



Afrikaner adolescents' identity struggles in post-apartheid South Africa

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The question of how Afrikaner young people – the generation born when apartheid was coming to an end early in the 1990s – are coming to grips with themselves and with life in a new society has interested scholars and ordinary South Africans in recent years.

By Charl Alberts

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One could argue that the parents of these Afrikaner adolescents, and the generations before them, can be held responsible for putting in place the notorious system of apartheid, and that Afrikaners over the past decades, generally speaking, have been socialised into the values, discourses and ideology of Afrikaner nationalism, apartheid and racial oppression. These discredited values stand in sharp contrast to what the new democratic society is all about and school-going Afrikaner young people are often rooted in traditional family settings, but they also have to deal with de-segregated contexts such as attending multi-cultural schools.

A recent study (Alberts 2013) investigated how Afrikaner school-going adolescents in rural Eastern Cape contexts were constructing identities of Afrikanerness in conversation with their parents. I conducted family conversations with nine Afrikaner families in the form of focus group discussions, where they were questioned about their identities of being Afrikaans and white in the post-apartheid society.

The research project conceptualised identity formation from a discursive point of view (i.e. identity is produced in and through discourse and in relationship with fellow human beings), and used the theory of a

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dialogical self, developed by Hubert Hermans (2001) and colleagues, as an explanatory framework. Hermans conceptualises self and identities as multi-voiced and dialogical, and individual selves are embedded in social, cultural and historical contexts.

Analysis of the transcribed texts of the family conversations revealed that identity formation among Afrikaner adolescents was complex and not one-dimensional. Applying the theoretical perspective of a dialogical self enabled an understanding of the complexity and diversity of youthful Afrikaner voices or identities, as well as the contradictions, tensions and conflicts emerging in the dialogue with their parents in a rapidly changing socio-political situation in South Africa. It emerged from the analysis that Afrikaner young people enacted a heterogeneity of identities of Afrikanerness and whiteness in conversation with their parents.

A major finding was that the discourse of the participants on being Afrikaans, for both young and old, was often pervaded by constructions of being threatened. Afrikaner adolescents and their parents often constructed a sense of threat in terms of their identity, language, culture, history, opportunities and future, to mention a few. In the process, a dangerous and uncompromising enemy – the racial ‘other’ – is constructed as one that wants to hurt and harm the interests and well-being of Afrikaners and white people in the new South Africa.

It became clear from the analysis of the data that, in the construction of these threat narratives, discourses (for example, “in the laager” or we should stand together as an ethnic group; the “purity” of the Afrikaans language is threatened) and ideologies (for example, Afrikaner nationalism) of the past were repeated and recited. The discourse of the “swart gevaar” (black danger) was most frequently utilised to construct a sense of threat. In one focus group discussion, Anneke (mother, 51 years old) said of her son’s end-of-matric bursary applications which were turned down: “He was just wiped out. *Then* already they had said ‘you can forget...we are not going to allocate the bursaries to the whites’ and so on.” It seems that Afrikaner adolescents and their parents often remain trapped in the past by repeating ways of talking and sense-making which belong to a bygone era. In the process, they continue to position themselves as settlers and struggle to grow towards making the transition of becoming constructive and participating citizens of the new society.

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and threat. In one of the interviews, Johan jr (18 years) said: “The Afrikaners must not stand back for what is right for them. They must *believe* in their language and everything, and they must not hide it away in a wardrobe or somewhere.”

The family conversation also became a social space where, for example, discourses of white domination, racial purity, apartheid, and racism were collectively recited in the negotiation of identities of Afrikanerness between the young people and their parents. Noel (17 years) talked about relating to young girls of colour: “Look, there is a friendship but it remains with friendship. I believe you do not climb over the racial line to tie the knot in a relationship with such a person. I believe strongly that sheep and goats don’t mate.”

From a theoretical point of view of a dialogical self, it can be argued that Afrikaner family settings often become social contexts where discourses of the past are recycled and reproduced, and where rumination and a lack of innovation is taking place (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka 2010). There is a danger that citizens, like Afrikaners in present-day South Africa, continue to talk from conventional identity positions in conversation with one another, making cyclical movements across these positions, and that they might arrive again and again at these same (often destructive) positions, and become absorbed in their negatively coloured memories, cognitions and anticipations. It is evident that rumination, for example between Afrikaner adolescents and their parents, is different from a truly dialogical relationship. This kind of relationship is repetitive in character; there is an absence of innovation during the process of interchange and an inability to move to novel and positive positions. There is a danger of keeping Afrikaners, young and old, trapped in discredited identities of the past, and preventing them from becoming constructive and participating citizens in the post-apartheid society.

The dialogue between Afrikaner young people and their parents during the family conversations was also riven with contradictions and contestations as they often drew on different discursive and ideological resources circulating in the Afrikaans cultural community to contradict one another in terms of identities. Two examples illustrate this point. In the first, Johanna (17 years) outlined – to the surprise of her parents – how she felt about letting go a traditional Afrikaner identity. “Now if I have children one day, I feel I must raise my children in English because I get the feeling our language is going to die out. I will rather change over to English than I would stay Afrikaans.” Johanna is prepared to consider embracing an identity that will give her access to a bigger world.

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In the second example, Anlé expressed her desire to embrace a traditional (romanticised) Afrikaner identity, to the amazement of her progressive-minded father. "I would wish that things must again be as it was in previous years. I am now over the new South Africa. It bothers me so much what is going on now." In contrast to Johanna, where the struggle and identity contestation revolved around a young Afrikaner's aspirations to break away from a traditional form of Afrikaansness and embrace a foreign (English) identity, Anlé's rhetoric about wanting to go back to a nostalgic and romanticised identity of being Afrikaans illustrates that it is not only the older generation of Afrikaners who are romanticising a traditional Afrikaner past.

It is evident from analysing these texts that discursive tensions and contestations of identity between the adolescents and their parents could go in different directions. It wasn't the case that the parents were necessarily conservative and racist, and the younger generation more liberal. In these family conversations, Afrikaner adolescents would sometimes draw on racist discourses to contradict their parents. It was not only parents who were trapped in ethnic identities of the past.

However, the young people often drew from experience and ways of talking resulting from being embedded in de-segregated settings, mostly at school. They were often able to utilise discourses from these integrated contexts to define themselves and their relations with black and coloured peers. Their parents, on the other hand, usually do not have the same quality of experience (or the same levels of intimacy, openness and intensity), nor the discursive and ideological resources, to deal with themselves and the 'other' in the same liberated ways.

In one of the focus group discussions, Carl (18 years) said: "We had a coloured in our class, Myron. We don't even see him as a coloured any more. He hangs out with us – everything. Unfortunately they have moved to Kareedouw now but there is another one now. We call him the coloured boer." With these words, Carl constructs the relationship with Myron as normal, embracing him unconditionally as a fellow human being and not on the basis of race, and frames it as a loss when Myron and his family moved away to another town. Furthermore, by adopting the term "coloured boer", Carl and his friends have befriended the racial 'other', and incorporated it into their own group. The invention of the term "coloured boer" can also be seen as a demonstration of the performance of a group ritual, and a way of accomplishing (discursively) group loyalty.

In another family interview, Bernice (17 years) commented on the situation in the classroom at school: "The white group that are there are friends but I am

very good friends with not just coloureds. Many of my good friends are blacks." In these family conversations, parents seldom described their relationships with black South Africans like this. Both Carl and Bernice have mobilised their experience and discourses from de-segregated social contexts at school in enacting identities of whiteness and Afrikanerness. The voices of these young Afrikaners have transcended identities of whiteness and Afrikanerness cultivated in the apartheid era and are pointing the way towards becoming citizens of the new, democratic society.

From the point of view of the theory of the multi-voiced and dialogical self, Bernice's discourse in terms of her friendship with the 'other' can also be interpreted as the development of a third position (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka 2010). This third position emerges as a reconciliatory position between voices of more conservative parents and traditional collective voices of her Afrikaner culture on the one hand and, on the other, the appeal of fellow black and coloured learners for equal and fair treatment in de-segregated school settings. The emergence of a third position in this example can be interpreted as re-organising the self in a new social, cultural and historical context and will enable Bernice to engage in open and dialogical relationships with fellow South Africans.

In summary, analysis of my research revealed a complex multiplicity of voices of Afrikanerness and whiteness emerging in the dialogue between Afrikaner adolescents and their parents. These identities are often rooted in the discredited apartheid past, but what also emerged were voices of Afrikanerness and whiteness that can be described as subject positions that transcend the ideology of whiteness and embrace solidarity across colour lines. These youthful Afrikaner voices of hybridity and renewal have the potential, if they can be strengthened through a variety of contemporary social forces, to make a contribution towards challenging discredited legacies of the past. They can also give direction in terms of growing constructive, participating and moral citizens in post-apartheid South Africa.

References

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