

## **SELF-ESTEEM IN CONTEXT: A CASE STUDY OF THE MOTIVATIONAL PROCESSES UNDERLYING SOCIAL IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION BY TOWNSHIP YOUTH**

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The issues examined in this paper are located within the context of the debate in Social Identity Theory (SIT) about the motivational forces underlying identity formation. The starting point of the paper is SIT in the tradition of Tajfel and Turner (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Tajfel 1981, Hogg & Abrams, 1988). According to SIT, people are motivated by a fundamental need for self-esteem in the process of identity construction. Despite a fair amount of criticism (e.g. Abrams & Hogg, 1988; Hogg & Abrams, 1990), the "self-esteem hypothesis" has received substantial empirical support. However much of this supporting empirical research has been conducted in experimental studies or laboratory conditions rather than in real-life social contexts (e.g. Hinkle & Brown, 1990; Hogg & Sunderland, 1991; Crocker, Blaine & Luhtanen, 1993). This paper reports on a research project which sought to address comments that SIT lacks ecological validity (Abrams, 1992; Hogg & Abrams, 1990; Reicher & Hopkins, 1996). The aim of this study was to complement SIT's predominantly laboratory and experimental findings with research conducted in a non-laboratory context, investigating social identity formation within natural social groupings. Against this background, detailed open-ended interviews were conducted with 40 residents of a Durban township, aged between 17 and 23 years, in the interests of investigating the process of social identity construction in the rapidly changing social climate of the early 1990s prior to the release of Mandela. This paper presents a case study of the motivational processes underlying the social identity of this group of young people.

To a limited extent the research reported on in this paper is located within the tradition of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), insofar as it sought to evaluate SIT in the light of its ability to account for the process of identity formation by this particular group of township youth, and where necessary to extend the theory for this purpose. As will be outlined below, while SIT's basic claims were taken as a starting point in analysing the interviews, every attempt was made to set up a dialogue between SIT and the interviews in the interests of fine-tuning the theory to account for the process of identity formation as reflected in the accounts of the informants.

Drawing on Gecas and Schwalbe's (1983) claim that self-esteem is achieved through engagement in efficacious social action, this paper will suggest that in the process of identity construction, informants were motivated by three socially negotiated criteria for perceived social competence, viz: respectability, self-improvement and personal/community empowerment. It will be argued that these criteria for efficacy-based self-esteem are shaped by the specific social and historical context of informants, and that such criteria will vary from one social context and one social grouping to another. The notion of "perceived social competence" provides a useful way of beginning to conceptualise the way in which self-esteem needs are met in the course of action in the context of everyday life demands.

### **SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY.**

SIT defines social identity as "the individual's knowledge that he (sic) belongs to certain social groups, together with some emotional and value significance to him of group membership" (Tajfel, 1972:31). A social group is understood as "two or more individuals who share a common social identification of themselves, or, which is nearly the same thing, perceive themselves to be members of the same social category" (Turner, 1982:15). Focusing on those group memberships that are located within the context of inter-group relations, SIT accounts for the psychological process of group formation in terms of interlocking cognitive and motivational processes. The theory provides a detailed account of the twin cognitive processes of categorisation and social comparison (involving the comparison of ingroup and outgroup in such a way that ingroup similarities and between-group differences are accentuated). With regard to motivational processes, the theory postulates that group formation is motivated by the fundamental human need for positive self-esteem. In making ingroup/outgroup comparisons, individuals are motivated to accentuate those comparison dimensions that reflect favourably on the ingroup (see Tajfel & Turner, 1979, for the SIT's classic statement regarding motivation and identity).

SIT conceives of the social self as a loose association of group memberships, with different group memberships being associated with different possibilities and constraints on action. It is this postulated link between group membership and action that formed the basis of the triologue model of identity that was developed as a framework for understanding the interviews in the current study. The triologue model also constituted the basis of this paper's conceptualisation of self-esteem in terms of a striving for perceived social competence - derived from the individual's performance of competent and efficacious action in specific social situations - according to socially negotiated criteria for efficacy.

Tajfel and Turner's (1979) classic statement on the role of self-esteem in identity formation has informed a prolific tradition of theory and research into large-scale inter-group relations in stratified societies (see, for example, work on ethnolinguistic identity theory by authors such as Giles, e.g. Giles & Johnson, 1981). It has also informed work in areas such as social identity and AIDS (e.g. Abrams, Carter & Hogg, 1989) and work on ethnic identity and the structure of the self-concept (e.g. Ethier & Deaux, 1990). However, the "self-esteem hypothesis" has not gone unchallenged (e.g. Abrams & Hogg, 1988), and over the years, a number of alternative motivational constructs have been suggested either as alternative or complementary constructs to the notion of a the fundamental need for self-esteem. Deaux (1993) refers to a number of studies

postulating needs such as the need for material wealth, power and control (cf Ng, 1980), the need for meaning (cf Reynowski, 1982) and the need for cognitive consistency (Horwitz & Rabbie, 1982) as the motivational forces driving the psychological process of group formation. Other possible motivational factors that have been highlighted include drives towards anxiety reduction (Wilder, 1993) and uncertainty reduction (Hogg & Abrams, 1993). Not one of these alternative positions has succeeded in generating any kind of substantial research tradition however. Neither have any of these competing or complementary constructs yet posed any substantial competition to the self-esteem motive. The need for positive self-esteem remains paramount as the motivational force within social identity research.

The current research does not seek to challenge SIT's claims about the motivational role of self-esteem. Rather it seeks to provide a case study of the operation of self-esteem needs - in a study which takes key aspects of SIT as its starting point and seeks to examine their operation in an ecologically valid setting. Thus the research accepts the basic tenets of SIT as outlined above, in particular:

- (i) SIT's definition of the self as a loose association of group memberships (using the definitions of 'social identity' and 'group membership' outlined above);
- (ii) SIT's postulation of a link between group memberships and possibilities and constraints on action;
- (iii) Tajfel's agenda for a "truly social" social psychology as the study of "individual behaviour as it interacts with its social context, and more often than not derives from that context ..." (Tajfel & Fraser, 1978:18); and
- iv) SIT's postulation of self-esteem as the primary motive underlying identity formation.

The third of these assumptions was the most important guide of current research. It was a commitment to this understanding of the role of social context in identity formation that motivated the current researcher's interest in developing SIT into a tool for understanding the construction of social identity of real people in naturalistic social settings - as a complement to the preference for experimental or laboratory research shown by the bulk of researchers in the SIT tradition.

## **METHOD.**

### **Informants.**

Interviews were conducted with 40 Zulu-speaking residents of a Durban township, 20 men and 20 women. Informants were aged between 17 and 23 years and their parents were unskilled or semi-skilled workers or involuntarily unemployed. The interviews took place in 1990, the time of turbulent social and political events immediately prior to the unbanning of the ANC and the release of Nelson Mandela, with strong signs of a fundamental shift in the balance of power in South Africa. These events were accompanied by high levels of social instability, evidenced in high levels of political violence and crime, which impacted strongly on the lives of ordinary township people. The young people in this study lived in stressed economic circumstances, overcrowded living accommodation, and frequently spoke of scarce family resources to meet the costs of education. Virtually all the informants' parents were rural-born people who had moved to the city to find work as opportunities for making a living in the countryside diminished. In contrast to their parents, almost all the informants in the study were township born. Their childhood experiences had often been very different to those of

their parents. Almost without exception, the informants had experienced more formal education than their parents.

### **Interview technique.**

In contrast to the more structured data-gathering procedures of much social identity research, information was gathered through an open-ended semi-structured interview format in which informants were encouraged to speak freely about their life experiences. Furthermore, in the spirit of grounded theory, every effort was made to tailor the theory to explain the interview findings.

The 40 interviews were detailed, lasting from four to nine hours, with the longer interviews taking place over two days. A copy of the interview schedule is provided in Campbell (1995a). Drawing on Tajfel's definition of social identity in terms of group memberships, the interviews aimed to identify and elicit information about the main formal and informal groupings of which youth could become members; norms and behaviours associated with different group memberships; which choices they had made from the range of available group memberships; what and who had influenced these choices; how the current situation had affected their decisions and so on. The first phase of the interviews elicited detailed open-ended life histories of informants. From these life histories, interviewers and informants jointly constructed a list of informants' most important group memberships. The second phase of the interviews was designed to elicit the more specific information about each of these group memberships already mentioned. Details of the way in which SIT was operationalised through the process of interview analysis are provided below.

### **Operationalising SIT for the current research: The triologue model of identity construction.**

Campbell (1995a) provides a detailed account of the mechanics of interview analysis leading to the development of the triologue model of identity. This paper provides only a brief thumbnail sketch of the triologue model of identity that was developed, in the interests of providing the basis for the account of self-esteem which is the focus of this paper. In an earlier section of this paper an outline was provided of four facets of SIT which were taken as starting assumptions of this study. A brief step-by-step summary of the process of interview analysis is provided below, and attention will be given to the way in which each of these assumptions informed the analysis of interviews.

The first classic assumption from SIT that informed interview analysis was the claim that the self consists of a loose association of group memberships, where a social group is defined as "two or more individuals who ... perceive themselves to be members of the same social category" (Turner, 1982:15). Drawing on this assumption, the first stage of interview analysis was to identify the group memberships drawn on by informants in giving accounts of their life histories and social identities. The following groups were mentioned the most frequently: *Black people*, *Church members*, *Comrades* (an informal grouping of youth broadly supportive of the anti-apartheid struggle), *Decent citizens* (carrying connotations of respectability, reliability, non-violence and upwardly mobile aspirations), *Educated people*, *the Family*, *Friends*, *Gender*, *Lovers*, *Urban people*, and members of the *Younger Generation*.

Some of these group memberships are of a different type to those conventionally referred to in SIT research. Such research has tended to focus on group memberships

resulting from inter-group comparison in the context of inter-group relations (e.g. French vs English speakers in the Canadian setting; Hindus vs Muslims in the Bangladeshi setting; blacks vs whites in the South African setting). However more recently, scholars in the social identity tradition have pointed out that not all group memberships necessarily rely on frequent inter-group comparisons (Cinerella, 1996). Examples of what Brown et al (1992) refer to as "autonomous group memberships" include Deaux's (1993) references to group memberships such as *Friend*, *Hairdresser*, *Quiet Neighbour* or *Mother* in her study of the group memberships comprising the social self. Similarly in the current research, while certain groups mentioned by informants could be characterised in traditional ingroup/outgroup terms (e.g. *Women/Men*; or the rival political groupings *Comrades/Inkatha*) others did not fit such an inter-group categorisations (e.g. *Friends*, *Lovers*, *Family*).

The second classic tenet of SIT that informed interview analysis was SIT's claim of a link between group memberships and action. This point was operationalised for interview analysis in the assumption that each group membership constituting the individual's social identity would be associated with a range of "recipes for living", consisting of norms of behaviour and interpretative frameworks for making sense of the world. Working from this assumption, the analysis sought to develop an inventory of "recipes for living" associated with each group membership. Thus for example the group membership of the *Family* was be associated with recipes for living such as: "Do not stay out late at night"; "treat older people with unconditional respect"; "young people should not drink or smoke", "if you work hard at school you will get a good job and uplift your Family ".The group membership of *Educated people* with recipes such as: "Avoid friends who are lacking in ambition", "Do not become pregnant before you have finished your schooling".

However the analysis was required to go further than identifying group-behaviour relationships - these had to be explored within the social context of rapidly changing township society, in line with an interest in exploring Tajfel's emphasis on the importance of social context (see assumption iii above) within a naturalistic setting. The analysis sought to link behavioural choices and group memberships to specific life situations faced by informants. Detailed attention to the data suggested that this idea could usefully be developed by regarding youths' behavioural choices as responses to challenges or problems posed by the social and material life world. Social identity was conceptualised as an adaptive resource in coping with the social and material conditions of daily existence. Analysis and reanalysis of the data suggested that the social identity of township youth is forged in relation to 20 major life challenges (see Table 1).

**TABLE 1**  
**Life challenges facing township youth.**

**A. Constructing a Code of Conduct.**

This cluster included life challenges referring to the construction of a code of conduct in the following areas of life:

- A.1 Alcohol
- A.2 Crime
- A.3 Freedom of movement
- A.4 Interpersonal conflict
- A.5 Interpersonal conduct
- A.6 Political conflict
- A.7 Sexual behaviour.

**B. Planning for the future.**

This cluster involved informants' accounts of the following aspect of their own, their family's and the community's futures:

- B.1 Career plans
- B.2 Community improvement
- B.3 Education
- B.4 Personal family life.

**C. Networking.**

This cluster referred to establishing social networks in the interests of the following life demands:

- C.1 Broadening one's horizons
- C.2 Choosing friends
- C.3 Choosing lovers
- C.4 Educational assistance
- C.5 Emotional support
- C.6 Guidance
- C.7 Having fun
- C.8. Material support
- C.9 Political identity

As can be seen from Table 1, the 20 life challenges facing youth fell into three clusters.

1. NETWORKING, the process of establishing social support systems to ensure material, emotional and educational assistance,
2. PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE, in relation to the future of self and the community, and
3. CONSTRUCTING A CODE OF CONDUCT to deal with situations ranging from interpersonal relations to political conflict and community crime.

Against this background, the structure of identity was conceptualised as a triologue (or three-way interaction) between:

- i) life challenges
- ii) group memberships, and

iii) their associated recipes for living.

This triologue model is illustrated with an example of the life challenge: *Constructing a code of conduct: Political conflict*. As has already been mentioned, at the time of the interviews Natal was locked in an on-going civil war between Inkatha and the ANC, as well as on-going violent resistance by black people against the white apartheid regime. A range of group memberships provided informants with potential recipes for living in response to this challenge. For example, the group membership of the *Family* was associated with the behavioural guideline that young people should avoid involvement in political violence (which the associated risks of physical injury and police detention), and focus instead on their education, which would advance both the young person and his or her family's chance of social and economic upliftment. On the other hand, the *Comrades* urged their members to participate in violent political conflict in the interests of undermining Inkatha, as well as bringing down the apartheid regime, urging that individual self-advancement should in some cases be sacrificed for the possibility of broader political freedom. Those recipes for living associated with *Church* membership prevailed upon young people to refrain from violence as a conflict-management strategy for a range of religious reasons. *Gender* was a strongly influential group membership here, with participation in violent political conflict being demarcated as a strictly male domain, with involvement in political conflict being an option for men, but not for women (see Campbell, 1992).

A second example to illustrate the triologue model relates to the life challenge of *Planning for the future: Family life*, and more particularly the range of group-related behavioural possibilities open to young women in this regard. At one level the group membership of the *Family* urged young women to take their role as wives and mothers within traditional patriarchal *Family* units, and to be dutiful wives to dominant husbands. Similarly despite minor variations, the group memberships of the *Church* and *Lovers* presented young women with the life-recipe of seeking to enter into long-term relationships with men, in which they would take a traditionally submissive role. A wide range of group memberships reinforced one another in presenting women with behavioural options geared towards virtue, obedience and home-centredness, limited freedom of movement and subservience to men. Despite all this however, several of the young women in the sample expressed their determination not to marry, associating husbands with problems such as infidelity, alcohol abuse and the failure to support their families adequately. These young women expressed their intention to set up households with their children, and possibly their own mothers, homes where male partners would have temporary rather than permanent status. Here there was evidence for young women reshaping the recipes for living traditionally associated with *Gender* group memberships, in the face of growing educational opportunities. More than ever before, these provided women with the possibility of economic independence and, associated with this, the possibility of taking power within the sphere of sexual relationships, and attaining a greater degree of independence over their lives and the lives of their children. Furthermore, despite the fact that *Family* recipes for living were often associated with traditional gender roles, 21 of the 40 informants in the present study came from female-headed families, so had first-hand experience of women playing important roles in *Family* leadership - which contradicted the more traditional "submissive wife and mother" scenario. (Campbell, 1995b provides a more detailed account of the gendered nature of youth identity).

So far, this section has provided a thumbnail sketch of the way in which the current study drew on three central assumptions of SIT in the development of the triologue model of identity construction. The central role of self-esteem in driving the process of identity construction was the fourth key SIT assumption driving interview analysis.

In seeking to operationalise the notion of self-esteem for the current study, SIT's classic conceptualisation of the process of self-esteem formation in terms of the accentuation of flattering ingroup/outgroup comparisons had limited value - in a study where group memberships (e.g. *Family, Lovers, Peers*) were not always located within intergroup contexts involving simple ingroup/outgroup comparisons. Taking this into account, the search began for a conceptualisation of self-esteem that (a) did not rest on inter-group comparisons as its central defining feature and (b) one that would be consistent with this study's interest in developing an account of social identity construction which conceived of the person as an active social agent -- dynamically constructing and reconstructing his or her identity through context-specific actions in the face of the challenges of a rapidly changing social world.

In line with the view of identity as an adaptive resource, and in line with the terminology of the triologue model, the problem of motivation was operationalised in terms of the following question: *In the process of identity construction, what motivates informants in deciding which of a range of particular group memberships to draw on in responding to particular life challenges posed by the social and material environments?* Gecas and Schwalbe's (1983) conceptualisation of self-esteem provided a suitable starting point to the task of answering this question. In their account of the motivational processes underlying identity construction, they place great emphasis on the notion of self as actor in the concrete social and material world. They argue that "it is the consequences of our actions that constitute the basis of our knowledge of ourselves ... We come to know ourselves, and to evaluate ourselves, from actions and their consequences and from our accomplishments and the products of our efforts." (p79). They argue that a key aspect of self-esteem is the ability to engage in competent and efficacious actions, where criteria for competency or efficacy are socially negotiated within the person's particular social and cultural context. "The experience of self arises in connection with active striving in the face of obstacles -- and is earned through the experience of competent action in the world." (p80)

This claim that in the process of identity construction people are motivated by socially negotiated criteria for efficacy-based self-esteem, provided a useful starting point for beginning to formulate ideas about the motivational criteria governing youth in the current sample. In speaking of significant group memberships in the context of concrete life situations, the criteria of *respectability, self-improvement* and *personal/community empowerment* appeared to inform many of the identity choices made by informants. As will be outlined below, these served as three of the rhetorical reference points that guided them in making many of their identity decisions. This is not intended as an exhaustive list of criteria for perceived social competence. No doubt there are many more. However these were the ones that appeared in the particular interviews under consideration. It has already been said that such reference points will vary from one society to another. Each of these criteria can be understood against the backdrop of a particular social environment that provided young people with scant opportunities for a sense of self-efficacy in the face of multiple social disadvantages.



## **SELF-ESTEEM IN CONTEXT: THE CONCEPT OF 'PERCEIVED SOCIAL COMPETENCE'.**

The remainder of this paper provides an illustrative case study of the operation of self-esteem in identity formation by a particular socio-historical group in a particular social context -- using the notion of 'perceived social competence' to encapsulate Gecas and Schwalbe's conceptualisation of self-esteem in terms of efficacious action in the face of life's challenges and obstacles.

Attention to the interview data in the light of the triologue model pointed towards the possibility of conceptualising the motivational process of identity formation in terms of three interlocking principles.

*Principle 1:* In the process of social identity construction the individual engages in a process of debate and negotiation, which involves continually weighing up the recipes for living provided by available group memberships in the light of the life challenges posed by the social and material world.

The terms "debate" and "negotiation" are used as Billig (1991) defines them. He suggests that human thinking is essentially argumentative. "The thinker is a debater, engaged in argument either silently with the self, or more noisily with others." (1991:31) As human thinkers we waver from one position on a debate to another. Typically the debates and arguments characterising human thought are not conclusively resolved. Analogously social identities are not finalised products; there is a dynamic engagement in "identity work", constructing and reconstructing the boundaries and possibilities of group memberships in the light of dynamically changing contextual demands.

*Principle 2:* In the process of negotiation, individuals select those group memberships whose recipes for living are the most likely to conform to socially negotiated criteria for efficacious action. Perceived social competence, defined in terms of the achievement of efficacy-based self-esteem, is the motivational goal influencing the choice of group memberships in the on-going process of social identity construction. It is in the light of their perceived social competence that existing group memberships are adopted, refashioned or rejected.

*Principle 3:* Criteria for what individuals regard as perceived social competence or efficacious action will vary from one social grouping to another. In weighing up what they regarded as social competence, this particular sample of working class, township youth were guided by their degree of commitment to, and their interpretation of, the three socially negotiated concerns of: i) respectability; ii) self-improvement; and iii) personal/community empowerment.

## **ILLUSTRATION OF CRITERIA FOR PERCEIVED SOCIAL COMPETENCE: YOUTH DEBATING FAMILY RECIPES FOR LIVING.**

The concept of perceived social competence is illustrated by means of a case study of the group membership that featured most frequently in informants' accounts of their social identities: the *Family*. While the *Family* was a group membership that was highly valued by informants, it was also the most controversial group membership in the sense that it was with the recipes for living associated with the *Family* that subjects

appeared to conduct the most heated debate. Following the lead of the informants, references to behavioural options associated with the *Family* will refer to parents' recipes for living. Given the unusually rapid pace of social change, township youth were often presented with day-to-day situations in which the recipes for living developed by their parents were no longer appropriate coping mechanisms. As a result, youth were having (at short historical notice) to develop new norms and attitudes, which could conflict with those of parents.

Youth's assessment of the adequacy of *Family* recipes centred around their judgments of their parents' qualifications as social guides for modern township life. On the one hand, informants expressed strong ties of love and loyalty to their parents. They appreciated the sacrifices parents had made for them. This appreciation often resulted in a sense of obligation to obey *Family* norms.

On the other hand, young people cited a number of reasons why their parents' recipes for living were not adaptive for the demands of township life. One such reason was their parents' relative lack of education. Educated people had more social status in the township community than uneducated people.

Informants also commented on the humbleness of their parents' employment. Most parents were labourers or domestic workers. Such work was not highly regarded by their children who had higher aspirations, structuring their identities around their dreams of educational advancement and good jobs. Also counting against parents' qualifications as social guides was their alleged lack of political consciousness. In the past 15 or so years youth had been at the forefront of resistance to apartheid in South Africa. Informants drew a sharp contrast between what they regarded as their parents' passive acceptance of racial discrimination and economic disadvantage and their own active resistance to these phenomena. Finally youth referred to their parents' rural origins. All the young people in the study were urban-born. They referred to the relative lack of sophistication of rural people, frequently describing them as "in the dark" or "ignorant".

It was in the context of this dissatisfaction with their parents' world views that informants debated *Family* recipes for living against those of competing social groupings. In the task of constructing social identities out of these competing influences, youth appeared to be motivated by the criteria of respectability, self-improvement and personal/community empowerment. While these three criteria were explicitly articulated by some informants, they were left implicit by others.

### **Respectability.**

The value of respectability comprised five components: respect in interpersonal relations, avoidance of alcohol, non-promiscuous sexual behaviour (an area of concern to women only), home-centredness (women only), and non-criminal and non-violent behaviour (men only). For the first component of respect, there was ample evidence of youth debating *Family* guidelines for respectful conduct, particularly in the light of alternative recipes for living provided by other group memberships, especially life challenges of *Constructing a Code of Conduct for Interpersonal Conduct and Networking: Guidance* (see Table 1).

Upward intergenerational respect is the cornerstone of traditional African social relationships. Respect for older people prescribes the acceptance of the following three guidelines for youth: reverence for older people, obedience to older people, acceptance of older people as valued guides for conduct. Every informant repeatedly cited the importance of respect in interpersonal relations. The group memberships of *Church*, *Decent Citizen*, *Lovers* and *Friends* tended to strongly reinforce *Family* recipes for living in this regard.

However a closer examination of the interview material revealed evidence for a range of subtle challenges to the *Family's* notion of respect, with alternative possibilities being offered by a range of competing group memberships. It was the *Comrades* grouping that provided youth with the most compelling competing framework. This group membership, an informal allegiance of anti-apartheid political activists, presented youth with the possibility of acting in terms of a sense of personal integrity and democracy, rather than blindly following what they regarded as outdated and undemocratic *Family* conventions. Thus for example *Comrades* membership suggested to youth that they ought not to be obedient to adults in matters that they believed were wrong in principle. One *Comrade* said that he would never obey an adult's request to go on the errand of buying alcohol, because this went against his belief that the consumption of alcohol was a serious social problem that served to undermine his community. However, true to the more traditional *Family* conception of respectability, he suggested that a young person should explain politely to the adult why s/he was refusing to obey the request, rather than simply refusing in a rude and unexplained way. This example illustrates an informant engaging in debate between the recipes for living offered by the *Family* and the *Comrades* groupings, and refashioning a particular *Family* guideline for respectful behaviour in the light of its perceived social competence in a particular situation.

The group membership of *Urban* also offered youth the possibility of relating to parents in a more egalitarian way, in sharp contrast to what some informants characterised as the tendency amongst rural youth to "over-respect" adults. Urban youth were generally regarded as more worldly-wise and sophisticated than their *Rural* counterparts, and less likely to stand in awe of their old-fashioned parents. The group membership of *Younger Generation* also provided behavioural options competing with those provided by the *Family*, where the *Younger Generation* was characterised as an outspoken, rebellious and independent group, forging a new set of behavioural guidelines, often in direct opposition to their elders' tried and tested recipes for living.

### **Self-improvement.**

The value of self-improvement was echoed again and again by informants, across the range of life challenges, but particularly in response to the *Planning for the Future* challenges. Almost invariably youth took a dim view of their present life circumstances, and often defined themselves in terms of their plans for uplifting themselves and their families. In response to the physical and material deprivation of their present lives, one of the ways in which young people coped with their difficult life circumstances was through talking, planning and dreaming of a better life when they were older. There were two approaches to self-improvement. The first, a relatively apolitical and individualistic approach, involved self-improvement through education. This was geared towards the attainment of an improved standard of living through access to material wealth and comforts. The second, more political approach, through personal/community empowerment is discussed below.

Education was regarded as the key to a "bright future" not only because it offered the opportunity of an improved standard of living, but also because it was the route to community respect and status. It was in relation to this motivational criterion that *Family* recipes for living tended to be the least controversial. Generally these were simply adopted by youth.

*Family* guidelines for self-improvement were reinforced particularly strongly by all the other group memberships available to youth. *Friends* were seen as important allies in the fight for self-improvement and key sources of moral support and academic assistance. Extreme perseverance and persistence were seen as the necessary preconditions for educational success, especially amongst youth from poor families.

While *Family* members could provide youth with the vision of a better future through success in education and career, uneducated working class parents generally had little understanding either of the careers open to youth or of the ways to enter higher education. Thus while youth generally accepted those *Family* recipes for living which emphasised the importance of education, these were not necessarily adaptive strategies for succeeding in the quest for education. While self-improvement through education formed a central pillar of youth's accounts of their identities, the reality was that not many young black South Africans were successful in the school-leaving matriculation examination at the time the interviews were conducted (in a publication in 1988/9, Hyslop reported that 10% of black South Africans were successful in the school-leaving matriculation examination).

### **Personal / community empowerment.**

In contrast to self-improvement through education as a means of self and community advancement, the motivational criterion of personal/community empowerment emphasised access to political power as the most viable channel for improving the life circumstances of self and ones *Family*. For some informants the notions of personal upliftment and community empowerment were inseparable. Personal upliftment could not be attained by individual self-advancement alone. It would also require a shift in the balance of apartheid power relations between black and white, and between rich and poor. Commitment to this motivational criterion was based on one of two kinds of assumption. First, social change was seen as an essential precondition for one's personal and *Family* upliftment. Some informants attributed their own and their *Family's* problems to the social disadvantages facing black South Africans. Secondly, some suggested that concern with one's own personal and *Family* upliftment should be secondary to one's concern with bringing about community empowerment. This anti-individualistic emphasis, associated with *Comrades* membership, presented an interest in the community as a higher and more worthy concern than an interest in oneself and ones' own *Family* at the individual level.

The motivational criterion of personal/community empowerment was a central issue for the *Comrades*. Broadly speaking, the *Comrades* associated themselves with the fight against race and class in South African society. They were working towards this broad goal through a range of activities designed to strengthen township community morale. Thus for example, high levels of crime were identified as a major source of community breakdown. Within this context the *Comrades* were organising informal policing networks and impromptu kangaroo courts to fight crime. This was in the face of the

failure of formal police and of legal structures to maintain community law and order. *Comrades* were also involved in a range of political activities, in addition to the violent confrontation between competing political groups that characterises the political scene in South Africa. *Comrades* membership provided a sense of empowerment and direction for many informants. This grouping provided young people, whose life situations often appeared hopeless, with the possibility of a positive social identity, and of what informants regarded as meaningful involvement in community upliftment.

The *Comrades* image provided young men in particular with a strong and powerful role model, taking control of their lives under conditions of uncertainty and deprivation.

With regard to the criterion of personal/community empowerment the most heated debates took place between the behavioural options of the *Family* and the *Comrades*. In general, parents who were relatively unpoliticised, ascribed their own life problems to lack of education rather than to broader political factors. They urged their children to focus energy on individual mobility through education and hard work, rather than what they regarded as dangerous political activities with an uncertain outcome.

The *Comrades'* assertive and radical critique of society stood in sharp contrast to the fearful and timid acceptance of the status quo of many older *Family* members, some of whom found it alarming. Furthermore, in their antipathy to their childrens' politicised outlook parents were guided by a well-founded fear for the safety of their offspring. The decade of the 80s saw thousands of township youth either killed or imprisoned for their political convictions.

*Comrades* recipes for living were strongly reinforced by the group membership *Younger Generation*. Youth characterised their parents as members of the bumbling *Older Generation* who in their view had bequeathed the youth an unbearably oppressive social reality. *Comrades* membership opened by the possibility of taking control of their lives to an extent which their parents had failed to achieve.

It was in relation to the criterion of personal/community empowerment that certain more politicised informants were the most skeptical about the perceived social competence of *Family* recipes for living, rejecting them outright in favour of those associated with alternative group memberships.

### **CONTEXT-SPECIFIC NATURE OF MOTIVATIONAL CRITERIA.**

This paper has provided a case study of identity construction by township youth as an empirical instantiation of its claim that efficacy-based self-esteem, characterised here in terms of the notion of perceived social competence, is the motivational process underlying social identity formation. In this paper it was argued that informants' identity choices could be explained in terms of the perceived social competence of different group memberships' recipes for living.

In relation to the three values mentioned above, it was in the area of self-improvement that the *Family's* recipes for living tended to be the least controversial. In many cases these were simply adopted by youth. However in the areas of education and career choice *Family* recipes for living proved to be insufficiently well-developed. In relation to respectability, the *Family*'s recipes for living were often subject to heated debate, and

challenged in a range of covert and overt ways, resulting in a refashioning or revision of some of the *Family*'s recipes. However, it was in relation to personal/community empowerment that the *Family*'s recipes were considered least adequate for dealing with their day-to-day life challenges; the recipes were often rejected. Interviews showed youth to be in the process of constructing new group memberships (the *Comrades*) and reinterpreting old group memberships (e.g. the *Younger Generation, Urban, Black People*) in moving towards their goal of achieving personal/community empowerment.

It is suggested that what counts as perceived social competence will vary from one particular social grouping to another. The three values outlined above are relevant to the identity of South African township youth in the early 1990s at the time the interviews were conducted. Broadly speaking, the notion of respectability was characterised by two components, a commitment to showing respect to others and a commitment to having a good name in the community. It is suggested that this commitment to respect was inextricably bound up with the fact that both in terms of age and gender relations African family relationships were in transition from a strict, hierarchical and authoritarian mode to a more fluid and democratic mode. Changing conceptions of respect were symbolic of this broader social shift, and were thus particularly central in the identities of these people at this particular moment in time. The commitment to having a good name in the community, the second dimension of respectability, was very likely to be strong in a social context where people lacked the material or educational raw materials to achieve social status, and must therefore achieve this through their reputations (along the lines of "he was uneducated, but he was honest", or "she was poor and uneducated, but she was virtuous").

The second criterion for perceived social competence, namely the commitment to self-improvement through education, is also understandable in the context of a depressed community, where education often appeared to offer the only route to an improved quality of life and higher social status.

The third criterion, commitment to personal/community empowerment is also socially and historically specific. The discrimination and deprivation experienced by black people under apartheid, and the beginnings of signs that the power of the apartheid system was about to crack, pointed to the possibility of a new social, political and economic era for black South Africans. These signs must have encouraged the commitment of youth to this criterion: their subsequent activities gave them a sense of the political power of black South Africans and of the growing inability of the white regime to overcome the tide of black resistance.

## **CONCLUSION.**

The study reported in this paper aimed to complement SIT's tendency to depend on laboratory and experimental research by focusing on identity formation in a natural social context. It sought to operationalise SIT into a tool that could explain the "identity talk" of a particular group of people in a naturalistic social setting, with data derived from open-ended interviews. Drawing on a number of key assumptions drawn from SIT, the process of identity construction was operationalised in terms of a triologue model. Attention to social identity interviews in the light of the triologue model pointed towards the possibility of conceptualising the motivational process underlying identity construction in terms of a rhetorical process in which the the perceived social

competence of group memberships and their recipes for living is debated in the light of their ability to meet life challenges posed by the social and material worlds.

Attention to the interviews suggested three criteria for perceived social competence motivating the construction of social identity by informants: respectability, self-improvement and personal/community empowerment. The paper has sought to illustrate each of these criteria, and to highlight the way in which each of them is linked to the specific life circumstances faced by this group of people at a particular historical moment.

In conclusion it is argued that if Social Identity Theorists seek to expand the applicability of their ideas beyond the context of abstract academic debate, they need to complement existing studies with case studies of identity formation by natural groups within real historical and cultural contexts -- in the interests of exploring ways in which SIT's assumptions may be operationalised in real historical and cultural contexts in line with Tajfel's original agenda for a "truly social" social psychology.

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