

# WHOSE REALITY?

## Fundamental issues in mediation and negotiation in South Africa today

'One of the important aspects of everyday knowledge is that it keeps certain people in power and certain others in the dark . . . There is, in other words, a social misconstruction of reality with the power structures in society partly relying on the fact that reality misdescribed cannot be seen for what it is'

(Crick, 1982:303)

The origins of this article<sup>1</sup>, which attempts to identify some of those factors which hinder the development of effective channels for mediation and negotiation are two-fold, and are inter-related.

Firstly, for some time now I have become increasingly preoccupied with the question of my relationship to reality – reality being defined as 'whatever people experience as real', including the meanings they attach to their experiences (Berger et al, 1973:18). No, I am not, as far as I know, an incipient schizophrenic, except in a uniquely South African sense: As an anthropologist, part of my task is the 'discovery of the characteristic ways in which members of a society categorise, code and define their experience' (Spradley, 1972:240) and, in the tradition of participant observation, one of the ways in which I do this is by becoming immersed, insofar as is possible in the South African context, in the life situations of the members of the society, or segment of society, I am studying; i.e. there is far more personal involvement than is the case with most other social science research methods. Largely as a result of my profession, then, I am able to glimpse, to a certain extent, the reality experienced by Black (African) South Africans, particularly those living in what is roughly the greater metropolitan area of Durban. Now, my sense of schizophrenia stems, not from any sort of 'culture shock', but from the fact that I am also a member of the same broader South African society as my informants, my (White) segment being inextricably linked to the Black segment politically and economically<sup>2</sup>, and as a White, middle-class, 'liberal' South African<sup>3</sup> my perceptions of the reality around me, especially insofar as political reality is concerned (and it is politics which pervades all facets of life in South Africa), differ markedly from those I experience *qua* anthropologist; not surprisingly, perhaps, the "White" reality is the more comfortable of the two. Why, I have often asked myself, should these discrepancies exist?

The second source of this article relates to a speech by a member of the Official Opposition at a recent seminar on 'township unrest' in Durban, to the effect that it was imperative, if present problems were to be overcome, for Blacks and Whites 'to communicate'. There is an obvious

connection between that statement and my topic, for communication is presumably central to negotiation, and mediators need to be skilled communicators. Communication, as Luckman (1983:68) rightly observes, has certainly come to mean 'all things to all men', and is seen as a panacea for a variety of contemporary ills, ranging from marital and family problems to national crises. However, like any other deceptively simple solution, it may not be as straightforward as it looks for various reasons, two of which are important in the present context.

Firstly, there must be motivation to communicate (or negotiate), which would include some perceptions about the likelihood of it proving fruitful. Just as recalcitrant spouses and rebellious teenagers may refuse to cooperate when a would-be mediator, in the form of a therapist, attempts to intervene, so too may leaders of particular political groupings dig in their heels and refuse to participate when attempts are made to set up mediatory structures (a recent example of this was the inability of the PFP to secure the participation of a variety of political groupings in their Convention Alliance).

Secondly, successful communication involves the 'objectivation and **interpretation** of knowledge' (Schutz and Luckmann, 1973:305, my italics), i.e. it is not simply 'sending a message' but receiving and interpreting what is said. Thus, as Crick (1982:289) notes,

'Communicative competence involves far more than knowledge and language; it involves a knowledge of social rules, apperceptions of contexts, understanding what is not and need not be said'

In short, some overarching reality structure. In a complex contemporary society which comprises a plurality of competing life worlds, even husbands and wives, not to mention their offspring, may inhabit largely different worlds; how much more so members of the different groups who would need to communicate about political problems, and whose reality I have suggested differs to such a marked extent?

Arising, then, from the two issues I have raised, the central thesis of this article is that to promote negotiation and mediation in the present crises which engulf the country some way of bridging the gulf between realities is needed, both to motivate ordinary White South Africans (who make up the constituencies of politicians) and their politicians, as well as Black leaders from a variety of political organizations (who may well, I suggest, in terms of their past experience, perceive proposed negotiations under present circumstances as a futile exercise) that negotiation is necessary, and to create a suitable climate in which it may take place. In an attempt to understand how the

present situation has come about, so that ways can be found to overcome the obstacles I have mentioned, I shall briefly consider how South African reality – in particular as it pertains to White perceptions of Black political realities – is constructed (or perhaps, more appropriately, misconstructed), and suggest that this misconstruction is contributing to the rapid polarisation we are witnessing. I shall conclude by asking questions about what all those concerned and, in particular, social scientists, can do to rectify the situation.

## THE CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY IN SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa, it is commonly maintained, is a plural society, i.e. one which exhibits 'sharp cleavages between different population groups brought together within the same political unit' (Kuper and Smith, 1969:3). In an attempt to gloss over the racial basis for the existing political and economic structure of the country, official emphasis tends to fall on the 'ethnic' or 'cultural' diversity of its population groups, this dogma of ethnic or cultural plurality being at the basis of the government's policy for the division of the country into 'White' (and other population groups) areas, and the various 'national states' or 'homelands'.

As with any theoretical concept, the term 'culture' is defined by anthropologists and other social scientists in different ways, most definitions falling roughly into one of two categories, i.e. either the 'totalist' type of definition proposed by the early anthropologist Tylor, which refers to the total way of life of a people, including both ideas and behaviour, as well as artefacts, or the 'mentalist'/'idealist' type of definition favoured by contemporary anthropologists, which focuses on the conceptual system of a group of people, e.g. 'shared standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating, communicating and acting' (Goodenough, 1970:99). Now it is an extreme form of the first type of definition, i.e. 'totalist', which appears most closely linked with government thinking about the need for the preservation of 'group identity', in that culture is not seen, as in definitions of the second type, as 'the medium of human communication' (Sharp 1980) but is linked to the concept of **ethnos** which refers to 'closed systems into which individuals are born, in which they must live and from which only death can separate them' (Sharp, 1980) Members of **ethnoses** may be held to share genetic and psychic, as well as cultural traits, and language is, of course, a prime characteristic of group membership.<sup>4</sup> As Sharp notes (*ibid*) 'A correspondence between the implications of the ethnos idea and the policy of separate development is patent' (see also Lye and Murray, 1980:18). As commentators such as Sharp and Lye and Murray point out, such an interpretation of what culture is all about **reifies** the concept, creating the erroneous impression that, of necessity, 'the boundaries of culture coincide with those of a given human population' (Lye and Murray, 1980: 18/19). This narrow, and empirically unjustifiable, definition of culture ignores two of its fundamental characteristics, i.e. that it is **learned** in human interaction and, as a human creation, it is even in the simplest (in terms of size, simple technology and minimal division of labour) society 'a continuous creative, inventive process' (Crick, 1982:299). Furthermore, in the South African context, such a reified model assumes a correspondence between 'culture' and political affiliation, the impression being given that the present 'homelands'

are immutable entities existing in their present form since the time of Black/White contact in South Africa – an assumption which recent work by historians renders patently false; the 19th century was a period of considerable political flux, political groupings frequently being of a culturally heterogeneous nature (Ley and Murray, 1980; Wilson and Thompson, 1982). It is, I suggest, this **reified** concept of culture which dominates the consciousness of most White South Africans.

As a theoretical tool, an 'idealist' definition of culture has proved far more useful in analysing the various societies of the world, but its use does present some problems when attempting to apply it to a complex, contemporary society; put it this way, even in a small-scale, relatively simple society such as that of the Truk (Pacific) islanders

'No two persons . . . have identical standards for what they regard as Trukese culture, and the amount of variance they accept in one another's behaviour differs from one subject matter to another and from one kind of situation to another'

(Goodenough, 1970:99)

Whilst there may be a reasonably clear-cut relationship between culture, defined in an 'idealist' sense and the reality experienced in, say, Bushman society, the relationships between culture and the reality experienced by members of a complex society such as South Africa (both Black and White) is far more complicated. Ethnography constantly refines theoretical tools, and recent work (see, e.g. Holy and Stuchlik, 1981) suggests that people's behaviour is influenced by **models** of what is perceived as culture (e.g. as 'traditional Zulu' or 'English middle class'), these models varying considerably in content depending on factors such as age, sex, geographic region, education, socio-economic standing etc., and operating selectively according to the particular situation in which the individual is functioning (e.g. a model of 'traditional Zulu' culture would be appropriate for some aspects of a wedding but not in the boardroom).

Research in contemporary South Africa suggests that the role of culture, whilst **situationally** colouring perceptions of reality, is not of major importance in the way most Blacks and Whites experience day-to-day reality, and I suggest that those factors which relate to one's position in the social structure of the country, which regulate where one may live, and work, and with whom one may interact and the type of interaction, have greater import than culture in determining the consciousness – i.e. the 'web of meanings that allow the individual to navigate his way through the ordinary events and encounters of his life with others' (Berger et al, 1973:18) – of South Africans. How then is reality constructed in South Africa, particularly as it pertains to White perceptions **vis-a-vis** Black political reality?

A sociology of knowledge perspective, which accords with the basic tenets of cultural anthropology, holds that the primary means of constructing reality is through meaningful human interaction (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Schutz and Luckmann, 1973). However, the very structure of South African society, entrenching as it does the 'separateness' of the different 'population groups', legitimated by the reified concept of culture I have referred to, mitigates against the creation, by ordinary primary means, of a shared reality structure<sup>5</sup>. Part of the stock 'taken-for-granted' knowledge of most White



South Africans, inculcated during socialization (e.g. school text books, separate educational institutions) is probably an implicit acceptance of the 'differentness' of 'them' as opposed to 'us'<sup>6</sup>, exemplified by a recent (but fairly typical) comment by a White (not a government supporter) about the current 'unrest', that 'if **they** can't agree amongst themselves, how are they going to agree with **us**' (obviously over-looking the fact that whites do not agree amongst themselves politically either!). In other words, the basic requirements of a meaningful, shared constitution of reality, i.e. that Blacks are seen as 'essentially similar to me', that they 'fundamentally experience the world in the same way as I do' (Schutz and Luchmann, 1973:306) are not present. The physical (separate living areas, for example) and conceptual distance which separates Blacks and Whites reinforces this 'taken-for-granted' knowledge because of the lack of opportunity for routine **meaningful** interaction (unless the relationships of Blacks with White employees and bureaucrats can be termed meaningful). My own observations of Black/White interaction amongst persons of the same professional standing suggests a built-in guardedness may exist on the part of Blacks in their discussions with Whites.

In the absence of meaningful interaction, what then are the 'structural bases for the distribution of knowledge' (*ibid*; 324) that Whites rely on to learn about Black reality? Since direct contact of the type I have referred to is lacking, I argue that the media ('the consciousness industry') which, world-wide, 'circulate and shape knowledge' (Tuchman, 1978:2) plays a crucial role in this regard<sup>7</sup>. If, in general, the importance of 'the mass media for modern consciousness hardly needs much elaboration' (Berger et al, 1973:96), how much more is this likely to be the case in South Africa, where Whites lack, in most cases, direct means of participating in the realities of Black life? Whilst mindful of the extremely important role of the other media, especially television and radio, in moulding public opinion, it is to one particular form of media that I wish to draw attention in this paper, and that is the role of the supposedly 'liberal' White Press here in Natal in the construction (or perhaps, more appropriately the *misconstruction*) of Black reality, specifically insofar as politics is concerned. Although newspapers may seem innocuous when compared with some other forms of media, as Louw (p.35) notes,

'The real danger of the present situation is that the average South African liberal reader of the Press believes he is getting the full story and does not see that the agenda has been set for him by the media' Now whilst newspapers can, and often do, run stories which provide their readers with an important window onto the world that Blacks live in, in general they tend to perpetuate the separateness of Black and White realities; for example, compare the coverage of crime in 'White' as opposed to 'Black' areas, and the coverage given to bomb blasts in 'White' areas as opposed to the violence in 'Black' areas, where a considerably greater number of the victims are innocent bystanders, and often children<sup>8</sup>.

However, even more disturbing in the present context is the tendency, on the part of some newspapers<sup>9</sup> to report selectively about what happens in 'Black' areas. Now I am not implying that this one-sidedness is intentional, but it is because of their crucial role as purveyors of knowledge about Black life that it is particularly disturbing, for it gives

Whites not only a partial, but a distorted view of what is happening virtually in their midst, and has implications for the political situation of the country as a whole. I shall give some general examples of this biased reporting by referring to the coverage given by one local newspaper to political events in and around Durban during 1985.

This particular newspaper carried a very one-sided picture of the disturbances which flared in Durban townships and Inanda at that time, reporting for the most part on events which placed Inkatha in a favourable light, highlighting its supposed 'peace-restoring' role, and ignoring disturbing allegations about some of the violence, e.g. that which flared at a memorial service for Mrs Mxenge (see, e.g. Sutcliffe and Wellings, 1985:3). Statements made by influential political figures about the cause of the violence were published, in spite of no Official Enquiry having taken place, and subsequent research by academics on these disturbances (Sutcliffe and Wellings, 1985; Institute for Black Research, 1985) received no mention. Since that time the trend has continued: Reports which place Inkatha or the Kwa Zulu government in a bad light are, for the most part, not published, nor are letters which seek to correct distortions through providing correct information, or which are even mildly critical of the Kwa Zulu government or its leadership. For example, reporting on May Day activities failed to mention the intimidation, and even physical coercion, which was used to draw people to the UWUSA rally – nor the fact that a considerable portion of the crowd left, or attempted to leave, early, – published reports conflicting considerably with those compiled by the Labour Monitoring Group at the University of Natal. As has been noted elsewhere as a trend in reporting (Tuchman, 1978:180), analysis is generally lacking; e.g. a recent article on clashes at Chesterville and Kwa Mashu was conspicuous for its superficiality, in spite of the fact that the main reporter involved in compiling the story had been in possession of detailed facts.<sup>10</sup> Could the average White, who probably also spends a fair amount of time watching television, be blamed for believing that the situation in Natal was 'calm', that Inkatha was the only local political organization with a sizeable following, & that any trouble which flared was instigated by 'trouble-makers' or 'agitators' from **other** organizations?

Now all this is not to deny that Inkatha has a large following, and is an important means of political expression for many Blacks (although, for a variety of reasons, a true assessment of its strength would be difficult to obtain). It should go without saying that this article is **not** concerned with assessing the merits of this, or any other political organization, for what is intended is a sober analysis of the present situation, including an attempt to explain discrepant Black/White realities. Research<sup>11</sup>, and informal conversations with Blacks of a variety of political persuasions (with whom a good and long-standing relationship exists) suggests that these discrepancies are very real, and that Black political reality is far more complex than most news reporting would suggest; for example, various other political groupings also enjoy large followings, it is not necessarily non-Inkatha members who are the aggressors when confrontation occurs, and there is evidence to suggest that some of the strife which occurs in the townships is amongst different factions of Inkatha, to name some of the ways in which the Black picture differs to the White one.

It is difficult not to conclude that news, as reported by this newspaper, is a 'means not to know' (Smith, quoted by Tuchman, 1978: 196/7) about Black political realities, for the sort of reporting that one expects on White politics – i.e. the wide range of viewpoints, inter-party feuding, and constructive criticism of political leaders – is not present. Apart from the other implications, the 'differentness' of Blacks is perpetuated in the way in which the news about their politics is reported. There are various reasons for this state of affairs (and I shall suggest in due course that social scientists are not blameless), for world-wide reporters tend to rely on official sources of information, and to lean towards political conservatism, reflecting the existing structures of the societies in which they live and work (Tuchman, 1978: 156; McQuail, 1985: 99); in fact, it is to the credit of the South African Press that it manages to overcome the obstacles to balanced reporting to the extent that it does.

The implications of what I have said for negotiation and mediation should be apparent: Negotiation, if it is to succeed, should include leaders who represent different political viewpoints, and mediators should be acceptable to different factions; if negotiation is to be perceived as effecting change which will improve the existing situation, obviously some of those involved must have the power, or access to power, to effect changes, **and** to safeguard the interests of all those taking part, so that there need be no fear of reprisals. Political power<sup>12</sup> in South Africa lies almost entirely in the hands of the Whites and, outside of the government it is the opposition parliamentarians, (through their access to Parliament, Ministers and the Press,) and the media, through its role in informing and influencing the general public, who wield a limited amount. Now if those limited sources of power are perceived as biased – and past experiences suggests that they are (because of the alignments of opposition politicians, and the fact that newspapers are seen to express White viewpoints) – is it likely that those Black leaders who, in Natal, are not part of 'homeland' structures (who also have their constituencies) would be willing to participate in negotiations? Past experience suggests that they will perceive negotiation as a fruitless exercise, **unless** those who wield power of any sort are **not** seen to be taking sides – and I realise that that is 'easier said than done' – and are likely to bring about some sort of positive change.

### **What can be done?**

I have argued that discrepant Black and White realities are the logical outcome of the enshrined dogma of 'separateness', which rests on the implicit acceptance of an erroneous, reified view of culture. Since daily life in South Africa does not generally allow for interaction of a meaningful nature between members of different 'population groups' the media plays a crucial role in determining White perceptions of Black realities; that it does not, for the most part, accurately reflect Black political reality is particularly disturbing given the present political climate, for lack of accurate knowledge can only feed misunderstanding and mistrustfulness, driving White and Black further apart – in short, promoting polarisation.

If a climate favourable to negotiation and mediation is to be created, ways must be found of decreasing – rather than increasing, as seems to be happening at present – the distance between White and Black, and since a lack of

knowledge is one of the factors which perpetuates the present situation ways must be found of disseminating accurate information. Now whilst this point seems to me too obvious to need making, experience suggests that it **does** need to be made. I have often been struck by the lack of knowledge about other 'population groups' exhibited by generally well-informed people such as businessmen – not to mention, for example, first-year university students, who are often abysmally ignorant of fundamental realities of Black existence, such as where townships are situated, and the fact that vast numbers of men live in single-sex hostels; even politicians, of whom one would expect otherwise, appear ill-informed at times. Also noticeable is the lack of coordination of available knowledge, and of an effective channelling of it to those with some power to make changes themselves (and here I am referring to politicians of different political persuasions, as well as businessmen) or to those who perhaps have the power to make 'definitions of reality stick' (Berger et al, 1973: 197), such as the media. Implicit in all I have said is that many people may well be acting as they do because of the type of knowledge they possess; e.g. Bekker and Humphries (1985: 35) note, in connection with what they term the 'distinct institutional culture' of the late – but not – lamented – Administration/Development Boards that

'While attending Afrikaans universities in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960's, these directors read courses in applied social sciences, in "Native" or "Bantu" administration, and in Bantu languages. It was primarily this training couched in the Verwoerdian ideology of the time, that formed the basis for the blueprint upon which Administration Boards were to be developed'

The courses to which Bekker and Humphries refer would, of course, have stressed the reified nature of culture that I have referred to (see Sharp, 1980). All this brings me to the role of the social scientist.

As 'experts' (Schutz and Luckman, 1973:330) in what has been termed the 'Knowledge Industry' (Berger et al, 1973:96) I believe that we have a duty to use that knowledge responsibly. Now whilst the past few years have been marked by much soul-searching about the role of social scientists in South Africa (see, e.g. Webster, 1982), and much talk of 'relevant' research, what, one may well ask (considering the present political situation) has been achieved? With a view to promoting discussion on what **can** be achieved, I should like to conclude by posing some questions which, I believe, all social scientists may fruitfully ask themselves:

Firstly, are they, mindful of ethical considerations, using their knowledge constructively, e.g. lobbying politicians, businessmen, the media etc. It is all very well to criticise the media, but have they liaised as fully with it as they could have? If they do have access to power structures of any sort are they sufficiently cognisant of the way in which their research findings are being used, and the likely consequences (see Preston-Whyte, 1979); in short, are they likely to help build an overarching reality structure and increase understanding, or is it more probable that they will increase polarisation? Secondly, are they able to put aside internecine strife amongst themselves, caused by their different ideological perspectives, sufficiently to pool resources and ideas about using their knowledge more effectively?



Lastly, but most importantly, some methodological considerations come to mind: Is there sufficient collaboration between White and Black social scientists and/or fieldworkers in the interpretation of research findings? Several years ago Webster (1980:18) noted that 'there is the danger of reproducing apartheid in the very research act itself—the white sociologist conceives, the black research assistant executes', a trend which has also been drawn to my attention by informants during research of my own. Does this trend continue to exist? This brings me to the second methodological aspect, i.e. is there sufficient emphasis on **qualitative** research to complement the quantitative studies being carried out? Qualitative research not only frames questions from the 'inside' rather than the 'outside', but is particularly valuable in the sort of climate of growing polarisation we are witnessing be-

cause important and (hopefully) mutually valued links are established, and bridges are built, when White researchers focus on Black communities (or black researchers on White communities).

I realise that all this may seem the height of naivety to those social scientists who believe that no progress can be made until a radically different socio-economic formation emerges. I believe that they may be underestimating the power of ideas to influence change, and that when human life is at stake—as it is in the sort of upheaval taking place around us—all possible avenues of effecting peaceful change must be explored.

(This article is based on a paper given at an ASSA conference, conflict and peace studies section).

#### Footnotes

1. I should like to thank Professor Eleanor Preston-Whyte and Mr Paulus Zulu for reading and commenting on the original rough draft of this article; Naturally they are in no way responsible for the views expressed in it. I also wish to thank Professor Keyan Tomaselli and Mr Eric Louw of the Dept. of Contemporary Cultural Studies at Natal University for drawing my attention to the Tuchman and Louw readings.
2. Due to the narrow focus of this article I am obviously not doing justice to the complexity of South African society in generalising about 'White' and 'Black' and omitting 'Indians' and 'Coloureds' from the discussion. It is also obviously something of an oversimplification (done for purposes of comparison) to talk as if there were a single 'Black' or 'White' reality.
3. This category presumably includes politicians from, and some ordinary members of, the Official Opposition, and one would expect them to be better informed politically than possibly the bulk of White South Africans, whose attitude is probably somewhat akin to that of the proverbial Three Monkeys.
4. As in the Citizenship Act of 1970.
5. I realise that in any complex society, different groups of people experience reality differently (different classes in particular). However, I am suggesting that the extent to which there are conscious attempts to perpetuate these different realities in South Africa is unusual, to put it mildly.
6. It is quite possible that articles and books which give vivid descriptions of the 'customs' of the different 'groups' owe their popularity to the fact that they reinforce the differentness of 'them' as opposed to 'us'.
7. In America, e.g. it has been noted that the press plays a significant role in setting political priorities (Tuchman, 1978:2); Tuchman also images of the subject discussed, such as the use of 'draft dodgers' as opposed to 'draft resisters' during the Vietnam war, as well as the tendency to use the word 'unrest' for a variety of acts.
8. I am obviously referring to the position before the recent declaration of a State of Emergency.
9. Some newspapers do attempt a more balanced perspective, and more analysis of what is happening.
10. One report published under State of Emergency conditions went so far as to allege that the situation was returning to normal in one township which had been the scene of much violence; since the situation was far from 'normal' this report would have been better left unpublished in view of the restrictions.
11. My own research is not of a political nature; I am referring to other research findings which must remain confidential.
12. I am leaving aside the problematic issue of the distribution of economic power and its relationship to political power, a debate about which is outside the scope of this paper.

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