

A South Africa in Social Identity Crises? Workplace Implications₁

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Abstract

The enormous transformation South Africans have witnessed over the past 12 years, since the systematic dismantling of apartheid in the era of social and economic reconstruction, brought about numerous societal and social identity changes. Due to these changes in social identity, societal norms and power shifts, major changes are occurring in the workplace, and societal level identity crises and conflicts are increasingly witnessed to be spilling over into the workplace. This article unpacks these social identity changes and power shifts on political, social, economic and management level, and highlights its impact on the workplace.

Introduction and Background

As a result of profound transformations in society, changes are occurring in mass consciousness, in the way people assign themselves to particular social categories and accept new values. Orthodox assumptions of identity are challenged, which cause a social breakdown of the “ideological glue” that keeps societies together. This phenomenon is referred to as a crisis of social identity. It is a state of consciousness in which most of the social categories - by means of which individuals define themselves and their place in society - seem to have lost their boundaries, their value and meaning. It is a sense of loss of rich meaningful content of old internalised forms of societal identification and socialisation, and the search for new ones that meet the individual’s basic need for meaning and adaptation to changing social realities (Ivanova, 2005, Wasserman, 2005).

The enormous transformation South Africans have witnessed over the past 12 years, since the systematic dismantling of apartheid in the era of social and economic reconstruction, is one such a profound and radical change. As a consequence, social identity and social self-awareness contradictions came into being, both for individuals as well as generations. Individual- and group power dynamics shifted (Booyesen, 2005, Gouws, 2005, Wasserman, 2005).

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Due to these changes in social identity, societal norms and power shifts, major changes are occurring in the workplace, and societal level identity crises and conflicts are increasingly witnessed to be spilling over into the workplace (Khoza, 1994; Mbigi, 1995; Manning, 1997; Jacobson, 1999; Van der Westhuizen 1999; Cilliers & May, 2002; Booysen, 2004b, Lufthans, van Wyk & Walumbwa, 2004; Rautenbach, 2005; van Gass, 2005). When social identity group conflicts occur in organisations, not only is work disrupted, but group members also experience substantial pain and distress that may only be remedied through significant and difficult changes in values, attitudes, norms and behaviours and workplace interaction. In addition, traditional leadership solutions are unlikely to be effective in social identity conflicts because traditional approaches to leadership presume a relatively homogeneous environment in which people share a common culture and set of values.

If social identity issues are effectively managed, the organisation can move into a successful and competitive future, but if not, the growth and competitive advantage of the organisation can be severely hampered (Booyesen, 1999a, 2001; Barekema, Baum & Mannix, 2002; Banutu-Gomez, 2002; Booyesen, Nkomo & Beaty, 2002, 2003; Lufthans, van Wyk & Walumbwa, 2004).

The Objectives of this Article

The objectives of this paper are to investigate the different social identities of the people of South Africa. Also to give a critical analysis of the power shifts and social identity changes that have taken place in South Africa over the past 12 years, due to external societal and internal organisational changes. Lastly to highlight some of the workplace implications of these shifts. This is done with specific reference to its impact on the workplace and in management.

What are the social identities of the people of South Africa?

South African people are still classified by population group. However now, different than in the past, membership of a racial group is based on self-perception and self-classification, not on a legal definition. The total classification of the population in the Census 2001, (Census, 2003) was based on, African black, 79%, coloured³ 8.9%, Asian or Indian, 2.5% and white 9.6%. Black Africans constitute more than three-quarters of the total population. There are 53% females and 47% males, and we have 31 different cultures.

To cater for South Africa's diverse peoples, the Constitution (Constitution, 1996) provides for 11 official languages. IsiZulu is the mother tongue of 23,8% of the population, followed by isiXhosa (17,6%), Afrikaans (13,3%), Sepedi (9,4%), English and Setswana (8,2% each), Sesotho (7,9%), Xitsonga (4,4%), siSwati (2,7%) and Tshivenda (2,3%). The least spoken official indigenous language in South Africa is isiNdebele, which is spoken by 1,6% of the population. Recognising the historically diminished use in formal settings and status of the

³ "Coloureds", are the descendants of black and Indian slaves, the indigenous Khoisan people and white settlers in South Africans.

indigenous languages (other than English and Afrikaans), the Constitution expects government to implement positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of these languages. English is the unofficial official language of choice for business.

According to Census 2001 South Africa has 8 religions and 25 denominations. Almost 80% of South Africa's population follow the Christian faith. Other major religious groups are the Hindus, Muslims and Jews. Approximately 6,8 million of South Africa's population do not belong to any of the major religions, but regard themselves as traditionalists or of no specific religious affiliation. Freedom of worship is guaranteed by the Constitution (Constitution, 1996) and the official policy is one of non-interference in religious practices. According to the constitution, no discrimination is allowed based on difference, apart from the above this also include age, sexual orientation and disability.

South Africa in the past and now ...

Some further facts about South Africa pertinent to this discussion that can be found on the Government Website and the 2001 Census data follow: In 1996, 57% of the population were living in poverty, two thirds were African black. The general income distribution of South Africa was among the most unequal in the world, and the white per capita income was almost nine times higher than that of Africans. For the first time in history in August, 2001 the total income of the black majority outstripped the total income of white minority (Census 2003, SA Government Web site).

South Africa is currently experiencing an HIV Aids pandemic – 21% of the total population is HIV infected. Furthermore, in 1997, most adults died between the ages of 65 and 79. In 2002, most adults died between the ages of 25 and 39 (Statistics South Africa P03093).

According to the 2006 World Competitive Report (Garelli, 2006) South Africa is ranked 44th out of 60 countries on competitiveness. South Africa moved up two positions from 46th in 2005 and five positions from 2004, South Africa was in 49th position in 2004. South Africa is the only African country that made the list.

The areas in which South Africa scored the weakest on the 2005 WCR are our unemployment rate, labour regulations, discrimination, skilled labour, brain drain, senior management competency, human development index, illiteracy, secondary school enrolment and pupil-teacher ratio on primary and secondary level, to name only a few. Only 8% of the population of 20 years and older have higher education, 20% have grade 12, 18% has no schooling. There is an (unofficial) unemployment rate of 41% and a negative employment growth (-0.89).

Some of the areas in which we are the strongest are electricity costs for industrial clients, effective personal income tax rate, cost-of-living index, employees and employers social security contribution rate, central government total debt, female labour force and females in parliament, compensation levels and social responsibility (Garelli, 2004). South Africa is also the largest producer of gold, platinum and chromium and the largest diamond producer, second only to Russia (SA Government Website).

South Africa is a land of management paradoxes. It has a constitution that functions on an extremely high level of social justice and equality, yet it has high levels of discrimination and low levels of human development. It has extreme wealth and extreme poverty and unprecedented high levels of crime. It has economic growth in a “jobless” society. It is a third

world country with first world expectations **and** achievements. Also the the power house of Africa.

In the next section the societal power shifts and identity changes that have taken place in South Africa over the past 12 years, will be discussed.

Societal Power Shifts and Identity Changes in South Africa Since 1994

Generally speaking prior to 1994 power on all levels in society resided with white males. White males wielded political, economic, management and social power. Almost by default white women had power as well, because they were associated with white males, being part of the then dominant group. However, white women had indirect power due to their subordinate status as women in the dominant race group. Power was almost exclusively in the white male domain, mainly due to sex discrimination and patriarchy. White males had high levels of absolute power.

Figure 1 depicts shifts in the political, economical, management and social power that took place in the different broad race and gender groups after the 1994 democratic elections in South Africa.

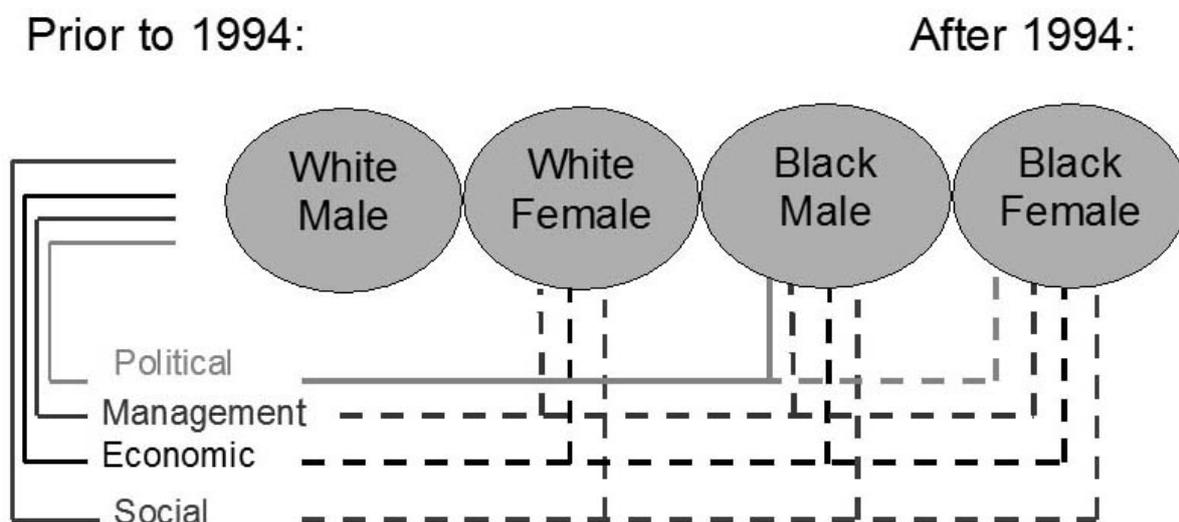


Figure 1 Power Shifts in South Africa Since the First Democratic Elections.

Shifts in Political Power

Political power was almost exclusively a white male domain, prior to 1994. Only six white women were elected to parliament over a period of 50 years during the reign of the

National Party (Jaffer, 1998), and South Africa ranked 141th in the world, before the 1994 elections, with only 2.7% women in parliament (Booyesen, 1999b, Mathur-Helm, 2004).

Literally overnight, on 27 April 1994, the political power moved towards the black group, particularly towards the black males. The black females also gained political power as the ANC instituted, already in 1994, a quota rule of 30% representation for women in parliament. In the Mandela government (1994 - 1999) women comprised 27%, and in 1998 already, South Africa ranked 15th in the world regarding their percentage of women in parliament. Following the 1999 elections and with President Thabo Mbeki's first term, the quota rule was almost filled with 29.8% representation of women in parliament and now in 2005, during President Mbeki's second term, we have almost 33%, predominantly black women in parliament, and South Africa is ranked 11th in the world. The first South African Madam Deputy President was appointed on 22 June, 2005 (SA Government Web site, 2005).

Even though it seems that black women have more political power than white women ever had, it is argued that parliament is still too patriarchal with a male representation of 67% compared to their 47% representation of the general population (Naidoo, 1997; Paton, 1998; Booyesen, 1999b, Van der Westhuizen, 1999; Mathur-Helm, 2004, BWASA, 2006).

With the changes in government the previously disadvantaged majority group in South Africa came into power, and the era of social and economic reconstruction had arrived.

Changes in legislation towards empowerment of all

On the journey towards transformation a number of Law Reform efforts and Affirmative Action (AA) legislation have been initiated in South Africa to achieve greater social justice and equality and to redress past unfair discrimination. One of the first attempts at redressing the wrongs of the past, came through the Labour Relations Act 1995 which took effect in 1996, the Constitution of South Africa, 1996, and the Basic Conditions of Employment Act in 1997. After that came the Employment Equity (EE) Act and its anti-discrimination provisions, which came into effect on Women's Day, 9 August, 1999, the Skills Development Act of 1998 and the Skills Development Levies Act of 1999. The intention of the last two acts is to shift the focus away from only affirmative action appointments but also to recruitment, succession planning and development and training of persons in the designated groups (blacks and women) and to address the skills gap (Munetsi, 1999; Pillay, 1999, Helepi, 2000, Swanepoel, Erasmus, van Wyk & Schenk, 2003; Rautenbach, 2005).

These changes were followed by the establishment of the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) Commission in 1999, and the subsequent strategies and policies set by Government and industry alike. The Black Economic Empowerment Act was implemented in 2003 and the Black Economic Empowerment industry Charters with proposed quotas for black ownership and management followed. In 2004 government sensed disparities and possible clashes between different industry charters and published a draft Code of Practice aimed at providing guidelines to the various branches of industry on how to set up their BEE schemes (Bouche & Booyesen, 2005 Mulholland, 2005; Rautenbach, 2005).

The effects of these social and economic reconstruction and development is already evident in the workplace and the economic landscape in South Africa.

Shifts in Economic Power

Although whites as a group still hold on a relative basis greater economic power than other groups in South Africa, there are numerous corporate and government initiatives aimed at redressing the economic status of blacks (Alexander, 2006; Du Plessis, 2006).

South Africa's current economic transformation or Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), and the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy is part of the natural progression following the political transformation (Slabbert & De Villiers, 2003). A central objective of the RDP and GEAR is to de-racialise business ownership and control through focused policies of BEE (BEE Commission Report, 2001). According to the BEE strategy document, (Department of Trade and Industry, 2002:15) BEE is defined as "*an integrated and coherent socio-economic process, that directly contributes to the economic transformation of South Africa, and brings about significant increases in the number of black people that manage, own and control the country's economy, as well as significant decreases in income inequalities.*"

Shifts have already taken place, in the middle 90's whites owned and controlled 98% of the Johannesburg Stock Exchange. A May 2005 study shows that in regard to the direct and indirect shareholding and control on the JSE, SA whites effectively own and control a little more than 50% of the JSE (Rautenbach, 2005).

Despite BEE and the Governments declared intentions, inequality has increased since 1994. The All Media and Products Survey (AMPS, 2006) indicates the average monthly household income in South Africa is R4,415. Eleven percent of households in South Africa have a per capita income of less than R5 per day, and 70% of households with a per capita income of less than R5 per day live in rural areas. (AMPS 2005 RA, Eighty20 analysis). However, Census 2001 also shows, that on the high end there were over 36,000 people earning R100,000 or more per month and over 80,000 people in South Africa earning R30,000 or more per month (AMPS 2005, 2001 Census). According to Alexander (2006) and the FW de Klerk Foundation (2005) inequality has also increased significantly within the Black community, due to the development of a strong black middle class, as well as the so-called black elite.

Shifts in Social Power

Due to the shifts in political and economic power, a shift has also occurred in the social power of the people of South Africa, and the way the different groups and individuals in the groups are portrayed. Wasserman (2005) asserts that there is a definite general shift in the media debates away from Eurocentric or Western sentiments and portrayals towards a more Afrocentric approach based in the African Renaissance philosophy.

Social power used to reside almost exclusively in the white group prior to 1994. Now this power is distributed more evenly amongst the groups, with a tendency to favour the black group, as can be seen in the present media coverage in South Africa. Apart from the politically very important people, the faces seen on television, on the society pages in the news papers and magazines and the people in the news are predominantly black. Our performing artists, actors in advertisements in the printed media and on billboards as well as voice artists tend to be much more in line with the population groups in South Africa. Quite recently, an all exclusive networking and discussion group the "Native Club" just for the African intellectual elite, was established by the political advisor of President Thabo Mbeki, Mr Titus Mafolo (Du Plessis, 2006).

Effects of the Above Power Shifts on Social Identities in Management

In 1994, management power resided almost exclusively with white males. White males held more than 80% of management positions (Central Statistical Service, 1995a, 1995b). Moreover, in 1990 black management in white firms was estimated to be approximately 4%, although blacks comprised over 85% of the population. Fourteen years later Hofmeyr (2004) points out that white people still hold 93% of top positions, a mere 2% less than the 95% in 2002 (van Rooyen, 2004).

With the demise of apartheid and the implementation of equal opportunity and affirmative action legislation, there is at least now formal equality between people of different races and genders. However, although the effects of these programmes are already evident, it will take some time before there will be substantive equality, because of societal discrimination and the present effects of the past discrimination that still exist (Kemp, 1994; Van Wyk, 1998, Jacobson, 1999; Klein, 1999; Van der Westhuizen, 1999, Swanepoel *et al.* 2003, Booysen & Ngambi, 2004; Mathur-Helm, 2004).

A comparison between the 2000 and 2002/2003 Commission for EE reports shows that there is slow progress in the implementation of the Employment Equity Act. It appears that momentum is building as demonstrated in the increase of employment of blacks (5.7%) in general and females in top and senior management positions. However, there is a drop in the representation of Africans and females at the professional and middle management level of employment which is worrisome since this level is considered a 'feeder' to senior and top management positions. Furthermore, the benefits have not accrued to a large extent to Black females who continue to be poorly represented in top management (13.8% in 2002 from 12.4% in 2000); and in senior management (21.6% in 2002 from 21.0% in 2000) (Commission for EE, 2003).

Figure 2 depicts the percentage distribution of "legislators" by race and gender. The category "Legislators" refers to critical decision makers such as chief executive officer, vice-president, chief operating officer, general managers and divisional heads, managers who provide the direction of a critical technical function; postmaster; superintendent; dean and school principal, etc.

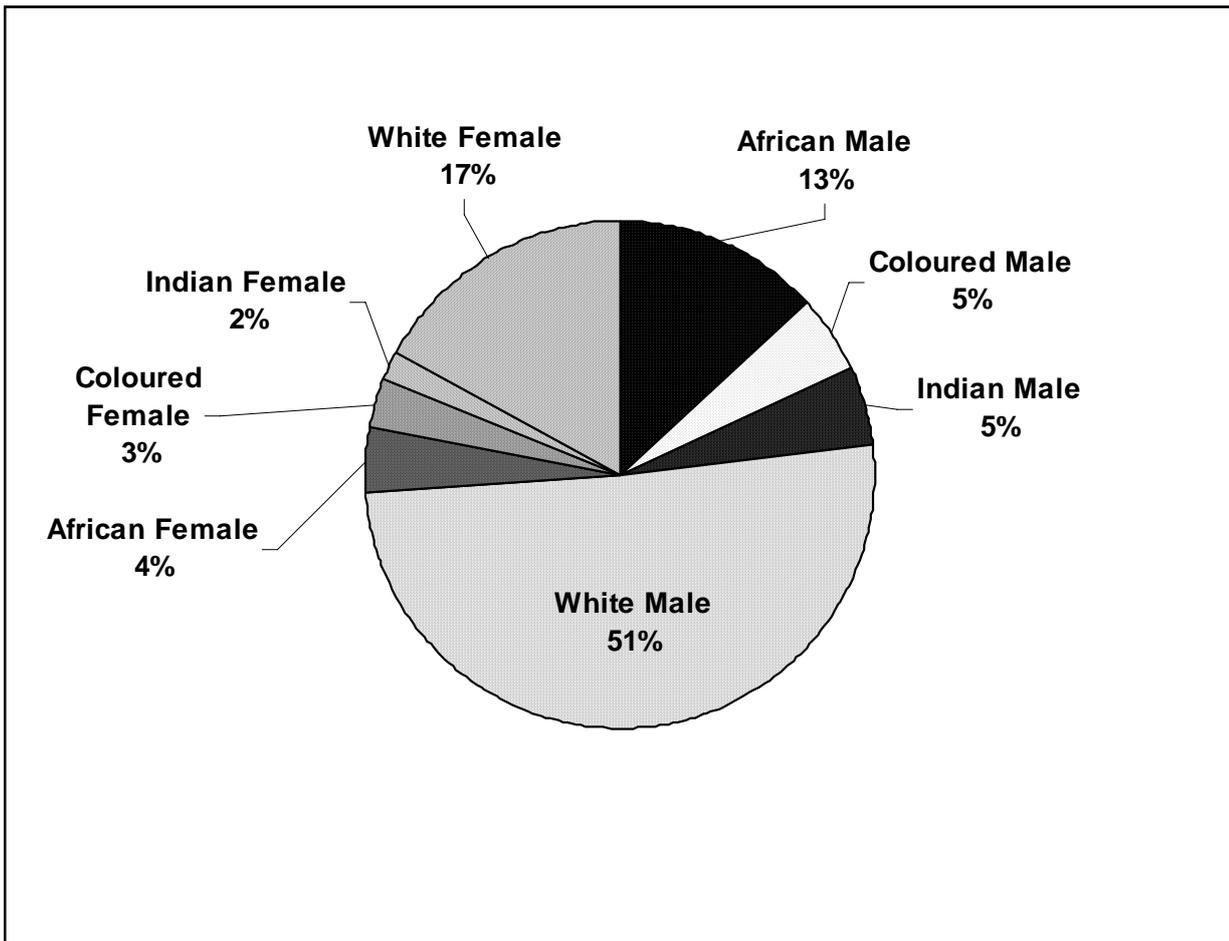


Figure 2: Percentage distribution of legislators by race and gender

Source: Commission for EE, (2003:13)

From **Figure 2** it follows that regarding race, blacks account for 32% and whites 68% of all “legislators”. Africans account for 17% (African males 13% and females 4%), coloureds 8% (coloured males 5% and females 3%), Indians 7% (Indian males 5% and females 2%) and white 68% (white males 51% and females 17%) of all “legislators”.

Regarding gender, females account for 26% and males 74% of all “legislators”. Among females, Africans account for 4%, coloureds 3%, Indians 2% and whites 17%. Among males, Africans account for 13%, coloureds 5%, Indians 5% and whites 51%. Black females account for 23% of all “legislators”.

It is thus evident that, despite various regulations that have been put in place since 1994 and in spite of progress that has been made regarding racial imbalances in management, the white group (68%), particularly white males (51%) still dominate management positions. Furthermore, the white female management group, is still the second largest group and, equals the African male and female group percentage at 17%.

Where Have All the Powers Gone... ?

As a result of the above societal power shifts in South Africa, all the different population groups are undergoing social identity changes in adapting to their new social realities – and their social identity crises. To a large extent the groups are at present out of their comfort zones. Generally speaking, for the group that had absolute power a little more than a decade ago, the white male, the perception is one of great loss and disempowerment. While the black male group seems to have gained the most power, and is at present the most empowered. In conclusion it can be said that the power bases, societal and group dynamics in South Africa are turned upside down, the previously subordinate groups are now becoming the dominant group and vice versa. This means that all the adults in the different groups in South Africa are presently functioning on a different interaction level than in the era they have been brought up – the apartheid era.

Changes and transformation in the workplace are perceived either to be too slow or too fast, depending through which cultural lens these are looked at, depending on whether you are black or white or in the middle.

Workplace Implications and Leadership Challenges of the Above Changes

The workplace implications of the above social identity shifts and changes are manifold. For a detailed discussion of the workplace implications and resultant leadership challenges refer to Booysen (in print). Three major implications will be now be highlighted. The first major workplace implication that needs to be managed is social identity conflict.

Handling intergroup anxiety, tension and Social Identity Conflict

It seems that the ever-present and very salient race divides in South Africa cause the most noticeable social identity conflicts in South Africa. An interesting dynamic is emerging in South Africa, and also reflected in the workplace: as democracy is growing, and the honeymoon phase of integrating the “rainbow nation” is rapidly coming to an end, people of all races are becoming more outspoken about change and lack of change. Coupled with that is the opening up of discussion around race and racism in as much that race is becoming more of an issue. Power plays between especially African blacks who entered organisations with the advent of democracy and whites who were in power positions all along, are now being unmasked, brought into the open and are discussed within organisations (Ngambi, 2002; Booysen & Ngambi, 2004, Booysen, 2004a, 2004b, 2005).

In order to manage social identity conflict effectively, managers need to understand the differential effect the changes have on the different social groups in South Africa. The second major workplace implication thus, is the changing nature of the different social identities – the fluidity and evolving nature of social group identities.

Construction and Evolvement of New Identities

Due to the social identity and social self-awareness contradictions which came into being because of the changes, orthodox assumptions of identity seem to have lost their boundaries, their value and meaning and are challenged. New social identities and social

identity structures are being constructed in order to make sense of this new reality. This process is still evolving and the identities are still rather fluid. As the social identity crises intensifies, power struggles are emerging.

Questions are raised about the legitimacy of some groups in South Africa. In their general council meeting discussion document in June, 2005 the ANC asked whether white Afrikaners are African. They suggested it is time to answer the valid question about whether or not Afrikaners belong to Africa (Brown, 2005). It is suggested that White South Africans, should rather be referred to as Eurokaners or Afropeers, than Africans to reflect their European, (rather than African) decent (L'ange, 2005)

Allegations are made that one form of oppression and exclusion is being exchanged for another form of oppression and exclusion. It is said that previously everything belonged to the whites, now everything belongs to the African blacks – minority groups rights are still not honoured (Brown, 2005, Booysen, 2005)

Lastly, the third implication is, paradoxically managers need to understand and manage these different realities, simultaneously. While going through their own social identity crises, being ontologically part of their own social identity group in flux.

Understanding and Supporting the Different Groups:

i) The Previously Non Dominant Blacks

Even though significant power shifts have already taken place – the shifts are still in process and have not yet been played out fully. Whites as a minority, which previously had absolute power, still have the most economic and management power. Moreover, even though the blacks have the power in the supra-system, they do not yet have the power in management or organisations.

ii) Recognising Third Identity Groups – Some Groups are Still Left in the Middle

While the most salient social identity issues are between whites and African blacks, the coloured and Indian groups are left in the middle, as the third identities. Affirmative Action initiatives are being perceived as African black empowerment, and not really beneficial to coloureds and Indians/Asians. There is a general perception amongst the coloureds in South Africa that in the previous dispensation they were not white enough, and in the current dispensation they are not black enough (Ngambi, 2002, Booysen, 2004b).

iii) The Previously Dominant Whites are Still Dominant

White people as a group are showing high levels of social identity anxiety, due to their loss of power and the changes in South Africa (Ngambi, 2002). This affects the white males more pertinently, since they were in the most powerful position, and had absolute power prior to the political change. There are high levels of job insecurity among white males and a real lack of future promotional opportunities, which result in high levels of demotivation. In a sense it can be said that white males are the "new minority", they experience a perceived Employment Equity Ceiling, feelings of being the least valued and in discomfort with power sharing. Reference to them as "the extinct species", the "dinosaurs" and "white rhinoceros" are noticed in social commentaries.

From the discussion of the shift in management power it is evident, that women, black and white, were, and still are, the minority group in decision making positions. While white men still are the dominant group. What is also evident is that white women still have more

management power than black women and that their position equals that of black men. On the other hand, even though white women still have more management power than their black counterparts, due to past white privilege, the white women group seems currently to be the most invisible group. It can be said, *that in the previous dispensation white women were seen as women and in the current dispensation they are seen as white.*

The Final Analysis

It is important to understand the differential effects of the changes on the different social identities and to explore their different realities. These shifting balances of power seem to be ever present in the inter-group interactions which in turn impact on the workplace. This is the leadership challenge and the workplace dilemma: How to simultaneously balance different changing realities, and how to deal with these social identity changes, evolving identities, and paradoxes in the workplace, while also being part of a specific group? How, as South Africans, to unthink old categories of citizenship and to redefine themselves as a nation – how to deal with their social identity crises.

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