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South Africa; SA Must Transcend Its Divided History

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In December last year a group from the Centre for Evolutionary Psychology at the University of California published the results of a potentially ground-breaking study on the perception of **race** carried out on a group of undergraduate students.

Social psychologists had long regarded **race**, along with sex and age, as one of the three immutable, primary categories into which people classified others. However, the evolutionary psychologists, Robert Kurzban, John Tooby and Leda **Cosmides**, argued that the important factor determining genetic survival in our evolutionary past was to detect hostile or potentially hostile alliances - and not **race** per se.

To summarise, they found that if some other external feature denoted an alliance, shirt colour for instance, the salience of **race** diminished markedly in the eyes of observers while the power of sexual categorisation remained unchanged.

These findings appeared in the prestigious journal, Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, and have elicited favourable comment in the scientific media.

The results will need to be tested further under different experimental conditions, including those more closely related to "real life". But the findings do confirm the intuitive perception that allowing **race** to become a political bone of contention promotes racial antagonism - or racism. Both common sense and now scientific evidence offer hope that **race** need not be the divisive factor it is in our national life, if only we grasp and act on the import of these data.

And the implications are quite clear: if group interests are allowed to coalesce around **race**, they will remain a potent element of our individual and collective psychology, impervious to moralising around the evils of racism.

The expression and, possibly, even the consciousness of **race** may be partly suppressed through social pressure, but it will remain a dangerous, unconscious factor primed to release its destructive effects under the right conditions.

This will hardly seem like news to many readers. Our history could hardly have been more calculated to enhance the potency of **race** as a primary identity in the minds of most South Africans.

From the earliest arrival of Europeans, and even before, sharp divisions of group interests formed along racial divides. While the primary division has been between "black" and "white" other significant cleavages are also present, all contributing to the pervasive group feeling that underlies the surface of South African life.

The continued use of a biological marker, **race**, to differentiate between South African citizens is justified under the heading of "transformation".

The basis for this policy is simple. It is widely acknowledged that South African society is profoundly skewed along racial-economic lines, that a substantial majority of our population has been systematically subjected to oppressive and discriminatory policies and that these two realities are causally related. While not all of the asymmetry in South African society can be attributed to apartheid and its precursors, it's certainly true

that a mainly white minority has benefited and a mainly black majority has been severely disadvantaged in the struggle for economic and social well-being.

This history underpins the current emphasis on the redress of demographic distortions in South African society through "reverse discrimination" or, more euphemistically, "affirmative action". Hence, South Africans continue to be classified and ordered in terms of the biological categories of **race** and sex that remain significant determinants of opportunity and reward and, consequently, potent psychological categories in the collective unconscious of the vast majority of South Africans.

I, and many others, have argued that "transformation" should be construed in broader terms than racial redress without negating its importance. Perhaps sight should not be lost of the reality that a major "transformation" has already occurred with the achievement of a universal democracy in 1994. The consequences of this will work through the South African consciousness for decades to come. But, of course, it is not enough. Policy must address all components of the damage done to South Africans through its colonial and apartheid history.

Chief among these has been the consistent relegation of "merit" to a secondary role in determining opportunity, reward and justice. This trend did not start with the present government or even with apartheid - it persisted unabated through the centuries of ethno-racial conflict culminating in the access to power of the National Party in 1948 and is perpetuated by the present government to this day.

The substitution of birth characteristics, whether based on racial, sexual/gender or status criteria, for "merit", is now widely recognised as both unjust and anti-democratic. Hence our Constitution expressly excludes such criteria as determinants of opportunity, justice or reward. Perhaps less widely appreciated is the harm that such practices cause at both the individual and collective levels.

One of these has already been alluded to, the creation of a powerful racial consciousness, which readily manifests as divisive racism. Such divisions result in the immense alienation of significant sectors of the South African population who perceive themselves as victims of injustice and discrimination; it is the overriding theme of our history.

The consequences of such alienation on the psyches and behaviour of the black community have been widely documented. This, I may add, has also been true of all other ethno-racial sectors at different times in the South African story. Why should architects of the current approach to transformation not recognise that whites as a whole will respond in much the same way, unless they are able to escape overseas as so many are doing?

Space constraints unfortunately prevent further exploration of the multidimensional, negative impact of reverse discrimination, but surely these are well-known. We must create "transformative" policies that promote the natural redress of demographic inequities without reintroducing the disastrous features of South African history.

There is no compelling evidence that racial divisions will wither away as the black community achieves greater economic power. It seems equally possible that the necessity for catering to the claims of a new ethnic elite will limit the economic empowerment of the impoverished black masses and result in intensification of current divisions even if only to divert dissatisfaction. Furthermore, the gains made by one community will elicit resentment if they occur in a racialised context. Such tensions have the potential to undermine advances made in other spheres.

The answer is to promote all attempts to move away from the prevailing racial paradigm that supports the South African political arena. The creation of a genuine multi/non-racial opposition, as proposed by Herman Giliomee recently ("Wanted: Leaders with a clear vision", February 8), which is committed to delivery and a working democracy is an essential first step in normalising South African politics around issues other than **race**. No leader who claims to have the good of the country at heart should allow personal agendas or antagonisms to stand in the way of this development.

Besides that, South African pressure groups must not hesitate to use the Constitution to enforce the ideals of our fledgling democracy. Thus the current application of "quotas" must be challenged as must be any practice that limits the rights of the citizen to opportunity, the rights and benefits of our society or the legitimate rewards of personal achievement.

So far, such action has been mainly limited to Aids activists. There is a great need for a more courageous and pro-active stance by those who believe that South Africa can and must transcend its divided history and become a home for all. This is a challenge for all **rac**es in our country.

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