Student leadership and advocacy for social cohesion: A South African perspective

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Abstract

This article utilises the insights of sociology and social psychology in defining social cohesion, outlining the ideal state and making a case for the role of student leadership in social cohesion. It draws from personal experience as former Dean of Students while it relies mostly, not entirely, on secondary sources in the disciplines of sociology and social psychology. The conclusion is that given the numbers behind them and the position of influence derived from student structures, student leadership is ideal for advocacy and activism.

Keywords: Social cohesion, student leadership, liminality, advocacy, common assumptions, fluctuating vision

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Introduction

This article is a personal reflection on the potential of student leadership in higher education in South Africa to act as advocates for social cohesion, thereby addressing the questions of advocacy[1] and mobilisation which are currently lacking around the issue. Making use of sociological and psychological insights, it first establishes the grounds for a social cohesion campaign[2] before it makes a case for the involvement of young people in general and student leadership in particular,[3] as advocates for social cohesion. The latter have access to critical tools as well as the student body which provides the necessary critical mass.[4] However, the success of the proposed approach is predicated on two crucial conditions: that students intellectually and emotionally transcend the baggage of the past and that they commit themselves to a cause: in this case, a social cohesion vision.[5]

Following this introduction is a discussion of the concept 'social cohesion'. This is followed by a comment on assumptions implicit in talks about social cohesion in South Africa. A diagnosis of the root cause of the failure to take advantage of the auspicious moment created by the post-conflict conditions and the enabling legal framework follows under the sub-heading 'the youth

1 The term advocacy is preferred to 'agency' owing to its use of campaigns towards achieving the goal(s). Students seem to be good at employing this technique.

2 While not intending to make use of Erikson's work in this article, cognisance is taken of his view that the ideological outlook of society speaks most clearly to the adolescent mind (Erikson 1963:263) which, in any case, is in search of an identity.

3 A distinction is consciously drawn between 'youth' and 'students' since not all the youth are students. There are times that the youth in general act in solidarity with students who are biologically their peers but are, by association, different from them. Most of the time, students and their leaders tend to pursue different interests and campaigns. Even in cases where joint campaigns are undertaken, students are expected by society to approach issues differently from the manner in which they are approached by non-student youth.

4 Taken from Nuclear Physics, this term is used here to refer to the minimum number of people required to start and sustain a project of this nature.

5 It should be borne in mind that South Africa only recently (2002) started to discuss social cohesion (see also *What holds us together? Social cohesion in South Africa* (HSRC 2003). This follows a national conflict of many decades which only ended after the release of Mandela from prison (Bernstein 1998:173).

and the liminal space'. Van Gennep's (1908) model of *liminality* as applied, inter alia, by Turner (1967, 1974) is used heuristically in this reflection. An outline of a possible South African model precedes a case made for the role of student leadership as potential advocates. This is followed by a conclusion.

What is social cohesion?

There are as many attempts at definitions as there are concerns about the state of the social fibre of a number of societies. Each society/context responds in a manner it deems appropriate to address its concerns. Some definitions are based on social experiences and are aimed at healing communities and nations (Canada) while others seem to have purely academic origins, resulting from analyses. As Gough and Olofson (1999) observe, the content of the term varies from author to author, ranging from 'solidarity and trust' to 'inclusion, social capital and poverty alleviation'.

Durkheim used the term to refer to the 'mechanical and organic solidarity' of a society (Osler and Starkey 1991:564). Within this framework, the concept is associated with social integration in simple societies, where there is a limited division of labour and where individuals are relatively interchangeable (Osler and Starkey 1991:564). In such societies, everybody was understood to be dependent on each other, sharing a collective consciousness that guarantees social cohesion and survival (Osler and Starkey 1991:564). Thus, social cohesion defines the degree of consensus of the members of a social group or the perception of belonging to a common project or situation (Osler and Starkey 1991:564). Further, as Elster in Osler and Starkey (1991:565) observes, social solidarity becomes the 'cement' of society.

The Canadian Government defined social cohesion as the 'on-going process of developing a community of shared values, shared challenges and equal opportunity within Canada, based on a sense of trust, hope and reciprocity among all Canadians' (Policy paper cited in Jenson 1998:4). This definition confirms two issues, namely, group solidarity and the on-going nature of

social cohesion which, according to Chan et al. (2006:281), refers to the state of affairs rather than an event or end-state (see also Jenson 1998:5). It is critical for nurturing future citizens. Jenson and Saint-Martin (2003:85) divide philosophies of social cohesion into those that related to the post-war social rights regime and those that relate to ideas of an emerging social investment (2003: 85).[6]

The European Union, which had established a commission (2003) to look at how social cohesion could benefit economic development, hoped thereby to achieve the most viable economy in the world with fewer inequalities and diversity-driven conflicts (Chan et al. 2006). This necessitated a review and integration of systems to ensure inclusivity through the creation of equal opportunities, the integration of minorities and the democratisation of structures. Thus it would be reflecting the current position of most societies, namely, a shift away from community (*Gemeinschaft*) to contract (*Gesellschaft*) (see Green et al. 2008:7). Theories that deal with structural imbalances are associated with this approach to social cohesion. These include concepts such as social inclusion, social equality and social capital, by which is meant the 'features of social life-networks, norms and trust that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives' (Putnam 1995:664, cf. Putnam 1993:167). Discrepancies in these areas are a hindrance to social networks.

In light of the above, it may be said that social cohesion is about regaining lost community values and repairing faulty social systems, thus clearing the way for 'mechanical' albeit not necessarily organic solidarities. However, in South Africa, the situation is complicated by racial, ethnic, ideological and, in recent years, class divisions. The youth are caught up in the midst of it all. Yet post-conflict South Africa has no alternative but to invest in its youth in order for it to make progress. This notwithstanding, it cannot be assumed that everyone is on board, as the discussion below will show.

6 See Myles and Street (1994:7) who link it to the citizen's rights and responsibilities, as well as Jenson and Saint-Martin (2003:81) who see it as an investment in the future rather than present benefits.

Common assumptions

The assumptions foregrounded below are based on public statements made through the media and from interaction with both public figures and students. In other words, it is raw material which, unless specifically acknowledged as such, has not been scientifically processed. However, it cannot be ignored. The assumptions pertain to: 1) assumed commitment of today's youth to social transformation; 2) assumed interest of South Africans and the youth in particular, in social cohesion; 3) the assumption that South Africans have a clear view on how they want to advance the Constitution in respect of reconciliation and nation-building and 4) the assumption that the youth of South Africa is a homogenous group.

First, those who think of the youth and students as vehicles for change often do so with the calibre of the youth of the 1970s and 1980s at the back of their minds. That generation was born and bred in a conflict situation and was therefore forced by circumstances to take a stand against social injustices. The developmental stage through which those two or three generations went also assisted in the choice of a cause for them. The generation of 1976, for example, seems to have had a commitment to alter the course of history. No one, including the brutal armed forces of the apartheid regime, could stop them. Student leadership across ethnic and racial lines took the lead in exposing the evil nature of apartheid and the damage it caused to society and individuals.

It would appear that current socio-economic circumstances are steering the youth in a different direction. This is supported by a preoccupation with success which is measured in terms of materialism which emerged about a decade ago. There is little visible commitment to a cause in order to change history in the same way as it would have been found in the youth of the 20th century. Instead, some Deans of Students have had to intervene in instances where students of the same organisation in their institutions would be fighting over tender allocations outside the institution rather than concern themselves with student issues or analyses and interpretation of various ideologies.

The predictable student protests at the beginning and middle of each year have recently been focusing on the insufficient funds for student financial aid in so far as this affects individuals. However, during the second half of 2015, this took a different turn as higher education students formed barricades to resist fee increases for 2016, using a vehicle known as the #FeesMustFall campaign. This is the first time that students of a democratic South Africa have united across political and racial lines, around an issue that is of national concern to students. Although a concession was made at government level,[7] in respect of fee increments for 2016 and some institutions pledged to reverse 'outsourcing' to 'insourcing' of cleaning services, there is no record of a policy change in respect of student funding. A scientific determination also has to be made on the impact of the campaign on student social outlook and behaviour. The point made here however, is not so much about such details as it is about the potential of students to take South Africa over the threshold which is characterised by instability and procrastination.

Secondly, it is assumed that South Africans have an interest in social cohesion. The Presidency, Department of Higher Education and Training and the Department of Arts and Culture, all talk about it and there is an expectation that everyone will jump onto the bandwagon. In the first place, South Africans do not know what it entails. Even those who attempt to espouse it from a political platform seem to lack an in-depth knowledge of it. This alone becomes a hindrance in terms of advancing or promoting social cohesion. In the second, they view social cohesion as part of the political rhetoric, not something that does happen in reality.

The above notwithstanding, there is little optimism about whether it would be different if the South African public knew, in any case, owing to numerous divergent views about how the historical baggage should be dealt with. Some harbour resentment while others are already imagining themselves to be living in a post-conflict society. A re-enactment of the past

7 A meeting between the State President, higher education leaders and student leadership on 21 October 2015 at the Union Buildings in Pretoria resolved that fee increments in 2016 would not be implemented.

seems to hinder the forward-moving process. While rehearsing the past is intended to educate subsequent generations, it also polarises and assists in keeping the past alive. Unfinished business manifests, for example, in the resentment of parole for prisoners convicted of apartheid-related crimes; land claims and threats to take the land forcefully if it is not reallocated by the government; as well as the resentment between black and white which becomes apparent at certain times in the history of the young democracy of South Africa. Most of these are regularly reported in the media.

Thirdly, related to the second point above, is the assumption that South Africans have decided on how to advance reconciliation and nation-building as required by the Constitution. This is not supported by the reality of relationships across race, class, religion, ethnicity and ideology. What is clear at this point is the perception that the moment of a radical change was halted by what some now label as cosmetic attempts at national reconciliation during the early stages of democracy. Several public commentators and political analysts, for example, Xolela Mangcu from the University of Cape Town and Eusebius MacKaizer, a newspaper columnist, seem to have joined the analysts who are critical of the compromises made during the era of the Government of National Unity which are repeatedly ascribed to the Mandela administration. Apparently, the leadership of the Economic Freedom Fighters recently questioned the conciliatory approach of the 'founding fathers' of the South African democracy, as espoused by Nelson Mandela, during their visit to London.[8] They are of the view that there has been considerable compromise, even in areas where there should not have been. The strong movement in favour of land repossession, ridding the country of various colonial symbols and nationalising the natural resources of the country should be understood in the light of this.

8 The *Sunday Times* of 29 November 2015 for example carried a report on the visit of Julius Malema, leader of the Economic Freedom Fighters, with Dali Mpofu, the national chairperson of the same organisation, to the United Kingdom where Malema is alleged to have accused Mr Mandela of having 'sold out' through his concessions to the capitalist forces. There were also reports, in the same paper, on reactions from the African National Congress and its allies to the statements made by Malema.

These actions stand out because South Africa had, at the outset committed itself to national reconciliation and reconstruction, not only as a constitutional imperative but as a realistic approach to the creation of a reconciled and prosperous nation. The establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1995), the Reconstruction and Development Programme (1994), the demilitarisation of the former liberation formations (1994) and the creation of a single system of education under one department (1994) engendered hope for a new beginning. Even the desegregation of sport and sporting amenities played a major role in defusing the social tensions that had their roots in the apartheid past.

However, the shortcomings of this approach in creating the ideal future society began to push through the cracks shortly after Nelson Mandela vacated office after the (1999) general elections. The old issues of social differentiation and resultant social inequality, that is, structural imbalances, were soon going to create a Frankenstein's Monster manifesting in crime, radical political groupings and a daily culture of service delivery protests.[9] It is not so much the scale of these ills as it is the perceived failure of the state to address them decisively that is a source of concern, for it conjures up a view that there is social dissolution in the country.[10]

Fourthly, there is an assumption that the youth of South Africa is homogenous. This includes the perception of the student body both by outsiders and, strangely, the students themselves. Hence some groups expect students to act in unison once they have made pronouncements on campus and tend to victimise those who have a different view on how to respond to issues. The mere fact that student solidarity is not being based

9 According to the State President, there were 12 575 service delivery protest actions in 2014 (Mbeki 2015).

10 Social cohesion is, almost invariably, thought to be triggered by a situation that threatens the well-being of a community or society in a given geographical area (Riley 2013). That, according to Chan et al. (2006:275), is what social dissolution does, whereas for Harvey (2010), social conflict is normal in a living society.

on kinship ties,[11] that is, not on ethnicity but on ideological grounds, is indicative of the extent to which social contracts (*Gesellschaft*) can play a role in the present situation. This may be both good and bad news. It is good news when social contracts provide the critical mass for a good cause and it becomes bad news when 'others' are excluded as a result of their non-affiliation.

Naturally, the issue of social cohesion will be a thorn in the side of those who prefer to live in comfort zones as it draws individuals and groups out of these zones and into a solidarity with others, regardless of how uncomfortable this may be. As has become clear in the discussion of the term above, social cohesion exposes the obstacles to the 'mechanical' solidarities Durkheim (1965) and others alluded to – be they structural or individual creations. In one way or another, one has to give up something in order to be reconciled to others or to cohere with others.

The youth and the liminal space

Anyone who knows the background to the present democratic constitution of South Africa would expect cohesion to come as second nature to the leadership and citizens. South Africans voluntarily chose the path of an open democratic society which is founded on the principles that are enshrined in the Freedom Charter (1955) and couched in Roman Law. The aim was to project a society that is the opposite of apartheid as well as to ensure a bright future for all. However, what is reflected on paper finds little expression in daily life. If it was only a question of lethargy, it would be understandable. However, the examples provided below indicate that in some cases, individuals unwittingly act contrary to the Constitution, driven by their experience of the past.

In seeking to understand the current situation better, two questions have been posed. First, why is it that the South African society, otherwise known

11 In terms of Erikson's developmental theory, this already, could be seen as a positive step since adolescents tend to identify with their own kinship groups (Erikson 1959). A definition of solidarity based on ideology or political strategy demonstrates a high level of social maturity.

as the 'Rainbow Nation', finds it difficult to foster cohesion? Secondly, why has the youth, which is known for its zeal to change the course of history, not made social cohesion a programme that is driven by young people in this country? A brief and straightforward analysis in light of Arnold Van Gennep's model of rites of passage and *liminality,* summarised below, seems to provide an answer.

The model has three distinct stages: 1) the separation or detachment from the stabilised environment; 2) the margin which is equal to an ambiguous state of the subject and 3) aggregation, which is the final stage or state of completeness. At this stage, the subject has crossed the threshold into a new fixed and stabilised state. Transitions from one group to another play an important role in this theory. Groups may be classified according to age, gender or social relationships (Willet and Deegan 2001:137). The common processes these groups go through are known as the rites of passage, the origin of the title of Van Gennep's book. Van Gennep (1908:189) wrote of the 'passage' process:

> For groups, as well as for individuals, life itself means to separate and to be reunited, to change form and condition, to die and to be reborn. It is to act and to cease, to wait and rest, and then to begin again, but in a different way.

The important stage is the *liminal* or waiting phase during which the displaced individual can be made or broken. This makes it imperative that reintegration takes place at the end of the process, failing which the individual remains in a permanent *liminal* state (Willet and Deegan 2001:138). Victor Turner was later to modify this with a view to making it simpler. He argued that society is a structure of positions where the *liminal* stage marks the transition between two socially viable positions (Turner 1967:73). In other words, *liminality* is, according to his subsequent publication, a 'movement between fixed points and is essentially ambiguous, unsettled, and unsettling' (Turner 1974:274). During this stage, the *liminar*[12]is characterised by a series of contradictions (Turner

12 This term is used interchangeably with 'subject'. It refers to the initiate.

1967:95). For example, he is 'no longer classified, and not yet classifiable'. Turner refers to this state as 'betwixt and between' (1967:97).

Viewed from the perspective of Van Gennep's model, the current socio-political situation that appears to be exploding, two decades into the democracy of South Africa, might be a reflection of the consequences of attempting to jump to the 'ideal state' in terms of the model, before removing the underlying obstacles to cohesion. For example, it was good to talk of the South African miracle on the macro-level at some point however, at a micro-level, there are aggrieved people whose problems arise from both systemic and filial fronts. These remain hurdles in the way of national reconciliation, let alone, social cohesion. Yet, South Africa cannot go back to that stage because it has already told the world that it had moved on.[13] What needs to be done is move on ideologically and practically, so that the chaotic space South Africa is currently in does not become a permanent feature of society.

In terms of the above model, the prevalent situation in South Africa is characteristic of the 'chaos' that accompanies the *liminal* or 'in-between' state. Many individuals and groups are being drawn out of their comfort zones, some have lost their original identities or are going through the process of losing their identities, if civic groups such as the Afriforum[14] are anything to go by. Despite their fears and resistance, they can never be the same again. Yet, efforts to get them to cross the threshold and embrace a new identity have been fruitless for they constantly return to the past where they think that there is comfort and security deriving from a familiar world, familiar group and 'rootedness'. The procrastination of the Democratic Alliance and Agang-SA in merging before the May 2014 general elections is another example, reflecting the problem of historical roots more than power dynamics. One leader represents a black history of the struggle while the other is perceived to have represented white

13 See Mbeki 1995:51.

14 This is a splinter group of the Freedom Front Plus. It claims to be concerned with civic matters rather than politics although membership is drawn from those who adhere to the ideology of Afrikaner nationalism.

privilege. Statements uttered by the African National Congress to the effect of 'rent-a-black', a denigrating reference to black politicians who are affiliated with previously white dominated political parties, in the context of a constitutional democracy, also reflect this dilemma. It all makes the situation look chaotic: the Constitution directs one way but the citizens, by allowing the past to rule their minds, behave contrary to it.

Student leadership is in no better situation as it is part of the same society. However, it is trapped between the past which the young leaders have never experienced and the future they have not started investing in. They know that the country ought to be in a different place but the majority of them are of the view, *albeit* shallow, that this place is the high level of racial harmony. A deeper analysis which exposes structural imbalances as the root-cause of chasms between 'races' seems to be favoured by the political leadership who, nevertheless, prefer the racial view when it suits them. Anyone whose goal is to move the youth to the final stage, the 'new being', on the other side of the threshold, has to start by addressing structural imbalances, the basis of the problems of our society. Once the students embrace the social analysis and buy into the future vision, they willingly act as advocates for change.

The youth and the fluctuating vision

What is the youth in South Africa expected to champion? In its understanding, the Moral Regeneration Movement would respond by referring to the shared values in the South African Constitution (1996) which are intended to promote the 'common good'(MRM Report I and II 2002; Charter of Positive Values 2012). Looked at carefully, the values contained in the second chapter of the Constitution, commonly known as the Bill of Rights, support the vision of a South Africa that belongs to all. These values are intended to create an environment where all equally enjoy their rights. In other words, the Moral Regeneration Movement's analysis looks below the surface which presents as race relations, to the pillars that keep people apart. Talk of social cohesion therefore, ought

to be synonymous with, and give effect to, the values enshrined in the Constitution.

However, there is a disconnect between theory and practice, largely because of what I have identified above as *liminality*. It would appear that older generations across the political and social spectra sit with their unfinished businesses of the past, the reason for their clinging on to false securities which manifest in different ways such as an exclusive group identity and a refusal to accept change– in particular, regarding identification with a democratic South Africa. This is in contrast to both the 1996 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa and the definition of social cohesion as provided in the report of the study that was commissioned by the Presidency. The study defines social cohesion as the 'extent to which a society is coherent, united and functional, providing an environment within which its citizens can flourish'.[15]

The above-mentioned behaviour of older generations confirms the background provided under sub-sections 'common assumptions' and 'the youth and the *liminal space*' which cannot be ignored by those who are seeking to create a society which is 'coherent, united and functional'. The first sub-section confirms that South African citizens have yet to come on board in respect of social cohesion twenty-one years into democracy, despite conducive conditions and an enabling legal framework. The second provides a possible explanation for that which, in terms of Van Gennep's model, may be ascribed more to the reluctance to give up something rather than the ignorance about what to do. One only needs to observe rallies on national days and listen to race-based finger-pointing in order to get a glimpse of where South Africans are. This leaves the vision fluctuating between the past and the ideal future, the whims of individual leaders and the constitutional framework. This fluidity should however, not be exaggerated as it is part of the chaotic stage in Van Gennep's model. The

15 Government attempts include a study commissioned by the Presidency (2005), an investigation into cohesion and transformation in higher education (2008), the National Summit on Social Cohesion (2012) and the Arts and Culture Pledge (2012).

only challenge is that two decades have now elapsed and no one seems to have been able to cross the threshold to the ideal state.

The impact of structural imbalances cannot be underestimated and cohesion demands a commitment that transcends all comfort zones, including a renunciation of the privilege accorded by an unjust system. South Africans have an inclination towards failure to make a connection between their inability to go all the way in ridding themselves of the past, on the one hand, and the chasm that exists between them and others, on the other. In its April 2015 report, the Institute of Race Relations predicts that violent protests and service delivery demands are going to continue as the youth who are 'born free' still find themselves in chains (IRR 2015). This confirms the view expressed in this paper, that there is a connection between structural imbalance and social cohesion. As the above model from social anthropology shows, structural imbalances are a hindrance to social capital. In South Africa, these are driven and maintained by economic elitism and cultural bigotry.

In a different context, Laurence (2009:2; cf. Letki 2008) suggests that social cohesion must be treated as a multi-faceted concept which requires *bridging ties*[16] *between layers or groups* (my emphasis). Without the latter, the chasm between groups remains or grows wider. The problem as he understands it, is the existence not of diverse groups but of *disadvantage* (my emphasis) (Laurence 2009:2). Bridging ties addresses natural discrepancies as well as those caused by the system while disadvantage undermines social capital (solidarity) and group relations (Laurence 2009:2).

Problems of ethnicity, racism, social inequality and the exclusion of groups and individuals from opportunities, as well as the marginalisation of immigrants, are well-known and documented. These exist at all levels of society and its institutions. Invariably, they are linked in one way or another to the apartheid system and stand, as monuments to this doomed system, between the people of South Africa. It is clear from this list that

16 The ideas of bonding and bridging were first used by Putnam to distinguish between dimensions of social capital that affect social life differently.

material compensation alone cannot provide a sustainable solution, even if it had been possible to provide it as recommended by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC 1998). A case study by Fearon et al. (2009:287), which focuses on post-conflict Liberia, provides evidence of the limitations of 'development aid' in similar situations. It would seem that material-driven programmes tend to lead to further fragmentation as people struggle over the control of resources. This, it should be noted, is not the same as the transformation of the socio-economic structures.

An emerging vision should therefore first focus on national identity, which must consciously transcend, not ignore, ethnic, racial, economic and ideological barriers. Its emphasis should be on the proactive, that is, the end-result, as opposed to the reactive, that is, with the view to reversing the wrongs of the past. In other words, the question should always be: 'what kind of society do we want to have?' The Constitution is forward-looking, thus providing a beckoning vision to the youth and students who can make a difference. It creates an opportunity for a new beginning rather than a mechanism for the reversal of the past. In fact, this, according to Mandela (1994), is a mechanism for ensuring that the past will never visit the South African society again, that is, if the Constitution is allowed to provide guidance. Given this, the success of cohesion should therefore not be measured in terms of how close to each other the races have moved but whether at a national level, their detachment from the structures of privilege facilitates their contribution to the 'common good'. In Van Gennep's terms, this would be an indication that they had attained the level of a new, reintegrated person. This is what is meant by South Africans belonging to one country (not necessarily belonging to each other) – living for one country and being in pursuit of a common destination. Put sociologically, social cohesion should define the 'degree of consensus of the *members* (my emphasis) of a social group or the perception of *belonging* (my emphasis) to a common project or situation' (Casas 2012: 564).

The second focus of the fluctuating vision needs to be on fostering social inclusion. This is one of the recipes for national unity and identity. The opposite, exclusion, becomes an obstacle precisely because of the reaction

of the majority of South Africans to their systematic exclusion from the mainstream of social, economic and political life for almost five decades (see Bernstein 1998:172–173). In terms of the 1996 Constitution, inclusion now goes beyond race and ethnicity and covers gender, sexuality, physical challenges and nationality. It is therefore not surprising that the draft policy on inclusivity which is being mooted by the Department of Higher Education and Training is not just inclusive but 'all inclusive', covering every category one could think of (see DHET 2014).

Education has been singled out by some as both a problem and a solution in respect of inclusion and exclusion. According to Osler and Starkey (2011) it is responsible for exclusion in so far as it gives opportunity to some and excludes others. However, it is also inclusive because it can contribute towards the development of citizens who are fully integrated into society. In South Africa, it has played both roles and will continue to do so until an effective strategy that will bring an end to the current status quo has been developed.

In a more abnormal situation like that of South Africa, the situation is compounded by the deep-seated damage caused by the education systems which were designed to keep some at the bottom of the ladder and provide a ladder for others to ascend (See the Bantu Education Act of 1953, which was intended for this). This has implications for employment opportunities and income distribution. The great concern about skills development in South Africa is a legitimate one. However, the skills should not only be aimed at the labour market (cf. Green et al. 2003:455) but at building communities so as to change their socio-economic profiles.

The third focus of the vision should be on social development. By this I mean strategies to put people at the centre of development. If the vision for social cohesion is aimed at inculcating good citizenship, then an investment in people, that is, social investment, rather than social security is imperative. The latter is less sustainable than the former.

The foregoing discussion under different sub-headings provides enough items for a social development agenda in South Africa. However, this needs

a driver and there have not, thus far, been any successful vehicles for it. One of the possible vehicles is the student leadership, which with its support base provides the necessary critical mass. Advocacy campaigns are usually employed as a mobilising strategy.

Advocacy and student leadership

Student activists and student leadership in particular, enjoy a slightly different position from that of the youth in general. As individuals, student leaders are members of the society. However, as a group, student leadership constitutes one of the stakeholder groups of higher education which enjoy legal recognition (Higher Education Act 1997). Contrary to popular views (see Tabane et al. 2003;Khan 2011), student governance is broader than the Student Representative Council (SRC) but includes all the leadership in the sub-structures of the SRC, that is, the recreational structures, residence leadership, academic structures, and so forth. In other words, those whose leadership qualities and skills are recognised by the students are voted into leadership positions in various areas of university life.[17]

If the youth in general cannot make their voice heard in respect of social cohesion owing to the ways in which senior generations cling to comfort zones, student leadership will become advocates, taking advantage of the support provided by the student body. The two advantages of this group are their energy which comes with the zeal to change the world and their support base which provides a critical mass. They possess analytical skills to deconstruct and expose the pillars that support the comfort zones which prevent progress to the final stage in Van Gennep's model. Their primary role is to organise students around the issues of student life and governance. However, they are also expected to take the lead in matters of student social involvement by identifying issues and mobilising students around such issues (Bodibe 2012:10).Thus, they are expected to act as catalysts although this can only succeed if they themselves have attained the third level status, that is, the status beyond the chaotic stage. In other

17 I do not concur with the narrow interpretation of the Education Act of 1997 which confines student governance to just the Student Representative Council (see Khan 2011:14).

words, they ought to break ranks with the generations that are stuck in a *liminal* state and lead the country to a reintegrated state that is based on the values that are enshrined in the Constitution. The second advantage is that once the student leadership buys into the vision and is in turn able to sell it to the student body, embarking on advocacy campaigns often finds easy support.

However, it would be folly to think that student leadership is neutral despite a recent claim by the Student Representative Council of Rhodes University to the effect that it is neutral (SAFM 2015).They are usually long-haul vehicles of the interests or unfinished business of their principals. My earlier reference to a decentralised model of student leadership was intended to make the point that when different structures such as residences, societies, academic structures, etc. in a broad-base campus democracy produce their own strong leadership, it becomes difficult for the SRC, regardless of its political alignment, to further sectarian interests. Instead, it is forced to seek consensus. This is one step towards cohesion.

The South African vision which has yet to be implemented has three focal points, namely, the creation of a national identity, the reversal of structural imbalances and social investment. My experience in working with huge and divergent student populations is that starting with identity takes the process nowhere, whereas starting with social investment increases the chances of them finding each other around a common objective. It is in the process of pursuing a less threatening common objective that students begin to cohere and appreciate each other more. In most cases, something new results from such newly found solidarities. This has the potential to address the obstacles to cohesion and open the way to the final stage in the rites of passage model (also referred to as liminality in this article).

I have already referred to the work of sociologists and social psychologists in respect of definitions of social cohesion. I have also outlined an 'anthropological' model of the rites of passage which shed light on why an extra effort has to be made in order to get South Africans to move towards a point of cohesion. It has become clear that the South African situation is

compounded by a combination of privilege and race, a legacy of colonialism and apartheid with its structural imbalances, and that failure to address this effectively poses a threat to social cohesion. Our limited psychological knowledge tells us that students (mostly in adolescence) with their zeal to 'change the world' can play an important advocacy and agency role. It is not my intention to go into the details of the works of Erickson's which focus on a young person's development. My aim is only to highlight the need for a redirection of the students' energy as they seek to forge their own identities, away from the dilemma of the South African society which is not their creation, while they are still pliable. If a positive vision is inculcated in them, there will be hope for subsequent generations.

The history of the struggle against apartheid reveals what students are capable of and the impact that student campaigns that start small have on the nation and legislative processes. This goes back to the 1940s, in the days of Anton Lembede, to the times of the young Robert Sobukwe and Nelson Mandela, in the 1950s[18] and later, the much younger Abraham Tiro and Steve Biko, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, culminating in Tsietsie Gordon Mashinini[19] and the 1976 Soweto uprisings which precipitated the sustained rolling mass actions that ended with the release of Mandela from prison in 1990. It took a thinking, planning and visionary leadership to achieve this. The leadership diligently interrogated various theories and ideologies in order to decipher them for the 'masses' and they mobilized students around well-argued, substantiated and worthwhile issues. They would not, for example, have left talk about social cohesion to political leadership only but would have raised questions about whether the term means the same in both developed and developing countries (Mercado 2012:592), a question that has not been raised in the discourse on social cohesion in South Africa.

18 The three later went on to establish the Youth League within the African National Congress before Sobukwe proceeded to form the Pan Africanist Congress in 1959.

19 This generation was associated with the Black Consciousness Movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s before Tiro and Biko died at the hands of the apartheid security officials while Mashinini disappeared without a trace after the 1976 Soweto uprisings. However, this inspired rather than discouraged the students to pursue the cause of liberation.

The 1996 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, which is undergirded by a dream of a non-racial, non-sexist and democratic country (Mbeki 1995:87–95), has opened up the formerly closed society. All it needs is a student body that is united around campaigns to make it a reality. Political education around issues of democracy, economic justice, etc. is crucial in this process. However, those who move along these lines are instead frowned upon and ostracized by their fellow students who do not realize that they are trapped in a 'betwixt and between' space but could make a breakthrough in the current impasse if they allowed themselves to do so. There is an urgent need to raise leaders of a new South Africa who will think out of the box of the present 'chaotic' state.

There are campaigns such as the anti-marginalization of international students and citizens, non-discrimination along gender lines or sexual preferences, anti-racism, institutional transformation, democratisation of the campus, anti-materialism, political tolerance, economic justice and issues of morality.[20] While these campaigns are not prescribed in the Higher Education Act of 1997, students are usually keen to embark on them. Fine-tuned leaders find such campaigns worth pursuing as their contribution to matters of justice or fairness. Hence the importance of training them, empowering them with positive skills and content at the outset. The rest of the student body serves as the critical mass behind the leadership. Successful campaigns depend on this.

As Berger (1998) observes in the context of the broader society, a 'more cohesive society has a greater capacity to solve conflicts, as social cohesion facilitates putting together a greater number of normative, cultural and social resources into practice'. Who has said that students cannot be role-models of such a society?

20 Incidentally, the Moral Regeneration Movement (MRM) of South Africa has a Charter of Positive Values under whose banner all the mentioned concerns could be organised. There is a student chapter of the MRM which operates at some universities as well as in Soweto schools.

Conclusion

It is clear from the above discussion that social cohesion is not a straightforward term and that it is vague enough to allow various attempts to bring together sections, factions and fragments of communities under one umbrella. However, 'mechanical solidarity' seems to be a basic and common factor, despite the different approaches and permutations of the concept. Whether this observation would have been the same or not if the discussion was being conducted along the lines of 'developed', 'non-developed' or 'developing' countries is a concern for a different article. The focus of this article has fallen on highlighting some aspects of it and what role the students in South Africa could play in promoting it.

While young people are no longer the same in terms of their level of commitment to a cause to change the world or to better their society, other than themselves individually, a vision is already reflected in the pages of the Constitution. They only need to focus on an aspect or two at a time; alternatively, the national students' structure could ask each campus to appropriate an aspect for its context. This is working well with the Moral Regeneration Movement in the Soweto schools. It should work better with university students. The role of student leadership is to serve as catalysts on campus so as to ensure that such campaigns are taken up. More importantly, they are to monitor progress and conduct on-going evaluation so as to ensure gains rather than to digress from the focal point. There is no better way of describing advocacy at work. While the British have chosen, in their context, to make cohesion part of the school curriculum, South Africa will be the first country to use a popular medium, the students, to do this.

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