

# The Robben Island diversity experience. An exploration of South African diversity dynamics

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**Orientation:** Because of its historic, symbolic and psychological representation, presenting a diversity event on Robben Island posed invaluable opportunities to form an in-depth understanding of South African diversity dynamics. This research focussed on such an event interpreted from the systems psychodynamic perspective.

**Research purpose:** The purpose of the research was to describe the experiences of participants attending the Robben Island Diversity Experience (RIDE) in order to understand South African diversity dynamics from a depth psychology perspective.

**Motivation for the study:** Of the many and different diversity events presented in South African organisations, RIDE is the only annual systems psycho-dynamically designed and presented event. This research was an effort to explore the nature of these dynamics which manifest themselves from below the surface.

**Research design, approach and method:** Qualitative and descriptive research from a hermeneutic phenomenology paradigm was used. The 15 participants who attended a RIDE event formed a case study. The data from an unstructured interview was content-analysed and interpreted using the systems psychodynamic perspective. The themes were integrated into a research hypothesis.

**Main findings:** Five themes manifested themselves, namely, crossing boundaries, engaging the brave new world, ties that bind, being imprisoned and the struggle.

**Practical/managerial implications:** The research highlighted the importance of understanding unconscious dynamics in the context of diversity in order to inform consultants about diversity management interventions in organisations.

**Contribution/value-add:** The research contributed towards how South African diversity dynamics manifest themselves and how that can be addressed in organisations.

## Introduction

In the South African context, DIVERSITY can indeed be written in capital letters. The country's history is fraught with differentiation, segregation, exclusion and discrimination (Bekker & Carlton, 1996; Eades, 1999). The replacement of the apartheid regime by the first democratically elected government in 1994 facilitated opportunities for everyone in the rainbow nation towards the celebration of diversity (Beck, 2000; Charlton & Van Niekerk, 1994). This road, to reconstruct the South African society, has been far from smooth (Hunt & Lascaris, 1998; Thompson, 2001).

Organisations realised that diversity often leads to frustration, misunderstandings, unhealthy conflict and an increase in turnover of people if it is not properly managed (Milliken & Martins, 1996; Van Eron, 1995). Often such organisations use mechanistic approaches to diversity (Cilliers & May, 2002). Although these approaches do little more than achieve certain structural and behavioural changes, they seem to create an environment in which consultants and employees can work with diversity. A solitary diversity intervention is however doomed to failure since the emotions and resistance that it elicits, normally fuel various unconscious dynamics that subvert the possibility of true connection between and change in employees. Studying diversity from the systems psychodynamic perspective implies exploring the unconscious dynamics that influence the way similarities and differences amongst employees are viewed and acted upon. The aim of such endeavours would be to gain an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of South African diversity by analysing and interpreting the experiences of participants in such experiential events.

## Robben Island as venue for diversity work

The researchers were part of the founding team of the Robben Island Diversity Experience (RIDE). The venue was chosen as an attractive marketing plan, but also because the hosting

organisation realised the historical and symbolic significance of Robben Island to study South African diversity dynamics as a phenomenon.

### The Robben Island Diversity Experience (RIDE)

The RIDE was planned and presented as a Group Relations Training event (see Brunner, Nutkevitch & Sher, 2006; Cytrynbaum & Noumair, 2004; Fraher, 2004), consisting of plenaries, large and small study groups, intergroup and institutional events, and review and applications events. Table 1 contains the programme. The primary task of the RIDE was to provide opportunities to individually and collectively study the core concepts of diversity dynamics (identity, reference systems, power, as well as relations and relatedness) in order to understand how they perceive, interpret and act towards individual and collective diversity. Systems psycho-dynamically informed staff members were employed.

The purpose of the research was to describe the experiences of participants attending the Robben Island Diversity Experience (RIDE) and to form a depth psychology understanding of South African diversity dynamics.

### The Ride Crucible

The South African journey in transforming the country from a minority-driven apartheid regime to a democratic nation is often described as a miracle. Miller (2011) eloquently described it by stating that the miraculous events in South Africa made hope possible again and that the people of South Africa had opened the way for the rest of the world in bringing about peaceful change. The South African miracle collapsed the apartheid system and removed the barriers that separated Black and White people. Beck and Linscott's (1996) metaphor aptly described this coming together of all South Africans in the post-1994 democratic society as a crucible

in which, under extreme pressure and conflict, various disparate and volatile human elements were being poured – White people, Black people, Coloured people, Indian people, males, females, and people from different religious orientations, ethnic groups and age groups. Although there was recognition that it would be hard to reverse apartheid's legacy, it seemed possible with Mr Nelson Mandela at the helm. The reality is however that the hope of creating the rainbow nation endures as long as it remains a dream. Any talk of the differences between Black and White people's lifestyles, attitudes or expectations was shouted down; no one wanted to wake from the dream (Brown, 2008). The dream of the rainbow nation, in a sense, kept people from dealing with the realities of the South African crucible, and the remnants of the past. The intense emotions, conflicts and (diversity) dynamics that arose through the process of amalgamating the highly segregated South African society were largely not dealt with. In a similar way the RIDE created a crucible which represented a microcosm of the larger South African society, and provided a golden opportunity to study diversity dynamics as it unfolded during the experience. The challenge was to deal with the emotions, conflicts and (diversity) dynamics whilst holding onto the dream of becoming a nation at peace with itself and the world. This research explores the diversity dynamics that shaped and characterised the South African crucible.

### The South African diversity challenge

Diversity has proved to be a double-edged sword because it is both an opportunity as well as a threat (Booyesen, 2005; Cavaleros, Van Vuuren & Visser, 2002; Newell, 2002). Organisations realised that diversity in itself does not lead to a competitive advantage, instead it is more likely to result in frustration, misunderstanding, unhealthy conflict, and an increase in staff turnover if it is not properly managed (Milliken & Martins, 1996; Van Eron, 1995). Thus the diversity sword, if not skilfully wielded, can have major cost implications for organisations in terms of production,

TABLE 1: RIDE programme.

| Time        | Sunday                          | Monday                             | Tuesday                 | Wednesday        | Thursday         | Friday              |
|-------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------|------------------|---------------------|
| 07h00       | -                               | Breakfast                          | Breakfast               | Breakfast        | Breakfast        | Breakfast           |
| 08h00       | -                               | Large group 2                      | Large group 3           | Large group 4    | Large group 5    | Small group 7       |
| 09h30       | -                               | Break                              | Break                   | Break            | Break            | Break               |
| 10h00       | -                               | Small group 2                      | Small group 3           | Small group 5    | Lecture          | RIDE Plenary        |
| 11h30       | Registration                    | Break                              | Break                   | Break            | Break            | Break               |
| 12h00       | Departing Cape Town; Arrival RI | Intergroup plenary<br>Intergroup 1 | Intergroup 4            | Intergroup 6     | Small group 6    | Application group 2 |
| 13h30       | Opening Plenary                 | Lunch                              | Lunch                   | Lunch            | Lunch            | Social event        |
| 14h30       | Tour of RI                      | Intergroup 2                       | Free time - Prison tour | Intergroup 7     | Large group 6    | Departure from RI   |
| 16h00       | Large group 1                   | Break                              | Intergroup 5            | Break            | Break            | -                   |
| 16h30       | -                               | Intergroup 3                       | -                       | Discussion group | Processing group | -                   |
| 17h00       | -                               | -                                  | -                       | -                | -                | -                   |
| 17h30       | Dinner                          | -                                  | Dinner                  | Dinner           | Dinner           | -                   |
| 18h00       | -                               | Dinner                             | -                       | -                | -                | -                   |
| 18h30       | Small Group 1                   | -                                  | Processing group        | Processing group | Discussion group | -                   |
| 19h00       | -                               | Processing group                   | -                       | -                | -                | -                   |
| 19h30       | -                               | -                                  | -                       | -                | -                | -                   |
| 20h00       | Break                           | -                                  | -                       | -                | -                | -                   |
| 20h30–21h00 | Processing group                | -                                  | -                       | -                | -                | -                   |

RI, Robben Island.

employee absenteeism, inefficient communication, poor utilisation of resources, low morale, and industrial action (Cox & Beale, 1997; Human, 2005; Oakley-Smith & Winter, 2001).

Organisations can also reap huge benefits and even gain a competitive advantage if diversity is effectively managed (Cavaleros *et al.*, 2002; Laubscher, 2001) resulting from the implementation of a variety of diversity initiatives (Cox & Beale, 1997; Hayles & Russel, 1997; Prasad, Mills, Elmes & Prasad, 1997). Traditional approaches to diversity tended to focus rather more on mobilising mechanistic organisational structures, than on achieving attitudinal and behavioural change at an individual level (Van der Westhuizen, 2001). The focus of diversity training programmes was mostly about facilitating diversity awareness and ensuring that non-discriminatory policies were communicated and understood (Eades, 1999; Thomas, 1996; Van der Westhuizen, 2001). These diversity interventions were usually based on a behaviouristic and socio-cognitive approach. The training programmes were typically presented in a mechanistic, instructional and telling style, extending knowledge and content about the different ways in which different people perceive and approach life. The underlying assumption of this mechanistic approach to diversity seems to be that members could be trained and that once they had undergone the training they could be certified as being able to cope with diversity (Cilliers & May, 2002).

According to Human (2005), the more rational and cognitive approaches to diversity often fail because of an inadequate understanding of the concept of diversity and its unconscious behavioural dynamics (Cavaleros *et al.*, 2002). The systems psychodynamic stance accepts that traditional *talk and chalk training* approaches do little more than share knowledge and enhance dependency. Thus, organisations only study the tip of the *diversity iceberg* if the covert and unconscious social political issues such as resistance, denial, splitting, projections and projective identifications are neglected (Cilliers & May, 2002; Obholzer & Roberts, 1994). True understanding and awareness develop when organisations take into consideration, both the rational and the irrational forces, conscious and unconscious processes, and overt as well as covert behavioural dynamics (Czander, 1993; Kets De Vries & Balazs, 1998).

The need is therefore to attain a deeper understanding of diversity and the underlying forces that impact on the way diversity is perceived, experienced and acted upon. In this quest, the systems psychodynamic perspective offers the possibility of attaining a deeper learning and understanding of diversity and its accompanying dynamics. Diversity programmes presented from a systems psychodynamic consulting stance using group relations training methodology can be seen as a microcosm of organisational diversity dynamics. This implies that the macro organisational

diversity issues will play out in the micro workshop here-and-now events (Campbell & Huffington, 2008). Research of the effect of such programmes indicates some movement towards increasing the awareness of diversity issues on the conscious and unconscious systemic levels. The success of these programmes lies in their focus on the owning of projections onto and into *the other*, authorising the subsystem to take up a leadership role, and to move from the paranoid-schizoid to the depressive position (Cilliers & May, 2002; Cilliers, Rothmann & Struwig, 2004; Coetzee, 2007; Myburg, 2006).

The core research problem was formulated as follows. Although experiential events in diversity dynamics are presented in South African organisations and some information is available about the experiences of participants, more knowledge about SA diversity dynamics is required. The objectives were to describe the experiences of the RIDE participants and to offer systems psychodynamic interpretations towards understanding the unconscious (below the surface) behaviour that organisations are not aware of or do not take seriously in planning human resources or organisational development activities.

The potential value-add of the research is to push the awareness around diversity dynamics beyond the obvious and rational organisational functioning, towards the exploration of behaviours and dynamics below the surface of consciousness. The authors hope that this endeavour could open opportunities for organisations to have more real – albeit difficult – discussions on relationships fraught with diversity anxiety.

The rest of the article is structured as follows. The research design is presented with reference to the research approach and strategy. Then the research method, consisting of the setting, the roles of the researchers, the sampling method, data collection, analysis and interpretation, is discussed. The strategies employed to ensure quality data are mentioned. Thereafter the findings are presented as manifested themes. The discussion contains the hypotheses followed by the conclusion, recommendations, limitations and suggestions for further research.

## Research design

### Research approach

Qualitative and descriptive research (De Vos, Strydom, Fouché & Delpont, 2002; Camic, Rhodes & Yardley, 2003) was chosen to allow the researchers to delve deeply into relatively unknown areas of organisational psychology, namely the personal diversity dynamic experiences of participants in an unstructured and experiential diversity experience (see Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2010). Hermeneutic phenomenology (Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006) was chosen as research paradigm, which allowed for the in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences around diversity. The paradigm also enabled us to interpret the data

from the systems psychodynamic stance in an attempt to develop knowledge around the conscious and unconscious manifestation of diversity dynamics (see Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006).

## Research strategy

A single case study was used (Chamberlayne, Bornat & Apitzsch, 2004) for its instrumental value, namely to report to South African organisations how employees experience diversity events in the unconscious (below the surface) and in terms of their object relations (see Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

## Research method

### Research setting

Broadly speaking, the research was set within diversity management as organisational development (OD) activity. More specifically, the November 2000 RIDE was planned and presented as a group relations event on Robben Island with its provocative diversity symbolism and connotations (Cilliers & May, 2002). The authors presented the event, voluntarily attended by employees from different organisations interested in diversity dynamics.

### Entrée and establishing researcher roles

All three authors were involved in the planning, presentation and research of the event. Individually, the first author took up the role of director of the hosting organisation and consultant during the event, the second as the director of the RIDE and the third, as the associate director of the RIDE. All three authors are psychologists with special training and experience in Group Relations Training as well as systems psycho-dynamically informed consultancy and research (as explicated in Cytrynbaum & Noumair, 2004; Fraher, 2004).

### Sample and Sampling

A sample of convenience was used (Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006) which consisted of the 15 participants who attended the event voluntarily. They were human resources practitioners working in large organisations, sponsored by their various organisations. Table 2 indicates the diversity characteristics of the sample.

### Data collection method

One month after the RIDE the first author conducted a one-hour, unstructured interview with the participants. Interviews were conducted by telephone or in person at a private and silent location (Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006). The interview started with an open question, namely, (1) 'It is now one month since the RIDE. Could you tell me about your experience of the event?' The researcher asked a maximum of three follow-up questions to elicit

more responses from the participant if needed, namely, (2) 'What else did you experience?', (3) 'Would you like to add anything else relating to your experience of the event?' and (4) 'Are there any other experiences that stood out for you?'

### Recording of data

The interviews were recorded on tape, transcribed and kept secured.

### Data analyses

Content analysis (Brewerton & Millward, 2004) was used from which five themes manifested themselves. Interpretations were made from the systems psychodynamic perspective (Armstrong, 2005; Campbell, 2007; Gould, Stapley & Stein, 2004; Huffington, Armstrong, Halton, Hoyle & Pooley, 2004; Klein, 2005). The emerging themes enabled the researchers to formulate working hypotheses and a research hypothesis about South African diversity dynamics.

### Strategies employed to ensure quality data

Scientific rigour was ensured by focussing on validity, reliability, and ethics (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Terre Blanche *et al.*, 2006). Reliability and dependability were ensured through the careful planning, execution and reporting of different aspects of the research project.

The credibility and transferability were ensured by a detailed and accurate description of the design and method (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Bias, which could impact credibility, was reduced through critical self-reflection about potential predispositions (see Johnson & Christensen, 2000). The researchers also used themselves as instruments to become aware of intra-personal and interpersonal dynamics that could influence their analyses and interpretations (McCormick & White, 2000). Consensus discussions (Mukherji, 2000) were conducted with colleagues (industrial psychologists) and consultants in the fields of diversity and systems psychodynamics to enhance the credibility of the research.

Ethical requirements were attended to in order not to cause harm to participants or to invade their privacy (Camic, Rhodes & Yardley, 2003). Informed consent was obtained verbally, during the telephone interviews. The privacy, anonymity and confidentiality of participants were protected by not disclosing their identity, but rather by assigning group membership to them (Henning, 2004). Therefore participants' verbatim responses were given by using their alphabetical numbers (e.g., P4).

### Reporting

The research findings were reported and interpreted per theme. In the discussion the findings were integrated

**TABLE 2:** Biographical information of the sample.

| Gender       | Black people | White people | Coloured people | Asian people | Total     |
|--------------|--------------|--------------|-----------------|--------------|-----------|
| Female       | 3            | 3            | 1               | 1            | 8         |
| Male         | 3            | 3            | 1               | -            | 7         |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>6</b>     | <b>6</b>     | <b>2</b>        | <b>1</b>     | <b>15</b> |



into working hypotheses and eventually into the research hypothesis. This was followed by the conclusions, recommendations, limitations and suggestions for further research.

## Findings

Five themes manifested themselves, namely:

- crossing boundaries
- engaging the brave new world
- ties that bind
- being imprisoned
- the struggle.

### Crossing boundaries

The RIDE implied that participants had to cross a physical boundary to get to the island, a methodological boundary to engage in learning from a different perspective (group relations training), as well as various symbolic boundaries in the process of connecting to and relating with *the other*. The latter included the crossing of the boundary from and the elaborate interplay between being a singleton to that of becoming a group member (see Turquet, 1975). During the event participants were confronted with their own personal identity boundaries and the need to belong.

### Engaging the brave new world

Engaging with the new world (of the RIDE) aroused a great deal of anxiety for participants and resulted in a need for safety and containment. Participants primarily sought containment and created comfort zones for their anxiety by linking with other participants with similar diversity characteristics. It seemed to be difficult, and possibly overwhelming to *face* the new world by oneself. The quest was to find ways in which the *singleton* could link up with and become part of a subgroup. This manifested in various splits within the overall membership based primarily on race and gender. A statement by P4 illustrated this dynamic: *'We clung onto those groups, it was a comfort zone ... people find safety in a group whether it is on the basis of colour or being a woman or man.'* The irony is, that the very act by which participants tried to contain their anxiety by linking to certain similarities (race and gender), created immense anxiety in the RIDE system due to the dynamics of exclusion. The very act of including implies excluding (Patel, Bennet, Dennis, Dosanjh, Mahtani, Miller & Nadirshaw, 2000).

Some participants however dealt with the anxiety of facing the new world in the opposite way – by disassociating themselves from the group. This behaviour, which is typical of the basic assumption of me-ness (Lawrence, Bain & Gould, 1996) emphasises separateness and averts any link with the subgroup's collective.

Within the RIDE fraternity the focus was predominantly on the primary dimensions of diversity, with priority given to race. As P3 stated *'It was as if this colour-thing was still important for people to survive in the new South Africa.'* This could be an

indication of the extent to which the South African society fixates on race. The many unprocessed race-related issues become the frame through which situations and relations are seen. Although gender issues were also dealt with, those played a secondary role and were only seen to be 'women's issues'. The men seemed to divorce themselves from the gender issues by projecting those onto the women. This gender dynamic underscores the notion that the privileged or dominant group (in this case the men) will seldom be motivated to deal with issues concerning the disadvantaged or denigrated group (in this case women). Interestingly, the discussions on the gender issues were derailed and turned into the race related issues – maybe once again reiterating the perception that South Africans find it difficult to move beyond race.

### Ties that bind

During the RIDE it became apparent that the ties (diversity characteristics) that were used to define the identity of the participants were also used to bind them to a specific subgroup. This led to complex interactions between people, because of their implied allegiance (ties) to different subgroups. P13 (White female) stated:

*'I made a close connection with a Black female ... but in the plenary she sided with the (Black) group and that floored me and I reacted on behalf of my (White) group and she couldn't understand that.'* (P13)

These ties thus not only linked people to a specific group, but also brought with it certain unspoken responsibilities. Participants were, for example, expected to be loyal to their groups and to protect co-participants. Breaking this unspoken contract led to severe emotional reactions from other participants of that group. Perhaps this indicates the powerful unconscious impact that the (diversity) ties might have on mobilising intergroup dynamics such as splitting, pairing and fight-flight behaviour (Bion, 1970; Lawrence, 1999).

### Being imprisoned

As with the South African Crucible, the RIDE participants crossed the boundary into the event not with clean slates, but with their personal and collective memories, experiences, reference systems, values and emotions attached. This baggage was subgroup specific and in a sense imprisoned the participants. Black participants for instance, verbalised a lot of rage and resentment about what had happened in the past. P6 (White male) reflected on *'how deep-seated the hate is amongst the Blacks towards Whites.'* The baggage that Black participants were carrying, despite their political control, is probably linked to emotional scars caused by oppression. The White participants seemed to carry a collective guilt about the past, projected onto them by the RIDE society on behalf of their forefathers. The baggage of Coloured and Indian participants seemed to centre on rejection, the feeling of not being good enough, and the struggle to find a place in the RIDE society. P15 (Coloured female) stated that: *'it awakened a lot of feelings inside me. The most important was my childhood rejection of being coloured. It made me so angry.'*

The (diversity) baggage from the past does not only create ties that bind, but much worse, it seems to have imprisoned participants into specific subgroups, which served as a stumbling block to connect across differences. Thus, unresolved/fixated diversity issues will keep haunting and returning until they are addressed and adequately worked through (Brown & Pedder, 1991; Rutan & Stone, 1993).

## The struggle

The struggle for power and position in RIDE illustrated typical characteristics of the fight-flight basic assumption (Bion, 1961). Within the RIDE, position, power and status were primarily allocated according to subgroup membership, especially with regards to race and gender. The primary position was reserved for Black and White participants, while Coloured and Asian participants were a distant second. In the past the South African society was characterised by the phenomenon that some people were more equal than others. Ironically the situation seems to be perpetuating itself in the new dispensation with the difference that Black males are now at the top. It seemed that Black people felt entitled to their position because of the pain and suffering they had experienced in the past. The message was clearly communicated that they would not give up their newly found position at the top of the ladder soon. A heated debate about the right to be called 'Black' or 'African' vividly illustrated this struggle. Black participants heavily opposed the notion of White, Coloured or Indian people calling themselves African. In this regard P9 (an Indian female) related her traumatic experience when Black participants denied her her 'blackness' as follows: *'I have never been exposed to such anger in my life ... from day one (of this event) I was being told that I am not Black. I lived my whole life knowing that I am Black.'* By refusing other groups the right to be 'African' or 'Black', the Black participants indirectly told the other groups that they would neither share their identity nor their position of power. The dynamics of subgroups looking after themselves and ensuring their own survival seems to be a theme that repeats itself throughout the history of South Africa.

Coloured participants were struggling with issues relating to acceptance, rejection, acknowledgement, and to find a place in the new society. The general experience was that of being caught in the middle – reflecting the biological constitution of being both White and Black. This symbolised being both an object of denigration and idealisation. The denigration was due to impurity as denoted by the mixture. They could not fit into either of the worlds (Black or White), and were therefore rejected by both parties. They however also represented an idealised object due to the integration they present in being both Black and White. This ability to fit into both worlds made them an object of envy, as well as a crucial variable in the power relations between Black and White participants.

The underlying assumption seemed to be that being good enough is determined by the colour of one's skin, and that Black and White are the only two recognised colours in South African society. The difficult position of being Coloured or

Indian, is illustrated by the statement of an Indian participant that *'I am too White to be Black and too Black to be White.'* In the past, South African society projected denigration onto and into Black people. In the new South Africa, with its hypersensitivity towards discrimination against Black people, this is no longer a viable option. It is as if society, in terms of the Coloured and Indian participants, found new scapegoats to carry the denigration label with which it struggles. This tendency to function in a paranoid-schizoid way seems to perpetuate itself. The more things change the more they stay the same – society seems to be caught up in a vicious circle, unable to contain the denigrated parts of the system, thus splitting them off and projecting them into another part of the system.

## Discussion

The purpose of the research was to describe the experiences of participants attending the Robben Island Diversity Experience (RIDE), which form a depth psychology understanding of South African diversity dynamics.

The research is seen as important in its in-depth and rich comments on South African diversity dynamics. As such it informs diversity consultants and leaders about the unconscious diversity matters that manifest themselves in their organisations. It also provides a methodology to study these dynamics inside their organisations for use in future human resources and leadership initiatives.

For each manifesting theme working hypotheses were formulated, which were integrated into the research hypothesis.

For theme 1 (crossing boundaries) the following working hypothesis was formulated. In our relations and relatedness with difference (different subgroups and/or diversity), we are continually confronted with the struggle and elaborate interplay between being an individual and also being part of a group. This struggle and interplay is impacted on by crossing symbolic boundaries created by diversity characteristics between us as individuals, between, us as individuals, and our preferred subgroups, as well as between subgroups.

For theme 2 (engaging the brave new world) the following working hypothesis was formulated. South Africans engage with the new diverse society through the process of linking with those who have similar diversity characteristics as themselves. Race is used as the principal diversity dimension to differentiate between and making connections with others, followed by gender.

For theme 3 (ties that bind) the following working hypothesis was formulated. Linking and subgroup formation based on diversity characteristics give rise to issues of inclusion and exclusion, as well as the processes associated with in-group and out-group dynamics. Being part of a subgroup unconsciously ties the individual to the subgroup, and implies certain unspoken obligations, such as being loyal to

the subgroup and to protect it from other subgroups. The South African diversity dynamic struggle is characterised by subgroups based on race and gender.

For theme 4 (being imprisoned) the following working hypothesis was formulated. Black people are imprisoned by their past baggage which is transferred from one generation to the next. In this process, the different subgroups seem to contain different aspects of South Africa's past. Black people seem to carry the anger, hate and aggression, while White people carry the guilt related to an unjust past. The Coloured and Indian people seem to carry the ambiguity of both being rejected for not being good enough and feelings of rejection by not being acknowledged.

For theme 5 (the struggle) the following working hypothesis was formulated. Much of the diversity dynamics is centred on the struggle between the different subgroups in which they tried to find a place for themselves in the new dispensation. This is especially important since the position of the different subgroups seems to determine the amount of acceptance and acknowledgement their members have received and whether they were listened to.

The above was integrated into the research hypothesis, reading as follows: South African diversity dynamics is about the splits and subgroups within the country and the dynamics between these different subgroups. South African diversity dynamics focuses on the dynamics (drives, emotions and needs) that inform subgroup formation, what these subgroups represent and carry on behalf of the total system, as well as the ensuing dynamics between the subgroups. Some of these dynamics could be linked to how projections of the various subgroups give rise to the process of projected identification in which the different subgroups, primarily based on race and gender, are kept in specific roles and/or positions.

It was concluded that South African diversity dynamics is not a rational phenomenon and cannot be treated as one. It is socially constructed and relational in nature. The way that similarities and differences are perceived, interpreted and acted upon is influenced by a host of conscious and unconscious, rational and irrational, as well as overt and covert forces.

The research findings elicited similar findings in other South African diversity dynamic studies (Cilliers & May, 2002; May & Cilliers, 2000). It affirms the presence of high levels of anxiety, which manifest themselves unconsciously in basic assumption behaviour and the paranoid-schizoid systemic position (Stapley, 2006). No similar international diversity research could be traced. In comparison with international group relations training events (see Brunner, Nutkevitch & Sher, 2006) these participants experienced similar types of (free floating, performance and persecutory) anxiety around authority and the taking up of a leadership role. In comparing the present findings with the theorising about diversity dynamics which manifest themselves in the US

(McRae, 2004; McRae & Short, 2010) and in the UK (Foster, 2004; Foster, Dickinson, Bishop & Klein 2006; Nichols, 2004; White, 2006), similarities and differences were found. The similarity lies in the anxiety which is inherent in diversity dynamics. The difference lies in the unique manifestation of diversity dynamics in South Africa because of the past splits between race groups and the resulting experience of entitlement and denigration.

It is recommended that South African organisations approach diversity (instead of in a mechanistic manner using instructional methods such as lectures and presentations) in a dynamic and experiential manner (such as using group relations training and systems psychodynamic thinking. Although participants in such events experience many defensive responses such as resistance and projection, the learning lies in processing the defences and accepting personal responsibility for their roles and actions regarding diversity. It was suggested that South Africans could not go forward if they had not dealt with the past. The vicious circles and destructive interactive patterns around diversity matters which manifest themselves in organisations, can only be broken by following the road less travelled – this implies re-owning projections to repair the broken relationships. In this process, communication and attitude become the stimulating factors on the journey to reconciliation and healing.

A further recommendation is that diversity interventions based on the systems psychodynamic perspective should be used in conjunction with other approaches such as the socio-cognitive and legal imperatives currently used in organisations in order to optimise the management of diversity. It is thus not a case of opting for one or the other approach, but using them together in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of diversity, and therefore to be able to manage more effectively.

Some limitations are the following. Although the sample was relatively representative, there was no Indian male present during the RIDE. Hence the perspective of an Indian male was excluded in the views on South African diversity dynamics. The second, and probably the principal aspect of the sample was that the members included in the sample could best be described as being affluent. Because of the financial implications to attend the RIDE, organisations generally sent senior human resource personnel or members from middle management to attend the event. Thus, the socio-economic diversity of the group could be seen as a limitation of the study. It could be contended that a more diverse membership in this regard, would probably have led to more dynamics on envy between the *haves* and *have not's*.

It was suggested that future research should focus on more qualitative as well as quantitative research. Qualitative research could focus on and obtain more in-depth understanding of the specific themes and hypotheses about diversity dynamics generated by this research between specific variables suggested in the themes and hypotheses. Quantitative research projects could focus to establish clearer causal or descriptive links generated through this research.



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### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) which may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this paper.

### Authors' contributions

M.P. (University of South Africa) did the empirical research. F.C. (University of South Africa) and M.M. (University of South Africa) supervised the research. All three authors worked on the formulation of the themes and discussion.

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