The Dilemma of Dissidence

Joha Louw-Potgieter

Department of Psychology

University of Natal

Durban

Disaffiliation from a group affects the very essence of group belongingness for those who choose to remain within the group. It heightens the salience of group norms, raises questions about the validity of these norms, the value of group membership and might even affect ingroup solidarity and determine the course of action to be taken against the non-conforming group member. The aim of this paper is to point out that those individuals who wish to retain the status quo, be they laypersons or professionals, will seek to locate the origin of dissidence within the non-conforming individual, thereby accepting the group and its norms uncritically as a given.

Psychology in Society, 1987, 8, pp 101-121

DISSIDENCE: THE MEDIA VIEWPOINT

In a recent treason trial a judge who sentenced a white woman to 25 years for planting limpet mines, said "...she was a dedicated Marxist and revolutionary and while this was understandable, though not excusable, in black South Africans, he found it difficult to understand in a white South African" (Weekly Mail, 7 - 13/11/1986). Passing sentence, Mr Justice van der Walt told Marion Sparg that "the fact that as a white South African you chose to espouse the cause of revolution I regard as an aggravating feature" (Sunday Tribune, 9/11/1986). In "exclusive" articles, journalists provided "explanations" for and "causes" of Sparg's dissidence. She was described as "the little obese girl who was rejected by her classmates" and who "...was just 13 when the seeds of terrorism began germinating in her" (Sunday Times, 9/11/1986). In what was termed a "portrait of a terrorist", certain aspects of the life history of "the lonely girl who turned to terror" were dissected in order to give readers a view of what was going on "inside the tortured mind of Marion Sparg" (Sunday Times, 9/11/1986). Thus the picture of a fat, socially alienated person with a very strong need to belong was created by the media and it was concluded that it was something within this individual which caused her to become a traitor to her own group.

A number of uncomfortable and controversial issues are obscured by the melodramatic style of most of the reports regarding Marion Sparg: as a highly intelligent and compassionate person, she appeared to have identified fully with a specific group and its ideology, conformed to the group norms in a consistent fashion and was confident that the actions of this group might make a positive contribution to the future of this country. Mr Justice van der Walt described her as a dedicated and unrepentant member of Umkhonto we Sizwe, while it was also reported that "...a striking feature during Sparg's trial was her courage and refusal to back down" (Sunday Tribune, 9/11/1986).

Inherent in all this information there seems to be an assumption (held by ingroup members like the judge and certain journalists) that people who exhibit certain group traits (e.g. a white skin) should automatically identify with the group in question. Such commitment is regarded as laudable - but only insofar as the ingroup is concerned. Should a former ingroup member choose to identify with and become a committed member of an outgroup, it is regarded as "deviant" and "abnormal" and "causes" and confirmatory evidence for this are sought in the person, sometimes to the neglect of other, more social explanations for this phenomenon: "Shortly after her arrest in March, certain newspapers described Sparg as a lonely, overweight person who turned to revolutionary politics out of a desire to belong. It was an image difficult to reconcile with the

woman who spoke in confident, measured tones about her political commitment" (Weekly Mail, 7 - 13/11/1986).

DISSIDENCE: THE TRADITIONAL SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL VIEWPOINT

In examining political dissent, social psychologists' main concern has been with the question: "Who, or what kind of person, becomes a political dissident?" Very often the answer to this question has been in terms of:

1. individual personality resulting from certain child-rearing practices (see, for instance, Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson and Sanford (1950) on the Authoritarian Personality; and the work of Keniston (1965, 1968), Flacks (1967), Inglehart (1971, 1977) and Block and her co-workers (Block, 1972; Block, Haan & Smith, 1969; Haan, Smith & Block, 1968; Smith, Haan & Block, 1970) on student activism in America);

2. types of temperament (see Eysenck (1954) and Eysenck and Coulter (1972) on tough and tender-mindedness);

3. and style of cognitive functioning (see Rokeach 1960) on the open and closed mind.

Thus, intra- or interpersonal explanations have been advanced for political dissidence. These explanations have resulted in a specific kind of social psychology of political dissent: causal explanations of dissent are

located firmly within the "deviant" individual and the social context of the "deviance" is ignored or uncritically accepted as a given. By neglecting societal variables such as the content and meaning of the political norms against which the political dissent is revolting, the ways in which these norms are created and maintained by powerful groups within society, and the social reactions to political norm violators, the existing status quo is rarely questioned or criticised. It could thus be argued that the kind of question which has been asked by social psychologists as regards political dissent, has determined the answer and the level of analysis of the explanation. It would seem that whenever social psychologists have attempted to grapple with the question of political dissent, that "...not only in their answers, but also in their questions was there a mystification" (Marx, 1968, p. 29).

AFRIKANER DISSIDENCE: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY AND A CRITICAL VIEWPOINT

In order to present a critical and social psychological viewpoint of dissidence, this section will report on part of a study (see Louw-Potgieter (1986) for full details on the sample, method and analysis used) which empirically investigated the following question: "How, or by means of which process(es) does a person, as a member of a specific group, in a specific social, economic and historical

context, start to question the political norms of the group?" Such a question immediately shifts the focus of investigation from the individual *qua* group member. Unlike other social psychological studies which sought to locate dissidence in intra-individual, psychodynamic processes played out against a backdrop of specific interpersonal processes (e.g. the Authoritarian Personality), or in intra-individual, genetic factors (e.g. tough and tender-mindedness), or in intra-personal, pre-ideological beliefs (e.g. the open and closed mind), the present study attempts to broaden the scope of examination to include societal factors outside the individual.

Twenty-two respondents, classified as dissident Afrikaners, on the basis of overt criticism and/or action against the governing National Party and its policy of *apartheid*, participated in the study. All of them grew up in traditional Afrikaans homes where both parents spoke Afrikaans as their home language. They were asked to write an autobiography (based on Allport's (1942) topical biography and Stone's (1970) propsopography) according to specific guidelines, one of which required a description of the change from a traditional Afrikaner to a dissident Afrikaner. Analysis of the autobiographies revealed, *inter alia*, the nature of the process of change plus those factors which gave rise to this change. Selective excerpts from these autobiographies will be used in the next few sections to illustrate, support or contradict certain conclusions.

1. The nature of the process of change: From the autobiographical data it became clear that respondents regarded their questioning of the status quo as a gradual, cognitive process and not a dramatic and abrupt change:

> "Nothing dramatic happened in those years. It was rather a case of a growing conviction, a gradual knowledge and certainty about the road I should follow. As far as I am concerned, that 'road' is still far from finished. I am, in a very real sense, still a pilgrim. I suspect - perhaps with more than just a bit of doubt - that I will, on that road ahead, become even more estranged from fellow-Afrikaners." (AC)

Some respondents stressed the rationality and logical nature of this process: AP said his decision to distance himself from involvement with the Afrikaner group "was on the level of good sense" and a "rational and realistic reaction"; AG changed his "philosophy of life" and "pattern of thinking" to a "more humanitarian insight"; and AM echoed this by calling his change "an increase in knowledge and insight".

The process of change also involves the process of constructing a new identity, sometimes coupled with the anxiety of arriving at a new, static and stifling

identity, or the fear of being re-absorbed into the old group: AI said that the biggest danger for a person questioning the status quo "is that he/she can become too 'established', and, therefore, become 'arrived'" even in this dissident identity; while AD regarded "the feeling that I can be re-accepted into the Afrikaner establishment, if I want to" as "a definite danger".

The process of disidentification from a group with clearly defined and restrictive norms, might lead to reactions against other possible group memberships in the process of redefining identity: AP remarked that "once cured of Afrikaner nationalism, I never suffered from other political or ideological extremes...Dissidence does not only force one to abandon comfortable, established opinions or standards and only to justify one's standards, but also to recreate an own life-world, also to redefine reality"; while AA said that he has "never seriously thought of identifying myself as a Communist". For AG, however, this redefinition meant a broader group membership: "It was a vision, a philosophy of life, that has helped me to see myself in a new light, namely as an Afrikaner who is also an African".

Overall, this provides support for the notion of dissidence as a cognitive process of change: rational,

logical and constructive. The gradual, continuous and unfinished nature of the process reflects an image of the respondent as an active agent, engaged in the complex task of constructing a dynamic definition of self within a specific social context. There are a few indications that the construction of an alternative identity is sometimes influenced by reactive motives originating from former unsatisfactory group memberships.

2. Factors giving rise to change: Respondents attributed the cognitive process of change from traditional to a dissident Afrikaner to a complexity of factors. However, three main factors, namely value conflict, exposure to alternative ideas and contact with outgroups, have been isolated on the basis of the frequency with which they were mentioned by respondents. Each one of these factors will be discussed in more detail.

a) Value conflict: Previous data (see Louw-Potgieter 1986) indicated that most respondents had grown up in typical Afrikaner families, where traditional values, norms and attitudes had been instilled in them. Religion, as one of the cornerstones of an Afrikaner upbringing, provided the basis for these values, norms and attitudes. In some families, the stereotype of a dour Calvinism -

authoritarian, dogmatic and egocentric - must have characterised the religious practice. In others, a relgion of compassion for all human beings (AJ), or a specific type of pietism (AK, AR), or a religion distanced from volk politics (AV), was practised. Sixteen respondents mentioned their past or present religious values as a causal factor of their societal critique.

The general moral example set by parents, has also been instrumental in providing respondents with a normative framework for questioning the status quo: moral orientations like non-chauvinism (AE), social justice (AG, AK), fairness (AU) and social concern and humanity (AK) were said to be held by parents and instilled in respondents.

For some respondents, a broad Christianity or humanitarian principles provided the standard against which various aspects of religious and political life were measured: AK, for example, remarked: "As a Christian I gradually became aware of the unacceptability of a lot of things that pass as traditional Afrikanerhood".

Whatever the specific origin or content of respondents' value orientations, they served as a standard for evaluating everyday experience. In general, the roots of the process of becoming

critical of the status quo, are to be found in a growing awareness of inconsistencies between two (or more) values, inconsistencies between theoretical and expressed societal values, and inconsistencies regarding the recipients of these expressed values. AU's experience reflect some of these value inconsistencies:

> AU reflected on the "exclusivity" and "closedness" of the religious practices of most Afrikaners as a factor that made him aware of the contrast between white "pious Sunday faces" in the NGK and the general need within broader society. He left for overseas study and only abroad did he discover "the inclusiveness and universality of Christian religion and realised that I had grown up with a mispresentation, conditioned by Afrikaner self-interest. This new awareness of an intellectual basis for my religious convictions was the completion of the road on which Mother and Father had already placed me early in my life. They would later, tragically enough, with difficulty accept the consequences of this, namely my rebellion against some societal structures."

While the above extract from AU's autobiography illustrates rejection of certain basic elements (i.e. NGK dogma) from his value framework, it also reflects the retention of others, namely specific parental values. This idea of change plus continuity was mentioned repeatedly by other

respondents and is further illustrated by the following quotation:

> AP noted that "most basic values were, naturally embedded during my youth. I am, however, of the opinion that, in my time, I have stripped these values to their essence and of their specific Afrikaner embellishments and unnecessary layers of varnish."

Once a satisfactory moral standard had been formulated by respondents, a large degree of value consistency is detectable across various situations and life spheres: "I regard...my 'change' not really as a change, but a consequence (logical) of my Christianity" (AV); "New political insights followed from this more humanitarian insight" (AG).

In summary, this section revealed that as regards value conflict, a framework of values, based either on parental values, NGK dogma, or broad Christian or humanitarian principles, provided a standard for evaluating the group's position in society. For some this standard proved to be adequate, while those who experienced it as inadequate altered it significantly; either of these standards then provided a powerful and

consistent guide for societal critique. This interpretation of change provides support for Tajfel's (1981) hypothesis regarding value conflict as one of the factors contributing to the perception of an insecure social identity of a high status group (see Louw-Potgieter (1986) for a more detailed discussion of this issue).

b) Exposure to alternative ideas: From the data two categories of respondents emerged: those who had very little outgroup contact and were all the more vulnerable for it, and those who had early and intimate contact with outgroups and subsequently became more aware of alternative outlooks on life. As most of the respondents' parents proved to be typical Afrikaners who associated mainly with other ingroup members, exposure to alternative ideas occurred mostly at school (for the few who attended non-Afrikaans schools) and/or at university (local or overseas). The liberalising influences encountered at university is a recurring theme in these autobiographies. The general questioning ethos, specific areas of study, new friends, lecturers, or novel ideas encountered in books, were mentioned frequently. The following quotations illustrate the influence of educational institutions in the process of change:

AJ was sent to an English school in a working class area: "...there were children of doctors and children of builders and children of mineworkers in this school...there were English children, Afrikaans children, Jewish children, Portuguese children, Syrian children, German children and Dutch children... The traditional Afrikaner feels out of place in such a set-up. I definitely felt out of place; even today I sometimes feel out of place. Why is the Afrikaner like this? Anyway...(I) have learned that other people are the same as all people... At university this process continued...I became aware of alternatives: at school of alternative people and at university of alternative viewpoints. This awareness of alternatives (in politics, literature, literary criticism) is perhaps the most important guiding principle that has occurred in my life."

AP was sent to a German school because of his father's Nazi sympathies. At this school, "I gave my first steps in the direction of alternative thought and alternative language. The German school was a first window on a limitless and unlimiting European world. In the German school, ironically, I lost my Afrikaner anxiety for English and English speakers."

AT recounted his experience of leaving home to go to university: "I...came from a small place where I had never been exposed to another view of the South African reality. We basically shared one point of view, read only Afrikaans newspapers and associated only with those who thought as we did... From an isolated position I was thus exposed, for the first time, to an alternative viewpoint. I think that one's position is very vulnerable if one gets a single message over and over again and does not debate one's point of view with others."

From this section it is clear that exposure to alternative ideas took place mainly within an educational context. This is not to argue that South African schools and universities, especially the Afrikaans variety, are notable for their radicalism. It would, however, seem that even institutions and intellectuals renowned for their conservatism, could not control what their students read or with whom they associated on the school grounds or campus.

c) Contact with outgroups: Exposure to alternative ideas and subsequent awareness of cognitive alternatives to the existing social reality, are closely related to contact with outgroups. Contact with outgroups often led to the realisation of the differential value application accorded to "them" and"us". This contrasts with the predictions of the race-belief paradigm (see Rokeach 1960, 1968), as intergroup contact did not lead to the discovery of similarities between respondents and outgroup members, but highlighted the differences between their own group and the black outgroup and sensitised the respondents to "double standards" (AL) and subsequent value conflict.

For some respondents (AJ, AP), outgroup contact was fostered in school. For others, outgroup contact started in their work context (AA), or within a religious context (AE, AT, AV) and resulted in a questioning of government or church policy. The following quotation illustrates this:

> While still studying theology, AT did missionary work in a very poor township: "Here I came into contact, for the first time, with open eyes, with the misery Afrikaners were causing others. Every Sunday I visited three families and their life histories made me realise to what extent their circumstances were to be blamed on the government. Gradually, I also came to the conclusion that it was a cruel joke to do missionary work here - that was the last thing those people needed - and that one was just soothing one's own conscience for what had been done unto them."

> AA's experience at a black university caused him to examine all his premises fundamentally: "...I had started doing psychotherapy with black students, lecturers, teachers, etc. This project made different demands on me and seriously tested my whole being. Through this I came to the clear realisation that the institutes of apartheid are fundamentally anti-humanitarian and cause dehumanisation."

Both AB and AL had to leave South Africa first to make contact with outgroup members "of a different colour". AL described her encounter as follows:

> While on a visit to an African country, AL met an Indian doctor and his wife - "civilised, refined and friendly people" - and spent some time with them. "White English speakers started discriminating against me, because I was associating with Indians and this hit my attitudes and way of thinking hard. Only then did I relate it to what was happening in South Africa. I also realised then that in South Africa I would, most probably, not have associated so openly with Indians. It revealed my own double standards. This caused me to reject National Party politics completely."

While there was evidence of improved interpersonal relations between respondents and members of other groups, the idea of improved intergroup relations resulting from interpersonal contact (Allport, 1954) received no support. This supports Brown and Turner's (1981) criticism of the contact hypothesis, namely that interpersonal contact is unlikely to modify intergroup attitudes and behaviour since the two domains are controlled by different psychological processes.

In Tajfel's social identity theory (Tajfel, 1974; 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) perceived illegitimacy - group members' perceptions of unjust and unfair relations between their own and other group(s) - emerges as one of the central tenets. Caddick (1982) identified four possible

ways in which perceived illegitimacy of a group's social position was used by Tajfel. Firstly, it is through perceptions of illegitimacy that groups become salient to one another for comparison purposes. Secondly, perceived illegitimacy is associated with the realisation by members of a group that their group's present position is not the only one possible. Apart from these "awareness" and "insight" roles of perceived legitimacy, Caddick also identified a "motivational" and "ideological" role. The motivational role of perceived illegitimacy is seen to have activity-energising properties, while the ideological role is explained as those instances where illegitimacy becomes a dialectical element in the struggle for justice and equity. It could be said that the data contained in the sub-sections of value conflict, exposure to alternative ideas and contact with outgroups, illustrate the awareness and insight roles of perceived illegitimacy as described by Caddick.

In summary it could be concluded that for these respondents, the general climate for intergroup contact could hardly have been more unfavourable: the unequal status of master-servant relationships in a rigidly segregated society where intergroup competition for scarce resources like economic and

political power, is the norm. This type of contact, however, made respondents aware of "a different world" (AE) and the injustices experienced by the inhabitants of this world (e.g. "terrible living conditions" (AK) and "misery" of the outgroup caused by the ingroup's "anti-humanitarian" and "dehumanising" policies (AA)). It is clear that the three main attributions provided by respondents for their change, are interrelated and provide the basis for a wide-ranging, social explanation of the process of questioning the status quo.

CONCLUSION

In their search for intrapersonal and (sometimes) interpersonal causes of dissidence and disaffiliation from the ingroup, most laypersons and social psychologists avoid or do not address the issue of the social context of dissidence. This leads to a variant of the ad hominem argument: something "wrong/deviant/extraordinary" within the individual has caused him/her to become a "traitor" or a "renegade". Little attention is paid to the content of group norms that such a person is rebelling against, or to the way in which this person perceives the group's position within society. Thus we keep on asking questions about the kind of person who has acted in this way, instead of

focusing our attention on the burning issue of why some of the most intelligent and compassionate members of a society have turned their back on it.

REFERENCES

Adorno, T.W.; Frenkel-Brunswik, E.; Levinson, D.J.; & Sanford, R.N. (1950). The Authoritarian Personality, New York: Harper & Brothers.

Allport, G.W. (1942). The use of personal documents in psychological science. New York: Social Science Research Council.

Allport, G.W. (1954). The nature of prejudice. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley.

Block, J.H. (1972). Generational continuity and discontinuity in the understanding of societal rejection. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 27, 333 - 345.

Block, J.H.; Haan, N.; & Smith, M.B. (1969). Socialisation correlates of student activism. Journal of Social Issues, 25, 143 - 177.

Brown, J. & Turner, J.C. (1981). Interpersonal and intergroup behaviour. In J.C. Turner and H. Giles (Eds.), Intergroup behaviour. Oxford: Blackwell.

Caddick, B. (1982). Perceived illegitimacy and intergroup relations. In H. Tajfel (Ed.), Social identity and intergroup relations. Cambridge: CUP.

Eysenck, H.J. (1954). The psychology of politics. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Eysenck, H.J. & Coulter, T.T. (1972). The personality and attitudes of working-class British Communists and Fascists. The Journal of Social Psychology, 87, 59 - 73.

Flacks, R. (1967). The liberated generation: An exploration of the roots of student protest. The Journal of Social Issues, 23, 52 - 75.

Haan, N.; Smith, M.B. & Block, J. (1968). Moral reasoning of young adults: Political-social behaviour, family background and personality correlates. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 10, 183 - 201.

Inglehart, R. (1971). The silent revolution in Europe: Intergenerational change in post-industrial societies. The American Political Science Review, 65, 991 - 1017.

Inglehart, R. (1977). The silent revolution: Changing values and political styles among Western publics. Princeton: PUP.

Keniston, K. (1965). The uncommitted. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.

Keniston, K. (1968). Young radicals: Notes on committed youth. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.

Louw-Potgieter, J. (1986). The social identity of dissident Afrikaners. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Bristol. (Available from University of Natal, Durban).

Marx, K. (1968). The German ideology. Moscow: Progress Publishers.

Rokeach, M. (1960). The open and closed mind. New York: Basic Books.

Rokeach, M. (1968). Beliefs, attitudes and values. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Smith, M.B.; Haan, N.; Block, J. (1970). Social psychological aspects of student radicalism. Youth and Society, 1, 261 - 280.

Stone, L. (1970). Prosopography. Daedelus, Fall, 46 - 79.

Sunday Times. (1986). 9 November.

Sunday Tribune. (1986) 9 November.

Tajfel, H. (1974). Social identity and intergroup behaviour. Social Science Information, 13, 65 - 93.

Tajfel, H. (Ed.). (1978). Differentiation between social groups. London: Academic Press.

Tajfel, H. (1981). Human groups and social categories. Studies in social psychology. Cambridge: CUP.1

Tajfel, H. & Turner, J.C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W.G. Austin and S. Worchel (Eds.), The social psychology of intergroup relations. Monterey, California: Brooks/Cole.

Weekly Mail. (1986). 7 - 13 November.