 1980 and provided data for quarterly commentaries on the state of society. Through this work OPUS has developed a process by which society can be examined as an intelligible field of study (see Dartington, 2000).

The Listening Post Project has its origin in the systems psychodynamic methodology developed by the Tavistock Institute in the UK (Czander, 1993; French & Vince, 1999; Gould, Stepley & Stein, 2001; Hirshhorn, 1993; Huffington, C., Armstrong, A., Halton, W., Hoyle, L. & Pooley, J. (2004), and more specifically, the Group Relations Training Programme and Leicester Working Conferences (Miller, 1989). Theoretically, the group relations model is based on the assumptions formulated by Bion (1961, 1970). The Tavistock based organisational consultancy stance (see Neumann, Kellner & Dawson-Shepherd, 1997), led to the concept of citizenship in the workplace (Lawrence, 1980). This concept was based on Khaleelee and Miller's (1985, 367) proposal that small groups may express phenomena that do not belong to the small group itself, but are manifestations of the larger system or even of society, of which they form part.

The aim of the listening post is to enable participants as individual citizens to reflect on their own relatedness to society and try to develop an understanding of what is happening in society at a specific moment (Stapley, 2003). The event is based on the idea that by coming together in a group, some of the unconscious dynamics that are currently operating in society may emerge. This enables the individual to move beyond personal preoccupations to a wider understanding of society. Participants have the opportunity of exploring the various roles that they take up in society. As a group they are invited to try to analyse the material that has emerged and

form a hypothesis regarding the underlying dynamics, both conscious and unconscious, that may be prevalent at the time.

The event is unstructured and has no agenda or issue being identified beforehand. It consists of between eight and 15 people. The size of the group is designed in such a way that a true microcosm of society can be created (Stapley, 2003). The sessions are conducted by a convenor, whose role is to introduce the event, participate as a citizen of the country or community, close the event and hold time boundaries firmly (Dartington, 2000). The event could be tape recorded and / or a scribe could be used to assist the convenor by producing a written account of the experience.

Listening posts are primarily used as described above as a method for capturing ideas, that are currently held within a society as a whole. Nahum (2005) suggested that with slight alterations to the method, it can be used as a valuable container for individuals as ordinary citizens, to explore the impact of societal dynamics on how they take up their roles. This idea could be explored further in the South African context.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### The structure of the listening post

The 2006 South African listening post was planned and presented following the guidelines provided by OPUS (www.opus.org.uk). The event consisted of the following introduction and three parts.

### The introduction

The convener set the scene, organised introductions, explained the programme, purpose and process, outlined his own role as the overall manager of the event and specifically the three different parts, outlined the roles of the participants in each part and briefly explained the difference between the parts. He also gave a definition of a hypothesis at this point in order to make the task in part 3 less daunting.

Part 1. The sharing of preoccupations and experiences
• The aim was to enable participants to speak of their pre-occupations and experiences of society (the external) from their various societal roles in a free flowing and unhindered manner.
• The convenor took up the role of "just another member of society", and managed the time boundary.

- The session was free of summaries, explanations, any form of leadership or any other designated group role.

Part 2. Identification of major themes
- The aim was to identify major themes from the previous session.
- The session acted as a transitional space and started to put a boundary around the material from part 1 – which would be analysed in part 3.
- Participants were asked to discuss and come up with a list of three or four major themes.
- The convenor took on the role of managing both the process and the time boundary.

Part 3. Analysis and hypothesis formation
- The aim was to analyse the material from parts 1 and 2, and to work at providing psychological explanations that can be developed into hypotheses.
- A hypothesis was defined as a possible explanation, a proposition assumed for the purpose of argument, a theory assumed to account for something not understood, as opposed to a right answer (Lawrence, 2000).
- The convenor took up an active management role, digging and delving into the content and encouraging participants to explore their inner world.

**The participants**

Eleven participants gathered at the University of South Africa in Pretoria. They were invited to attend the event based on their exposure to and experience in Group Relations Training in education, organisations and the community. All participants contributed to all parts of the event.

**Findings**

Three themes manifested – namely living in a split society, crime and AIDS. For each theme an analysis and the formulated hypothesis are given.

**Theme 1. Living in a split society**

The group referred to split in race (black / white), poverty / abundance, materialism / spirituality, isolation / sharing, own / other, and nature (representing destruction and prosperity).

**Analysis**

The discussion constantly oscillated between pessimism and optimism. This may be indicative of the level of ambiguity, even "signs of social disintegration", and the difficulty to transcend opposites and paradoxes in the present South African society.

Race was mentioned as the most observable difference in our society. Pessimism and disillusionment were expressed referring to home roles and after work activities. These are characterised by a lack of integration, similar to the old style in our society of living in separation, seeking comfort and protection in the own and in sameness, in terms of ethnicity and culture. Optimism was expressed around the experience that South African society has moved considerably since 1994, from the separation of apartheid, to the integration of black and white, especially in terms of work roles. Mandela's concept of the rainbow nation is at least coming alive in the work place where diversity is celebrated to some extent. This is further facilitated by the laws on affirmative action and employment equity.

On one hand, perceptions stay the same. For example, blacks see whites as still having it all which leads to strong efforts to balance society. On the other hand, perceptions do change. An example of this is whites, who previously had abundant opportunities but have lost these due to affirmative action, and see blacks as "having it all". There is also acknowledgement of the shades within these perceptions.  Although some blacks do have significantly more and better circumstances now, others are still struggling to manage because they have no history or memory of abundance. These experiences highlight the existence of envy between (as it is perceived) those who have and those who do not.

Poverty / abundance refers to the "haves" and "don't haves". This split between rich and poor is continuing and growing. The poor are becoming increasingly isolated from the rest of society, representing the status quo (the apartheid split). The new rich seem to be driven by materialism, and as a fast growing middle class, its spending power is stimulating the economy as never before, representing new abundance. The materialism is juxtaposed against an increasing focus by society on spirituality, defined and practised from both an african and western perspective. The materialism has a "me, myself and I" value system (selfishness) whereas the spiritual has a tendency to share resources (even if it is sometimes associated with shame and guilt). The amount of guilt depends on whether one gives or not.

The split between own and other includes xenophobia. The own is seen as "our country of milk and honey" being invaded by "the other" to escape their severe political and economical issues (for example Zimbabwe). The projection onto "the other" has to do with own insecurity about jobs, opportunities and resources. The presence of the illegitimate other, stimulates a we-ness amongst members of society, even across the above differences.

During the listening post, a severe storm (with thunder, lightning and heavy rain) broke loose over Pretoria. This was so loud that participants could hardly hear one another. The discussion turned to nature representing destruction in its power for destruction in either drought or flood (called "impending doom") as well as the prosperity that could result from good rains.

## Hypothesis 1

Living in a society with so many ingrained splits, ambiguities and paradoxes leads to feeling overwhelmed, inhibited, paralysed, hopeless, helpless, incapacitated, de-authorised, preoccupied and guilty, with a confused sense of belonging and identity (around the lies of sameness and the superficiality of integration), a lack of insight to understand the real diversity and poverty issues (and for some flight into work and progress), which results in apathy, not having the energy to proactively change society, using flight into appearing busy in performing mundane tasks, continuing the games of political correctness, not sharing resources, continuing the separateness and even creating new forms of apartheid, and not attending to the abundance of opportunities to share and build.

## Theme 2. Crime

This is the most threatening thing in our society, influencing every individual South African. The theme elicited many strong feelings.

## Analysis

The underlying dynamic is about a split society, that projects perpetration onto blacks on the one side, victimisation into whites on the other, and balancing it all on the government in the middle.

- The role of perpetrator is projected onto blacks who contain the aggression for society. They are seen as being out of control, violating personal and societal boundaries ("as if they make their own

rules about what belongs to whom, who owns what and who gets punished by whom"). Their motivation is seen as need and greed, an entitlement to ensure balance by correcting the wrongs of the past, to take from those who have, the affluent, those that "can afford to give away and just claim from their insurance policies".

- The role of victim is projected onto whites who contain the martyrdom for society. They are seen as paying the price for actions of the past. Their motivation is seen as self-protection and thus narcissistic in their non-sharing of their possessions. Their feelings are fear, vulnerability, feeling unsafe, not listened to or cared for, de-authorised, helpless, powerless, exposed, rage, mistrusting, loss and hurt, which leads to different de-authorised actions such as self-protection and isolation.

- The role of balancing the middle is projected onto the government which has to contain the neutral position for society. It is seen as a mediator between opposites ("like a referee at a tennis match"), implying an authority position on the sideline, who evaluates but does not interfere, help or rescue. Their feelings are being overwhelmed by the volume and intensity of the aggression, followed by passivity and not taking up their primary task of containment and protection of society and persecution of aggression (crime and corruption). The same projection is taking place onto and into management in organisations (as alternative authority roles).

All three roles find themselves locked into their projected positions. This means that each is containing its part of the whole, which is denying the other access to that part. For example, blacks can not move towards having empathy for whites, because they are locked into the fighting mode; whites can not move from their victim mode towards energising themselves and actively fight crime, because the fighting work is kept for and done by blacks; the government can not perform its primary task because it has become so strongly de-authorised.

Blaming the other takes place as a way of de-authorising the self and the other from taking up a leadership role to change the status quo. It also reminds us of the Oedipus dynamic with the blacks as Oedipus (who violates the boundaries of acceptable behaviour), the whites as the father (being killed off) and the government as the mother (who "has both in the eye" but owns none / has no control over anyone). The fantasy may be for the whites to give up what they have as the desired object, and what they represent as the stumbling block, so that the blacks can join with the government in making their own rules about engagement and structuring society according to their own rules.

Thus, crime serves as a reminder of how our society is operating in a split position and the energy (with reference to the varied and intense feelings) it consumes to stay in silo operation, and how difficult it is to move beyond these misplaced projections and projective identifications and to start building meaningful cross boundary relationships.

## Hypothesis 2

The system's projective identification is so effective that the parts are locked in their silos which they cannot escape, meaning that the parts can not take up their legitimate leadership roles and perform their primary tasks – even if that is just being a responsible citizen, and therefore the projections of the parts stay securely locked in, which makes them unavailable for processing in the consciousness. The blaming of the other is each part's defence against its own reluctance and inability to take up the own leadership role to change the crime situation, to make a difference and to build relationships, either in this or different crime related situations.

## Theme 3. AIDS

AIDS was discussed as a major, terrible and frightening pandemic and killer in society, with a negative and devastating effect on organisations, the national economy and most seriously on family life. The theme elicited many different and strong feelings.

## Analysis

The underlying dynamic is the split between silence, versus pro-active caring and helping. Silence is associated with misunderstanding, feelings of anger, fear, shame, disgust, apathy, dissociation, leading to avoidance and denial. Pro-active caring and helping is associated with an effort to understand the medical technicalities of the disease, empathy with victims, and a reaching out to directly help victims and their families. This split occurs nationally where the government is negating the seriousness of the pandemic, versus activists who have to overcompensate to attract some attention to relevant issues in organisations where management often denies the serious effect of AIDS on their staff numbers and turnover, versus whistleblowers who try to strategise and create employee wellness programmes; and in families where some members disconnect from and disown their victim family members, versus others who openly acknowledge the facts and take care of their loved ones physically and emotionally.

**Hypothesis 3**

AIDS with its overwhelming physical threat to society has become the container of many projections about denigration and fear of death which manifest in a split of flight and fight. Some people identify with the flight part of the projection by denying the related issues which leads to the isolation of victims, as if this will keep the projector un-contaminated, safe and alive with the other non-infected citizens. Others identify with the fight part of the projection by addressing the relevant medical, social, organisational and personal issues, and care for victims.

**Discussion**

The above three hypotheses highlight the presence and intensity of anxiety in current South African society, which manifests in many and various splits.

On the conscious level the splits are about obvious, well known and daily published constructs such as race (black and white), financial means (poverty and abundance), being isolated and ill versus having access to all kinds of resources, including health.

On the unconscious level, splitting as a defence mechanism implies that the country is "working with" its bad and good parts. It is as if the bad parts are split off and projected onto the other – black on white, poor on rich, isolation on "those who have", and ill on healthy. These clear splits are followed by strong projections and projective identification. The one part takes on the projected material from the other and become the projected part on behalf of the other. Although many South African citizens may not know or experience life in this manner, it may show a form of caring towards and trust in the other.

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