Pretoria News Thursday 12 May 2016

The longer walk to freedom: making sense of our attitudes towards race

Twenty years since the formal end of apartheid, South Africa still has a considerable distance to travel to become a country of true social cohesion

Research into race relations indicate that racial mistrust and dislike are still prevalent among South Africans.

PICTURE: DENZIL MAREGELE

THERE is much unfinished business in post-apartheid South Africa. Over the past year, a series of racist and bigoted outbursts on social media have generated widespread public debate about the state of race relations and social cohesion in the country.

Student protests have also drawn attention to economic inequality, the slow pace of transformation in general, and institutionalised racism in society and on university campuses.

Against this backdrop, we consider the trends in attitudes towards race relations over a number of years based on data from the Human Sciences Research Council's South African Social Attitudes Survey (Sasas) series.

The results suggest that there is a general recognition of steadily improving race relations, particularly among black African adults. However, feelings of inter-racial dislike and mistrust persist at consistently high levels.

Besides providing a measure of the improvement or worsening of race relations, the data's value is in the fact that, in giving us a more balanced national picture, it also points to the permeation and breadth of the "race relations" problem.

Contrary to social media sentiment, many in the country feel that race relations have been improving. In 2015, around half of all South Africans (51 percent) indicated that they had improved, 36 percent indicated that they had remained unchanged and only 13 percent felt they had deteriorated.

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These results are similar to what was observed in most rounds of Sasas since 2008. Only the 2010 results stand apart, probably due to the euphoric effect of the Fifa World Cup.

There is significant optimism among black African adults about race relations in South Africa. Less than a 10th of black African adults (7 percent) felt that race relations in the country had worsened between late 2014 and 2015, while 55 percent reported improvements and 36 percent noted no discernible difference.

Black African youth were even more optimistic, with 71 percent of those aged 16-24 years expressing the view that race relations had improved since the end of apartheid and 56 percent reporting improvements since 2014.

In contrast to black adults, white and Indian adults were found to be less optimistic about race relations.

Two-fifths (40 percent) of white adults felt race relations had worsened since 2014 and roughly a third (34 percent) thought race relations had worsened since 1994.

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Similarly, about a third (32 percent) of Indian adults believed race relations had worsened between 2014 and 2015, while nearly a third (30 percent) thought that relations had deteriorated during the post-apartheid period.

Among these racial minorities, the youth on average tended to voice more confidence about progress in race relations compared to older generations.

While a measure of improved race relations has emerged, many South Africans express concern that their racial group's position – economically, politically and culturally – is under threat from other groups.

In 2015, 61 percent of the population thought that people of other race groups were trying to get ahead economically at the expense of their own group. More than half (59 percent) thought that people of other race groups were excluding members of their own group from positions of power and responsibility.

Finally, almost half (53 percent) believed

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RACISM DIALOGUE

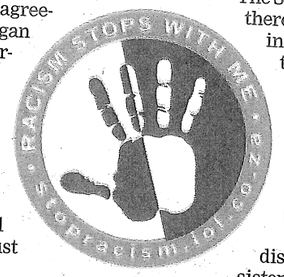
that the traditions and values that are important to people of their race group are under threat because of the influence of other races. These figures are not appreciably different from surveys conducted since 2010.

Trust is central to an individual's ability to form social relationships and reject harmful stereotypes. It is also a commonly used measure of social cohesion.

Since 2003, Sasas respondents have been asked about their level of agreement with the statement "people of different racial groups do not really trust each other".

In 2003, 72 percent agreed with this statement. Public agreement with the statement remained relatively stable until 2007. In 2011, it fell to 64 percent of the general public. Since 2011, public agreement with the statement began rising again, reaching 69 percent in late 2015.

In addition, respondents to each round of Sasas since 2003 have been asked to register the extent to which they agree or disagree with the statement "people of different racial groups will never really trust each other".



At the time of the first round of interviewing in 2003, three-fifths (60 percent) of the adult public agreed with this statement. Since 2003, there have been only modest variations, with total agreement ranging between 51 and 60 percent over the period, and standing at 55 percent in 2015.

This pattern suggests fairly broad-based scepticism about the future of race relations in the country.

The Sasas surveys remind us that there has been an improvement in race relations and that there is room for optimism and hope. But the sobering survey figures also tell us that a considerable proportion of South Africans continue to feel threatened by other race groups.

If racial mistrust and dislike are as prevalent, consistent and widespread among South Africans as the data suggests, then we need to begin the conversation with the recognition that this burdens, shapes and constrains everyday interactions in myriad difficult and complicated ways (of which social media outbursts are simply a small indication).

As the country prepares to welcome a new bill on hate speech in an attempt to curb racist language, the Sasas data can perhaps act as a valuable reminder that individualisation and criminalisation, while necessary at times and for immediate redress, ignore longer and wider trends that are pointing us elsewhere.

They point us to the fault lines of social cohesion and nation-building in South Africa. They challenge us to address the systems and institutions that keep racism and racial inequalities in place.

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No choice but to transform

MAZWI XABA
ACTING EDITOR: ISOLEZWE

THERE are few things that can leave you with a feeling of more pride than reading your own appointment letter for a better-paying and more prestigious job. But when I was officially appointed chief sub-editor I had mixed feelings.

Excited and proud of course I was, but it also soon dawned on me that I and the whole team would have to ensure that our brand-new newspaper really took off, or we'd find ourselves with a great but empty dream and no newspaper, and no jobs.

It's now history that Isolezwe was a roaring success from the start in April 2002, from zero to over 100 000 copies within the first 10 years.

All thanks to exemplary leadership by founding editor Philani Mgwaba and hard work by the team with support from colleagues in Durban and other regions of Independent Media.

We had left behind our stable jobs at 100-plus-year-old newspapers, including the Sunday Tribune, in my case Ilanga, and the Daily News.

We were confident, but we needed inspiration.

Nat Nakasa's sister came out of the blue and provided loads of it to me very close to the launch.

Gladys Maphumulo, a neighbour who lived just across the road from my uMlazi home but whose background I didn't know, told me about her brother like she had just seen him.

She was so proud of his contribution to journalism and the struggle against apartheid.

I could see in her age-defying face that pretty-boy look captured in photographs of her famous brother who died at only 28 on July 14. (At the time his body was still lying next to Malcolm X in New York City.)

She left me proud to be a journalist, and reminded me that while he became famous for writing for the famous Drum magazine, the Rand Daily Mail and New York Times magazine, he had started "here in Durban with Ilanga LaseNatal".

I felt proud but ashamed that I didn't know much then about Nakasa and what he and his cohort of pioneering "native" journalists did for our freedom and for the freedom of the press.

I had read about him but had missed the part about how he came to be awarded the ultra-prestigious Nieman Fellowship, how he had defied apartheid in the way he lived and through his journalism.

I had missed the significance of his travelling abroad on a one-way ticket the then-government referred to as "exit permits", going boldly to exile as a "native of nowhere".

So it had to be forward ever, backwards never for us too as founding members of Isolezwe as we prepared to launch the first daily published in an African language.

Of course, signing up for Isolezwe pales into insignificance compared to the "grave step" that Nakasa took about 50 years ago.

But it was still a significant and challenging step and an opportunity to grow and transform Independent Media.

Isolezwe's success helped the company transform through adding a new and powerful voice in its stable of newspapers. It quickly became a springboard to better positions for its staff and, most of all, helped enhance the sustainability of its sister newspapers.

The self-proclaimed "permanent wanderer" is now resting in his childhood home of Chesterville, and apartheid is gone.

However, the struggle to transform the media is not over. Some of the challenges that inspired journalists to converge in Windhoek and give life to World Free Press Day about 26 years ago are still with us.

In our constitutional democracy we may be enjoying a relatively free press but there are still many challenges, one of them being the slow transformation of South Africa's press.

I was very encouraged to hear upon rejoining Independent Media in 2014 the executive chairman, Dr Iqbal Survé, talk openly and unashamedly about transformation.

"Sekunjalo is a Xhosa word which means 'now is the time'. When the company was formed it was in response to the requirements of the country to transform," Survé explained.

And he followed up his words with action as we saw the launch of I'solezwe lesiXhosa in the Eastern Cape and the African Independent, adding more colourful voices and helping grow and further diversify the group and the media in general.

Nakasa could have chosen to stay home with his family in warm and friendly Durban.

Like Rolihlahla Nelson Mandela, he felt he had no choice but to seek freedom, first by living and working in Joburg, and then New York.

He lived and worked defiantly as a wanderer who was of the correct view that the apartheid laws were only fit to be honoured in the breach, and never in timid observance.

Like Nakasa, media owners and journalists of today can accept the status quo and say "it's the way it is", or we can say "don't you believe it".

We have no choice but to transform.

Our constitution enjoins us to remember Nakasa and others, recognise the injustices of our dark past and work towards healing our land and transforming it into the utopia that is contained in it.

We have no choice.