Aspiration to Community: Community Responses to Rejection

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RUNNING HEAD: ASPIRATION TO COMMUNITY

Abstract

While people may belong to multiple psychological communities, each has a have primary community which reinforces norms, values, identities and, provide structures and social support systems that are crucial to the well-being of its members. In some situations, people aspire to membership of a community, but are rejected. This paper examines the responses of coloured South Africans and Anglo-Indians in their aspirations to membership of European communities. By the use of status borrowing, relative advantage, and social comparison, these groups tried to enhance the importance of the language and culture they shared with the Europeans, while rejecting the indigenous parts of their heritage. However, the European groups rejected them as "inferiors", while still providing them with some degree of status and privilege above that of the indigenous groups. It was found that socially constructed differences and social distances between communities, racism, and other negative outcomes associated with rejection and marginality operated at social and psychological levels to suppress the members of the aspirant groups. A proposal of immediate and longer term responses to the social stratifications and inequities are set forward in order to understand the adjustments over time that must be made by these groups. It is recommended that understandings of response to oppression and marginalization should go beyond the individual level to include community level responses.

Key words: sense of community, rejection, marginalization, empowerment, adaptation.

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People belong to multiple psychological and social communities that fulfil a variety of psychosocial needs and in which they develop their social identities. Membership of one's communities may be achieved (e. g., locality, profession) or ascribed (e. g., race, gender). Entry may be gained based on qualifications, social status, prestige, skills, or other criteria. Some groups, however, are not the product of voluntary association or free will of membership and, due to sociopolitical forces, the imposed group membership and membership criteria can have negative and devalued meanings. Particularly negative forms of ascription can be seen in the racial classification schemes of Apartheid in South Africa.

Whether ascribed or achieved, the various communities to which we belong have differential importance. We may, in general, emphasise one of those communities over all others as our core identity, our primary community. However, the situations and the circumstances that one face should demand the particular psychological benefits or strengths of a specific community that is best suited to supportive functions or identity constructions. (At the time of writing, Australia is going through a Federal Election and the USA through its Primaries season. Both are situations that demands all our psychological resources and help to focus our membership of political communities.)

When there are not such pressing issues, it is postulated that one community underpins identity and social functioning, and that is rooted in one's culture. The preeminence of membership of one community should be a continuing feature of our psychological lives. The primary group is one that reinforces norms, values, identities and, provide structures and social support systems that are crucial to the well-being of its members. Cox (1989) believed in the centrality of the primary community in society, serving as a socialization agent, and central to the psychological development of group members.

This paper will explore the issue of primary communities and their value. It will not, however, explore these from achievement or ascription of membership. The focus will be on the results for groups where there have been an identified aspiration to membership of what could become their primary group. The example of coloured South Africans and Anglo-Indians, and their aspiration to the primary community represented by the Europeans will underpin the exploration (added to their rejection of, and subsequent rejection by, the indigenous groups). It will set forward a proposal of immediate responses to the social stratifications and inequities, but look for longer term developments which may occur.

Primary Communities

According to Sarason, some characteristics of psychological sense of community (PSC) include the "perception of similarity to others, an acknowledged interdependence with others, a willingness to maintain this interdependence by giving to or doing for others what one expects from them, the feeling that one is part of a larger dependable and stable structure" (Sarason, 1974, p.156). More basically, McMillan and Chavis (1986) outlined the roles and values of psychological sense of community. They proposed that one would invest in the community because of the support received, the identity it confirmed, consensual validation, shared history of members, the influence that the community could exert, and the meeting of other psychosocial needs. They saw membership as the feeling of belonging to, and the identification with, a group comprising boundaries reinforced by common symbol systems.

The boundaries determine who belongs to the group and who does not and provide emotional safety to group members. The amount of personal investment people have in communities also influences membership and their active involvement in the protection of the community and its ideals. There is an implicit reward structure that maintains the sense of togetherness in a group and is largely directed by shared values. It is a reward structure that facilitates the maintenance and control of boundaries.

Many have written about the benefits and importance of group membership and psychological involvement in one's community (Berry, 1984, 1986; Sherif &

Sherif, 1964; Smith, 1991). For example, it has been demonstrated that ethnic and racial groups provide members with a sense of belonging that is psychologically important for people -- it serves as an anchor for individual relatedness (Berry, 1984, 1986; Phinney, 1990; Smith, 1991). Sherif and Sherif said secure social ties are important because "... to have a dependable anchor for a consistent and patterned self-picture, which is essential for personal consistency in experience and behaviour, and particularly for a day-to-day continuity of the person's self identity" (p. 271). They suggested that the absence of such ties can lead to estrangement, alienation, and other negative psychosocial consequences. Turner (1984) said that a group as a psychological process "can be thought of as the adaptive mechanism that makes social cohesion, cooperation and collective action possible" (p. 535).

To demonstrate the benefits associated with group membership, Cox (1989) and Berry (1984; 1986) have encouraged the development of ethnically homogeneous social support networks because of the enormous psychosocial benefits associated with such networks. In a similar vein, Williams and Berry (1991) argued for designing culturally-anchored programs to facilitate settlement processes for refugee groups. Although there are many positives associated with belonging to a community, there may also be negative impacts because of sociopolitical forces.

The formation of communities, group boundaries, and identities varies across contexts and is influenced by factors including sociopolitical forces, intragroup dynamics, and intergroup differences. Oppressive and disempowering social structures and environments can have many impacts on individual and group development and functioning. The interactions between dominant and subordinate groups in different sociopolitical contexts influence the ways in which individuals and groups adapt to these contexts. These adaptive patterns are, in turn, reflected in terms of ethnic identification, group boundary formation, quality of life, and wellbeing.

Sarason (1974) said that there is nothing as destructive of a PSC as segregating people into geographical areas. Using residential institutions as examples, Sarason said that people in institutions start to view themselves in terms of external perceptions and stereotypes and often internalise the notion of second class status projected onto them. Sarason also highlighted that removal from families and communities accentuate feelings of rejection and differentness and that the separation attenuates feelings of belonging. Sarason argues that the removal from, or rejection by, a primary group results in a diluted sense of community in the new context and also have implications for the experience of community in other contexts.

Colored South Africans and Anglo-Indians

Bose (1979) and Gist and Wright (1973) discussed the position of Anglo-Indians in the Raj and later. They were the group of mixed Indian and European heritage. Anglo-Indians were afforded privileges in employment, education, and living standards; group members often filling roles in between the British and Indians. Similarly, the coloreds in South Africa were the mixed race group, so classified under the Apartheid regime. They were of both European and African descent, with privilege, status, and responsibilities in between the whites and the blacks.

For each of these groups, there was the membership of their defined community. However, each also indicated aspirations for membership of the white group. It was the one that in terms of culture and language they saw themselves as most like (Bose, 1979; Gist & Wright, 1973; Sonn & Fisher, this issue); to an extent, the whites became their primary communities -- even without actual membership. With the aspiration to be accepted by the whites, these groups actively devalued and rejected the indigenous parts of their ancestry. However, the whites rejected them as "inferior" and the indigenous groups often rejected them because of their self-important status.

Their roles gave them some privilege, not equality. The colored community was told that similar cultural practices and value systems did not entail equality (Adhikari, 1991; James, 1986; Sparks, 1991). They were confronted with

a situation that separated them from blacks and whites on economic, social, psychological, physical, and political levels. Similar to the Anglo-Indian community, the coloured group was given certain privileges withheld from the black group. These privileges included education, land ownership, and jobs (Sparks, 1991), but they were required to earn their position by carrying out some demands of the government's Apartheid structures. This contributed to resentment and rejection between the two groups (Sparks, 1991). Freire (1972) stated that: "As the oppressor minority subordinates and dominates the majority, it must divide it and keep it divided in order to remain in power." (p. 111) This rejection and oppression resulted in a variety of forms of adaptation which gave rise to many negative psychological consequences that are reflected in terms of ethnic identification, group boundary formation, quality of life, and wellbeing.

Effects of Rejection and Marginalization

Within different sociopolitical and cultural contexts, the power relationships and distribution of resources between groups differ. The subsequent interaction between dominant and subordinate communities can lead to different individual and group adaptations (Smith, 1991). In some instances, individuals and groups adapt by aspiring to belong to a particular group or community; a form of adaptation called assimilation (Furnham &Bochner, 1986; Tajfel, 1981). In such a case, the subordinate group rejects its own characteristics and history in favour of that of the powerful group. This can often be seen in groups where there is not only contact, but also where there is a mixing of the heritage of members (Bose, 1979; Gist & Wright, 1973; Sonn & Fisher, this issue). A stronger form of this was referred to as "status borrowing" by Wolf (1986); groups try to maximise their status and power by reflection on those to whom they feel related but are subordinate.

The role of assimilation and status borrowing can be clearly seen in those groups who have similarities to the dominant groups in a society. From colonial and oppressive regimes, there are some clear examples where the assimilation and status borrowing attempts were stronger aspirations towards membership of the dominant community. The cases of the colored South Africans and Anglo-Indians seem to fit these very well. It was their perceptions of similarities with the whites that led them to aspire to that status and to reject the indigenous majorities -- often implementing the separatist policies of Apartheid.

Sarason (1974) said that groups rejected and segregated may start to see themselves in terms of the criteria and status imposed upon them. Researchers (e. g., Myers & Speight, 1994; Tajfel, 1981) have shown that evaluations of self and culture in terms of dominant group criteria are some outcomes associated with intergroup interaction where there are dominant and subordinate groups and pressures such as prejudice and discrimination. Externalizing to reference groups and the rejection of one's own group are correlated with the development of negative group and individual identity. E. Smith (1991) states that "negative identity is often characterised by using the majority group's standards as a means to judge and accept or reject oneself" (p. 186). James Jones (1990) mentioned that some responses to dominant and nondominant situations are characterised by self-hate, and the aspiration to, and evaluation of, self in terms of an ideal that is representative of the dominant group. Others (e. g., A. Smith, 1986) have said that marginality leads to negative psychological effects including ambivalence, alienation, anxiety, and negative self-concept. A. Smith does, however, also discuss some of the positive aspects of marginality.

The Colored and Anglo-Indian communities were caught in between white and indigenous groups. However, these groups rejected their indigenous heritage and aspired to be members of the white community (Gist & Wright, 1973; James, 1992). Prilleltensky and Gonick (in press) stated that many dynamics facilitate such an adaptive response. Relative advantage and social comparison are two processes which facilitate such a response. Relative advantage is where a group legitimates the status quo by comparing itself with groups in lower strata (Wolf, 1986). Similarly, Tajfel (1981) argued that social comparisons and

perceptions of relative deprivation are central to the development of group identities, attitudes, and behaviour. Through these processes oppressed groups' legitimate social systems and justify their positions in them.

The colored group and the Anglo-Indian group adapted to particular sociopolitical realities, realities that seemed to equate social, political, and economic status with skin colour. By evaluating their assigned social and political positions through comparisons with the other groups that existed in the system, they saw that they had an advantage over groups placed lower in the racial hierarchy. Wolf (1986) wrote that "the sense of relative advantage limits the sense of deprivation" (p. 222). This response also indicated group conservativism which means a group tends to cling to what it has and takes few risks to alter a situation. Therefore, through comparative processes and group conservativism, the Anglo-Indian and coloured groups legitimated their positions and, as a result, acquiesced to the systems. These processes also contributed to the development of, and reinforced, social and psychological distance from other oppressed groups in the system. According to Tajfel (1981), positively-valued differentiation can contribute positively to a group's self-image and worth.

Negative intergroup experiences and oppression do not always lead to the rejection of an ingroup, but might lead to the rejection of the status of inferiority. Groups might respond by accepting a particular identity, while distancing themselves from other groups. In these instances, groups respond by accepting and advancing their own identities and separateness while trying to achieve equality and acceptance in terms of things valued by dominant groups. This response is characterised by the notion "separate but equal", and has been referred to as social competition (Tajfel, 1981). Groups like the coloured South Africans and Anglo-Indians responded by developing mechanisms and structures that offered their members a protective haven against a hostile outside environment while competing in terms of the dominant group values and standards.

Prolonged oppression, racism, prejudice, and discrimination, although negative experiences, can serve as factors that unify and mobilise groups (A. Jones, 1990; Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990). Spencer and Markstrom-Adams (1990) have also mentioned studies that suggest negative experiences may encourage an ingroup preference and may also encourage people to gain an understanding of their own group. The emergence of a community solidarity and awareness may occur if the community experiences deprivation over a considerable period as a result of discrimination and exploitation (Gist & Wright, 1973).

An Anglo-Indian sense of community emerged as a result of deprivation and hardship (Gist & Wright, 1973). Sparks (1991) said that, in South Africa, some sections of the coloured community responded by promoting the coloured ethnicity as a platform for the advancement of the group's interest. They encouraged the notion of a separate ethnicity while establishing equality in terms of dominant group values. This response is characterised by self advancement within a particular system; a response in line with the intentions of the Apartheid regime. They wanted coloureds to define themselves as different from other groups and introduced many laws to facilitate and force this (Beinart, 1994). This reinforces the idea that the group had assimilated (voluntarily or involuntarily) a large part of the white South African culture and aspired to a status equal to that of the oppressor. It also points to the role of differentiation from others as a way of promoting a positive group image in a system in which racial groups are tiered (Tajfel, 1981).

Some (e. g., Unterhalter, 1975) also suggested that political ideologies, especially those advocated by Steve Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement, combined with the rejection of coloureds by whites, might be some forces that contributed to the emergence of a coloured identity. This view reinforced the idea that colored people differed from other racial groups and represented a separate political and ethnic/cultural entity. This argument was consistent with certain political parties within the coloured community that promoted the notion of a coloured history and ethnicity. These activities are further indication that sections of the group adapted to the system in an

assimilationist way and that relative advantage and social comparison processes were at the centre of developing a positive self image.

Over time the coloured and Anglo-Indian communities changed on social, cultural, and psychological levels because of sociopolitical forces. In South Africa and India those who were disempowered and oppressed were empowered, effectively promoting the rejected indigenous community to a dominant political position while demoting the primary community to a lesser position. Both these communities found themselves in precarious positions because they had rejected and distanced themselves from the indigenous communities but were in situations where those they had rejected now ruled. This reversal of status has implications for how these communities psychologically responded to the new realities; realities in which the groups they aspired to belong to had been relegated while those they rejected became power holders.

The Indian independence movement during the 1920's culminated in the independence of India from Britain in 1947 implied changes on many levels for the Anglo-Indian community. Gist and Wright (1973) argued that these changes contributed to number of responses including immigration to other British colonies by many Anglo-Indians and the confirmation of an Anglo-Indian identity and lowered emigration rates after the community had been promised equal rights and privileges with other citizens. These responses implied that the community wanted to retain its relative advantage over indigenous groups and saw themselves as different from their indigenous ancestors.

The historical, first non-racial elections took place in South Africa in 1994. Interestingly many colored people in the Cape voted in favour of the National Party (the white ruling party) in those elections. This is contrary to some of the political activities which reflected colored people's support for the ANC and other black and non-racial political organisations. This voting pattern could represent sections of the community's attempts to retain their relative advantage compared to the black majority; or reflect the group conservativism that conformity to oppression had facilitated.

On the other hand, this pattern may reflect some of the impacts of the Apartheid system including social and politically constructed myths about racial separateness and superiority that people internalised during that period and opportunistic political strategies employed by the National Party and collaborating coloured politicians. Adam (1995) stated that the institutionalized racial differences were rejected by groups in South Africa because they were imposed, and more significantly, these differences, compounded by material inequality, psychologically divided the South African community. Adam continued, saying that:

Even if the ethnic hierarchy has been modified by blacks as political rulers, racism as the everyday false consciousness of socially constructed difference, has not disappeared with the repeal of racial legislation. (p. 468)

This comment reflects the impact of the system on the oppressed communities and alludes to the idea that macrosocial changes, albeit an important step towards social change, do not always coincide with changes at social and psychological levels. Thus, socially constructed differences and social distances between communities, racism, and other negative outcomes associated with Apartheid still operated at social and psychological levels. Overtime these changes will lead to new social and psychological responses by communities.

Apart from trying to maintain their status of relative advantage and promoting racial and ethnic differences, the Anglo-Indian and colored communities have also responded to their rejection, powerlessness, and in-betweenity by immigrating to other countries (Gist & Wright, 1973). In the new countries, these groups are relatively free to integrate and become part of the dominant community (Sonn, 1995). In those countries the groups are not necessarily free of racism or oppression, but they could become part of the group they aspire to. According to Tajfel (1981), this reflects partial assimilation. That is, negative connotations of these communities are maintained by the dominant group and the new communities are not fully accepted.

In the new cultural context processes of social comparison and relative advantage also operate. These immigrant communities become part of the dominant

group and take on characteristics of that group while differentiating themselves from other racial and ethnic groups placed lower in the social structure. These groups take on the characteristics and values of the dominant group and use their status to distance themselves from other racial and ethnic groups placed lower in the social order. Thus, the racism and prejudice associated with socially constructed difference which typified community in one context is translated into the new context. Therefore, the social and psychological processes which underpinned community responses to rejection and oppression in South Africa and India are implicated in understanding how communities locate themselves in the new context.

Changes for these communities have come in different forms. Although changes took place at psychological and social levels before these communities had internalised the social constructions of difference associated with the systems in which they were created and existed. Only with time will these communities develop new psychological responses to deal with the dynamics of identity construction and development implicit in intergroup relations.

Responding to Rejection and Marginalization

History has shown that rejection and marginalization can lead to negative social and psychological responses. There may, however, also be positive outcomes associated with marginality. If marginalization is clear, and attitudes, values, and sociopolitical structures reinforces social distances between groups, communities in marginal positions may create new forms of community that has positive outcomes for group members. Sometimes the barriers imposed by dominant groups and time spent together in enforced categories can lead to within group cohesion and the development of new forms of community. According to Gist and Wright (1973), the Anglo-Indian community responded to British rejection by "forming organizations and creating a generally self-sustaining community" (p. 15). Sonn (1995) and Sonn and Fisher (this issue) found that the colored South African community responded to its marginalization by displacing notions of community to other settings or outlets. Thus, people created alternative settings in which they could experience a sense of community and develop support networks. This sense of community, in turn, facilitated the development of a sense of identity and provided opportunities for belonging and identification.

Tajfel (1981) have argued that responding to a nondominant/dominant group situation by making comparisons with ingroups or groups of similar social status, rather than dominant outgroups or groups in lower social strata, may reduce the negatives associated with a particular group. That is, rather than working in terms of a principle of relative advantage or disadvantage, group comparisons are based on notions of equality. However, this process is also an adaptive response that does not encourage the development of a critical awareness of the sociopolitical realities of the particular contexts.

Redefining negative connotations associated with a group is an important step for group and individual development because positively belonging to a group and experiencing relatedness is psychologically important for people (Cross, Parnham, & Helms, 1990; J. Jones, 1990). The processes involved in redefining group identities and changing systems entail some form of empowerment or consciousness raising, and may involve changing cognitive sets or ideologies which maintain and perpetuate oppression (Freire, 1972; Montero, 1990; Prilleltensky, 1989; Tajfel, 1981; Watts, 1994a). Some groups respond by redefining and reformulating the meanings, histories, and definitions associated with their group and community, or they may revitalise their customs and cultures. According to Myers and Speight (1994) by "getting to the core of the [oppression] dynamic, liberation and empowerment are made possible through a cognitive restructuring process that enhances individuals' capacity to control their thoughts and feelings through reconnection with a more authentic sense of identity." (p. 110)

It is imperative that we gain a clearer understanding of how groups, marginalized and oppressed for prolonged periods, adapt to contexts over time. Therefore, research and action aimed at unravelling the processes that are

conducive to conformity and the legitimation of oppression should be a central concern for psychologists and other social scientists. Watts (1994a, 1994b) contended that an understanding of the oppressive processes that affect people's lives is important for countering oppression, encouraging social change, and developing a positive sense of self. This understanding also needs to take into account the community level responses to rejection, oppression and marginalization.

Communities are dynamic and, in adverse and challenging circumstances, communities evolve and adapt traits, values, and beliefs to facilitate group survival (Edgerton, 1992). That is, communities construct and create belief systems and internalise notions of culture and community that serve supportive functions for its members. Some adaptations are negative, but Edgerton (1992) has highlighted it is important that we understand human adaptation because we will ultimately have some stake in fashioning new cultures and societies.

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