

SLOW WALK TO FREEDOM:

Attitudes towards race relations

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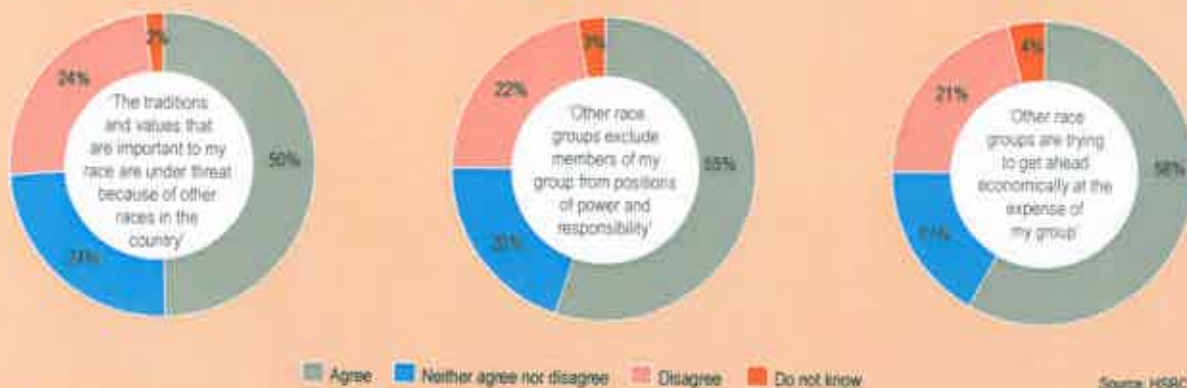
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South Africans are becoming more positive about race relations in the country, albeit slowly

Figure 1: Fear of racial marginalisation in the Rainbow Nation, 2011



Source: HSRC, SASAS 2011

Race featured prominently at the recent Social Cohesion Summit in Soweto hosted by the Department of Arts and Culture. The summit highlighted the importance of improving race relations in the Rainbow Nation and raised questions about the extent of the country's progress towards racial harmony. To answer these questions, *Steven Gordon, Ben Roberts and Jaré Struwig* present findings from the annual South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), revealing signs of growing racial tolerance, especially among the young.

The HSRC annually conducts SASAS since 2003. The survey series consists of nationally representative samples of South African adults aged 16 years and older living in private households. The authors examined SASAS data from the last five years to understand how perceptions of race relations have changed in South Africa. The sample sizes for the 2007 to 2011 surveys were in the range of between 3 000 to 3 300 participants.

Feelings of racial marginalisation

Many South Africans seem to be afraid that their racial group's position – politically, culturally and economically – is under threat from other groups. In 2011, 58% of the population thought that people of other race groups were trying to get ahead economically at the expense of their own group (Figure 1). More than half (54%) thought that people of other race groups were excluding members of their own group from positions of power and responsibility. Finally, almost half (49%) believed that the traditions and values that are important to people of their race group are under threat because of the influence of other races.

Fears of marginalisation are shared by all race groups in South Africa, with a majority

in each group expressing concerns about the marginalisation of their own group. Given how widespread these beliefs are, it is perhaps not surprising to learn that 54% of South Africans felt that other race groups will never understand what members of their group are like.

Can other races be trusted?

Trust is a central component of an individual's ability to form social relationships and reject harmful stereotypes. It is also considered indicative of social cohesion and therefore imperative to understand attitudes towards inter-racial trust in the country.

In 2011 SASAS asked respondents their level of agreement with the statement that 'people of different racial groups do not really trust each other'. While 64% agreed, only 19% disagreed and 13% opted for a neutral position. Furthermore, 51% agreed that 'people of different racial groups will never really trust each other', 20% were neutral and about a quarter (26%) disagreed. These findings indicate a disturbing level of distrust.

On a more positive note we found some indications that race relations have been

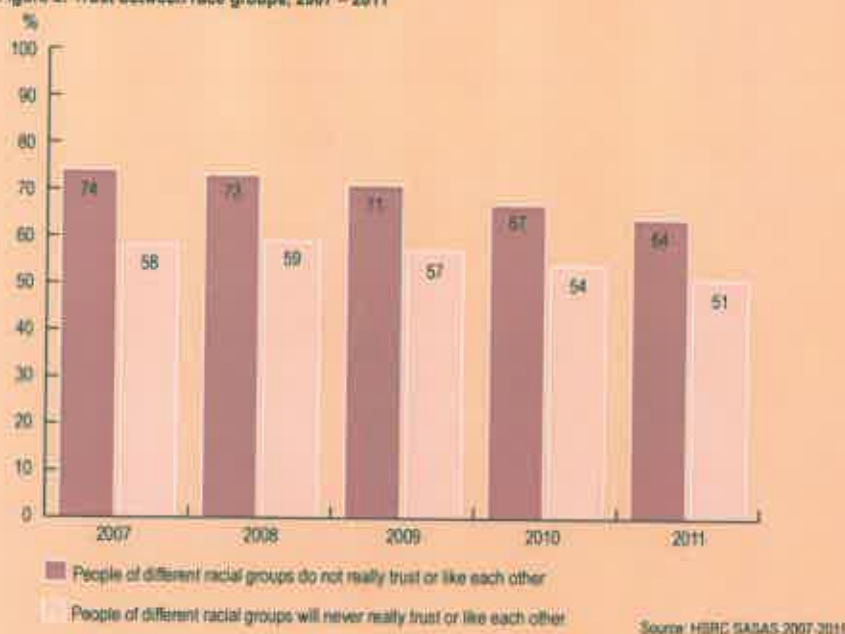
improving. South Africans were less pessimistic about race relations than in 2007, when almost three-quarters (74%) agreed that racial groups did not trust each other and 58% agreed that they will never trust each other.

Figure 2 on the next page suggests that South Africans are becoming more positive about race relations in the country, albeit slowly. Future work in this area will need to examine whether this is attributable to progress in social integration and the creation, since the end of apartheid, of more multi-racial workplaces, residential areas and schools. The positive trend observed could also be linked to efforts by government and civil society to promote national unity.

The improvement in positive attitudes towards race relations in South Africa is visible not only in the observed increase in trust; there is also a general feeling among the population that relations have been improving. Asked if race relations in the country have improved, stayed the same, or grew worse in the last year, more than half of all South Africans (51%) in 2011 indicated that they had improved, 32% indicated that they had stayed the same and only 15% felt they had deteriorated.

>> SLOW WALK TO FREEDOM: Attitudes towards race relations (continued)

Figure 2: Trust between race groups, 2007 – 2011



As Figure 3 shows, the majority of South Africans share the conviction that race relations have been improving year-on-year since 2008 (when SASAS introduced the question). The 2010 results stand out, probably due to the euphoric effect of the FIFA World Cup. The findings seem to suggest that the majority are optimistic about the nation's progress on race relations. Indeed, in 2011 only 12% believed that race relations in the country had deteriorated since 1994 with almost two-thirds (64%) stating that relations had improved.

Who is optimistic about racial relations?

Men and women did not differ significantly in their optimism about race relations in 2011. Race, however, was found to be a significant determinant of such attitudes. Black Africans were the most optimistic about race relations last year, followed by coloureds and Indians, with white South Africans as the least optimistic.

Encouragingly, there seemed to be a strong relationship between age and perceptions on improvement in race relations. For example,

of the nation's youth (those between 16 and 19 years), 61% believed that race relations had improved in 2011 and 73% felt that race relations had improved since the end of apartheid. This finding signals that young people are more confident about progress in race relations in South Africa, an important indication of the country's movement towards the goal of racial harmony.

A class bias was noted with those with high living standards were more likely to be pessimistic about race relations than those with low living standards. The nation's rural residents were significantly more optimistic than their urban counterparts. Urban dwellers were almost three times more likely than their rural counterparts to believe that race relations had worsened in 2011.

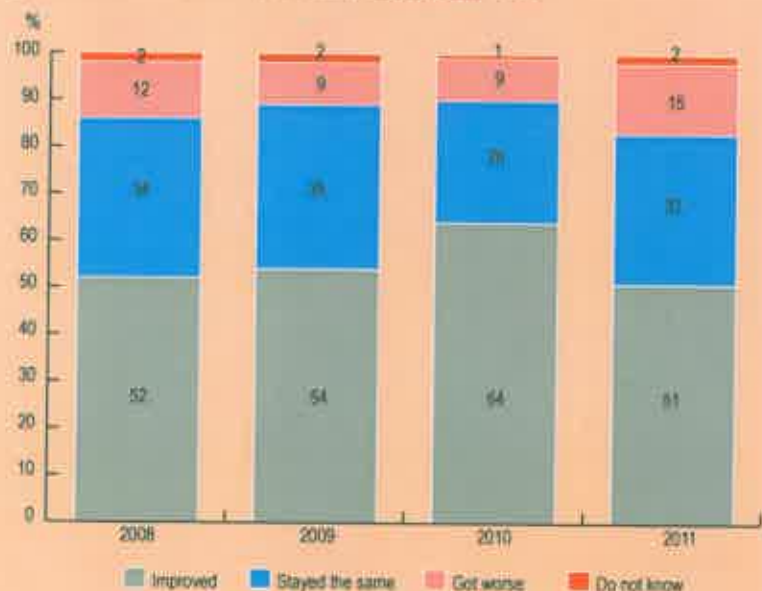
Optimism about race relations may also be related to the government's efforts to promote equal opportunities. In 2011, those who believed the government was working hard to ensure that people of all races had equal opportunities for jobs, housing, and education were more than twice as likely to believe race relations had improved.

Conclusion

South African society has made significant progress in building racial harmony. Yet, despite the recognition of improvement in race relations on a year-on-year basis, a considerable proportion of South Africans continue to feel threatened by other race groups. This raises concerns about interracial trust, a finding that lends support to investing in further social cohesion research in South Africa. Research findings about interracial trust – and distrust – emphasise the need for greater social dialogue on issues of race.

Expressions of racial distrust emphasise the need for greater social dialogue on the issue of race as well as ongoing monitoring of societal change and progress in this area. This need has been acknowledged by President Zuma and the government is currently finalising preparations on the National Strategy on Social Cohesion and Nation Building. Nonetheless, if South Africa is to arrive at the future envisioned by former President Nelson Mandela, we as citizens must play a decisive role alongside government efforts to build a socially cohesive nation.

Figure 3: Have race relations improved in the last year? 2008 – 2011



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