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Xenophobia in the 'Rainbow Nation': An Analysis of Intergroup Conflict in Contemporary South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Since the inception of democracy in South Africa, the nation has been touted as an example of racial reconciliation and harmonious diversity. However, the xenophobic violence that has plagued the state since 2008 and resulted in hundreds of fatalities reveals deep and ongoing intergroup divides. Dehumanizing rhetoric around immigration is propagated by both elected officials and the media, and non-natives are frequently characterized as 'parasitic' and 'criminal.' In this paper I suggest that the xenophobic violence observed in contemporary South Africa may be explained via a three-pronged analysis: the construction of an 'exceptional' South African social identity during the early years of democratic rule, the intergroup conflict instigated by job scarcity, and the mythologized scapegoating of migrant workers as an outgroup responsible for the lack of opportunity that persists despite majority rule.

INTRODUCTION

South Africa has been touted as the 'rainbow nation' in recognition of its diverse population and the largely peaceful integration of its various ethnicities in 1994, when the country achieved democracy. But despite the nation's dismantling of the apartheid system, there remain deep schisms between subsections of the population. South Africa's non-native population in particular has experienced widespread and frequently violent ostracism, predominantly at the hands of indigenous citizens.

Since 2008, hundreds of immigrants from African countries, as well as from east and southern Asia, have been killed in a combination of isolated incidents and organized raids[1]. In May 2015, non-natives across the country were endangered by xenophobic riots that left seven dead and thousands more displaced [2]. Only one individual has thus far been convicted of murder in relation to these attacks. As xenophobic rhetoric gains momentum in countries across the world, theoretical frameworks from social psychology provide an analysis of the mechanisms that underlie violence towards immigrants in South Africa. In analyzing xenophobia in contemporary South Africa, I suggest a three-pronged approach; I interpret the phenomenon as the product of a combination of nationalist sentiment, intergroup conflict imposed by high unemployment rates, and the mythologized scapegoating of a subordinate outgroup. An analysis and contextualization of xenophobia in contemporary South Africa is vital to understanding the forces that underly the phenomenon, and consequently to the development of government policy and public education that might counteract it.

1 https://www.groundup.org.za/article/do-immigrants-steal-jobs-south-africa-what-data-tell-us/ retrieved on 9/12/20

2 https://www.cnn.com/2015/04/18/africa/south-africa-xenophobia-explainer/index.html retrieved on 12/11/2020

SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY AND THE PITFALLS OF PATRIOTISM

One theory that serves to explain the roots of this intergroup conflict is Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1969; Tajfel et al., 1971). In 1994, after decades of notoriety for its implementation of the segregational apartheid system, South Africa experienced a largely peaceful transition of power and became a functioning democracy, prompting praise from nations across the world. A quote by Nelson Mandela, a leader of the African National Congress and the first democratic president of South Africa, sums up the sentiment at the time: "Sometimes it falls upon a generation to be great. You can be that great generation. Let your greatness blossom." Not only was South Africa the poster child of peaceful political transition and racial integration, but it also boasted Africa's largest economy at the time. National pride and hope were high.

Social Identity Theory posits that part of a person's self-concept derives from membership in groups that are of importance to that person. Under this theory, an individual may feel that what happens to their group reflects on and influences them personally (Augoustinos & Walker, 1995). Individuals are motivated to "strive for a positive social identity," and to belong to groups that are distinct from, as well as superior to, other groups. This desire for distinct and superior social identity was, for the majority of South Africans, fulfilled by identification with the newly defined "Rainbow Nation" or "New South Africa." Not only was South Africa a rare example of a postcolonial state that underwent a transition of power without large-scale civil conflict; it was also economically superior to other nations on the continent at the time. This phenomenon was captured in a study undertaken by Møller (1998), which showed that in the aftermath of the first democratic elections, levels of happiness and life satisfaction of formerly disenfranchised South Africans peaked, eliminating the 'happiness deficit' of black South

Africans as compared to white citizens under apartheid.

Social identity theory also serves to explain why black South Africans who engage in xenophobic violence identify themselves with their nation instead of their race. While in the majority of recent cases both aggressors and victims of xenophobic attacks are of black African origin, the attacker's hold a primary identification as 'South African,' which enables them to see other black Africans as opponents. This may be due to the negative public image often associated with black Africans as "poor" or in need of aid, whereas South Africa's relative prosperity has enabled a superior social identity—tied to nationality—to persevere. Steenkamp (2009) argues for what has become known as the 'isolation hypothesis'—that the isolation experienced during apartheid galvanized Afrophobia in contemporary South Africa. Steenkamp suggests that South Africans "do not see themselves as Africans" and they "perceive other African countries as war-torn zones," making it difficult for black South Africans to incorporate other Africans into their social group. This phenomenon contributes to the ingrained sense of 'otherness' South Africans feel towards foreign immigrants from the continent, which heightens outgroup derogation.

In her article "Locating Xenophobia: Debate, Discourse, and Everyday Experience in Cape Town, South Africa," human geographer Belinda Dodson locates the construction of a new, "nonracial" sense of South African national identity after 1994 as the site of the creation of a new oppositional "other," the foreigner or "non-South African" (Murray 2003; Peberdy 2001, Reitzes 2002). This "other" is most clearly manifested in those foreign Africans who have immigrated to South Africa, described by Murray (2003:460) as "the ultimate strangers—the new helots—within the social landscape of South African cities." Dodson and Murray point out that antiforeigner attitudes are understood as originating in black South Africans' attainment of the full rights and privileges of citizenship post-apartheid and their subsequent protection of those benefits against the perceived threat of infringement or usurpation by non-nationals (Murray 2003; Nyamnjoh 2006). This stands in line with Social Identity Theory, as a key aspect of a functioning social identity is distinctiveness—difference from and superiority to—an outgroup. With the construction of the South African national identity, there was a requirement for distinctiveness from the non-native immigrant group that existed within the nation's borders.

"This desire for **distinct and superior social identity** was, for the majority of South Africans, fulfilled by identification with the newly defined 'Rainbow Nation' or 'New South Africa'."

While feeling pride in one's social identity is by no means wrong in itself, Social Identity theory expands upon the pitfalls that this strong association of the self with a particular group can present. The Categorization-Competition Hypothesis holds that merely categorizing oneself and the other into an ingroup and outgroup may generate intergroup competition (Hartstone & Augoustinos, 1995). This categorization of people into ingroups and outgroups results in an ingroup favoritism effect, in which people tend to favor and protect their own group's interest against a perceived competitor group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). When extrapolated to a national scale, this effect may lead to an ingroup blaming the outgroup for a society's problems, and the intimation that intergroup contact is undesirable (Jackson, 2002). Holding closely to one's social identity may boost self-esteem, but this often comes at a cost to outgroup members.

However, research on social identity theory has determined that while people show favoritism towards ingroup members, this doesn't necessarily translate to aggression or animosity towards outgroup members (Brewer, 1979, 1999; Mummendey & Wenzel, 1999). In order for intergroup relations to escalate to the levels of violence and hatred observed in recent xenophobic attacks in South Africa, there must be other factors at play.

JOB SCARCITY — A REALISTIC CONFLICT

South Africa has been a hub for immigration since 1994. Its relatively strong economy and largely stable political climate attract migrant workers from all over the continent. But despite its status as Africa's largest economy (until surpassed by Nigeria in 2013[3]), the nation has been experiencing high levels of unemployment, making job scarcity a frequent cause of concern and conflict. During the years following the end of apartheid, unemployment rose substantially due to multiple economic and political factors including the repercussions of capital flight from the apartheid state, the legacy of the Bantu Education system, and the institution of labor market regulations that disadvantaged small enterprises (Nowak & Ricci, 2006). This deficit of jobs exacerbated pre-existing intergroup competition arguably latent in South African society, causing intergroup relations to move from ingroup favoritism to explicit outgroup hostility.

In conjunction with Social Identity Theory, Realistic Conflict Theory can be used to explain the violent reaction towards migrant workers witnessed in the late 2000s. Realistic Conflict Theory proposes that people attempt to maximize the rewards they accrue, even if this requires taking those rewards away from others (Taylor & Moghaddam, 1994). Consequently, people join groups in order to bolster their ability to claim rewards. This theory suggests that when different groups find themselves in pursuit of the same resources, they end up competing— resulting in dislike and prejudice directed at members of the outgroup.

In 2008, the year in which the first widespread outbreak of xenophobia occurred, the national unemployment rate was 29%[4]. The belief that immigrants are 'stealing jobs' or 'taking positions of power' that would otherwise go to native citizens has since become salient rhetoric in xenophobic attacks and riots. As predicted by Realistic Conflict Theory, this scarcity of jobs fuels anti-immigrant sentiment; a 2010 survey by the Southern African Migration Program found that 60% of South Africans agree with the state-

3 "Nigeria Economy". *nigeria-consulate-frankfurt.de.* Retrieved 12/10/2020.
4 https://www.news24.com/fin24/economy/just-in-sa-unemployment-rate-jumps-to-29-the-worst-since-2008-20190730/, retrieved on 10/16/2020

ment that immigrants are "taking jobs," whilst 55% think that they worsen crime, claims for which there is no evidence—studies have found that African immigrants are far likelier to be victims than perpetrators of criminal activity (Danso and McDonald 2001; Harris 2001).[5]   But while only 14.68% of international migrants are unemployed ,(much lower than the national average), studies have shown that immigrant workers are more often responsible for job creation than job "theft," as they often go into entrepreneurial business roles and engage in the informal economy. According to a recent World Bank study, self-employment accounts for 25% of total jobs among immigrants, compared to 16% for locals.[6]

While Realistic Conflict Theory and competition over jobs certainly play a role in the xenophobic attacks that have ravaged South Africa, this theory too is limited, as it fails to explain the historic deprivation and socio-economic realities experienced by the majority of South Africans which predispose them to intolerance of foreigners (Tella, 2016). Before the democratic vote of 1994, 80-87% of the population was subjugated by the discriminatory laws of the apartheid state. A large portion of the population experienced extreme poverty and were deprived of access to higher education and employment—as a consequence, South Africans take an unfavorable view of the employment of foreign workers who did not experience the dispossession of apartheid while native workers remain unemployed. However, migrant workers constitute a small fraction of South Africa's population—7.2% according to a 2019 survey, and significantly less in 2008, when the riots began[7]. Immigration is clearly not responsible for South Africa's 29% unemployment rate. This raises the question, are there other factors producing this large-scale reaction?

THE FAILURE OF THE "RAINBOW NATION" AND THE MIGRANT SCAPEGOAT

A theory which contextualizes the current intergroup conflict within South Africa's history of segregation, racism, nationalism, and exceptionalism is Glick's Scapegoat Theory (Glick 2002; 2005). Scapegoat Theory is rooted in a perception of group 'relative deprivation,' the lack of resources necessary to continue the lifestyle, diet, and activities to which an individual or group has become accustomed (Runciman, 1966). This sense of deprivation is relative, as it emerges from a comparison to social norms that are not absolute and generally differ depending on time and place. When a group perceives itself as relatively deprived, it searches for a cause of its deprivation, and in an attempt to maintain a positive social identity, an ingroup will often settle on an innocent outgroup as the cause of its problems.

The increase in unemployment rates following the end of apartheid, combined with an expectation held by many that democratic rule would lead to a vastly improved way of life, contributed to this sense of relative deprivation. Majority rule promised equality and opportunity for all South Africans—and yet, the majority of

black South Africans remain in poverty amidst growing unemployment. Given this reality of relative deprivation, as well as abject deprivation and poverty[8], South Africans sought an outlet for their frustration, and foreign immigrants provided an easy target (Tella & Ogunnubi, 2014). There are countless examples of this phenomenon throughout history, from the blaming of Christians for Rome's natural disasters to the blaming of the Jewish community for Germany's economic strife—and it is a phenomenon that frequently culminates in xenophobic violence.

> "Given this **reality of relative deprivation, as well as abject deprivation and poverty,** South Africans sought an outlet for their frustration, and foreign immigrants provided an easy target."

This serves to explain, in part, why animosity is directed towards other African migrant workers, while almost never towards European immigrants. This sense of relative deprivation is most commonly experienced by the lower-income black majority, as the white minority, which retained significant generational wealth, has experienced little in the way of lifestyle change, nor did white South Africans have expectations of lifestyle improvement. According to a recent study[9], 49.2% black South Africans are "crowded" into low paying elementary jobs such as domestic labor and plant/craft occupations, while white and Asian people are more likely to hold managerial and professional positions. This is due to numerous factors, including the apartheid regime's introduction of the Bantu Education act in 1953, a segregational law with the aim of funneling the black majority into manual, blue-collar jobs.

This lack of access to quality education, compounded by the failure of the democratically elected ANC to prioritize education or root out corruption in the Education Department[10], left a large subsection of the black population vying for a small number of low-skill jobs. As white European immigrants typically do not compete for these jobs, they do not experience the force of xenophobic feeling that is directed towards African migrant workers, who often arrive in South Africa with a 'blue-collar' skillset. White European immigrants also generally possess the means and social power to reside in gated neighborhoods and avoid situations in which they may face violence, unlike Zimbabwean and Malawian immigrants who generally reside in poorer neighborhoods and are more vulnerable to discrimination.

But why, one might ask, do South Africans not look inward to find the causes of economic strife and unemployment? One notion is

5 https://www.polity.org.za/article/unemployment-and-immigration-in-south-africa-2013-05-24 retrieved on 9/12/20

6 https://blogs.worldbank.org/africacan/empirical-evidence-shows-migrants-in-south-africa-create-jobs

7 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immigration_to_South_Africa retrieved on 9/12/20

8 While relative deprivation was clearly at play, there is also the force of basic poverty and the struggle to survive which fueled the frustration and violence of xenophobic attacks.

9 https://paa2008.princeton.edu/papers/80858 retrieved on 9/12/20

10 https://www.news24.com/news24/MyNews24/education-biggest-failure-of-the-anc-government-the-past-25-years-20190626 Retrieved 12/10/2020

that of South African exceptionalism; due to the post-1994 construction of a hyper-positive social identity, South Africans view South Africa as the 'richest' and most 'developed' African nation. As a result, South Africans are motivated to overlook internal and historical issues in favor of blaming an outgroup. On this subject, social psychologist Tshitereke has suggested:

> "In the post-apartheid epoch, while people's expectations have been heightened, a realization that delivery is not immediate has meant that discontent and indignation are at their peak. People are more conscious of their deprivation than ever before .... This is the ideal situation for a phenomenon like xenophobia to take root and flourish. South Africa's political transition to democracy has exposed the unequal distribution of resources and wealth in the country."

> (Tshitereke,1999: 4)

Though the most significant factors involved in South Africa's high unemployment rates are the legacy of apartheid's Bantu education, the failure of the education system, and long-standing economic and financial inequality, South Africans largely ignore these issues, and many have latched onto the idea that immigrants are the cause of the widespread job scarcity. This rhetoric preserves the positive social identity of the "Rainbow Nation" that emerged after apartheid ended in 1994.

The ideological theory of scapegoating best explains the facts of the case in South Africa, as well as its historical context. This theory proposes that dominant groups take up an ideology in which scapegoat populations can be blamed for the ingroup's relative deprivation and concerns (Glick, 2002; 2005). This ideology may also serve to promote the ingroup's positive social identity by providing an external group with which the ingroup can be positively contrasted. Glick suggests that there are various factors which make a subsection of the population vulnerable to being scapegoated: lack of power (which prevents effective resistance), visibility as an outgroup, and being stereotyped and disliked along axes that make it 'justifiable' to blame them for the ingroup's predicament.

All three of these factors apply to the non-native community in South Africa. As non-citizens (who often lack documentation), immigrants have fewer rights and protections than native South Africans. Also, the absence of communal structures and authority make it difficult for immigrants to voice concerns over their treatment. Although the majority of immigrants who have experienced violence are black Africans, and thus not always visibly distinct from black South Africans, various factors such as language, religion, and cultural practices mark them as distinctly 'other.' Mørris (1998) has observed that although the population of Nigerian and Congolese immigrants in South Africa is comparatively small, and that most are employed in the informal sector, they are nevertheless identifiable as foreigners because of their distinct physical appearance, dress, and lack of fluency in South African languages. These groups are also frequently stereotyped and discriminated against in the media and by public figures in ways that make them more vulnerable to prejudice and large-scale dislike.

SCAPEGOAT MYTHOLOGY

A key initiator of xenophobic uprisings in South Africa has been anti-foreigner rhetoric that conflated immigrants with criminality, as well as the use of dehumanizing terms to refer to non-nationals residing in the country. Migrant laborers have been labelled a 'human tsunami[11],' feeding into a general sentiment that foreigners move into the country in order to 'take all the South African jobs'. In the early 2000s, a derogatory term came into circulation to describe migrant foreigners: 'makwerekwere,' purportedly derived from the phonetic sound of foreign African languages. Crucially, the 2015 attacks followed a speech by Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini, in which he said:

> "I would like to ask the South African government to help us. We must deal with our own lice in our heads. Let's take out the ants and leave them in the sun. We ask that immigrants must take their bags and go where they come from."

> (eNCA, 2015)

This comparison of the outgroup to "lice" and "ants" is a clear attempt at dehumanization, in which the derogated others are compared to parasitic life forms. This form of mythologizing of the outsider as a parasite and therefore a danger to the ingroup legitimizes violence, as it requires that the outgroup be punished or eradicated in order to protect the health, status, and well-being of the ingroup.

In South Africa, this discrimination was bolstered by misinformation at the highest level of government; the post-apartheid government miss-quoted the number of undocumented immigrants at 9 million when the actual number was closer to 500,000[12], prompting undue concern about the presence of immigrants with the nation's borders. Again, in 1996, a government-sponsored study claimed that there were 2.5 - 4.1 million undocumented migrants in the country, despite the best statistical evidence suggesting that the real number was half that. Although the study was withdrawn due to widespread concerns about its methodology, it remains in the public consciousness and is frequently cited by government officials and news reporters. In this case, institutions like Witwatersrand University, which had the financial backing of the government, were leveraged to proliferate a myth (the idea that millions of migrants are flooding the country) that 'legitimizes' discriminatory behavior.

Similarly, a prominent anti-crime program named Operation Fiela, whose goal was to root out 'dangerous individuals,' was implemented in immigrant neighborhoods. Operation Fiela deported 700 people while only charging 150 of them with any particular crime. This connection of criminality to non-citizen identity produced further stereotyping and prejudice against immigrants, which served to bolster ideological scapegoating and xenophobic violence. South Africa's previous president, Jacob Zuma, infamously claimed that those "legally" in the country must be protected, suggesting that undocumented immigrants did not warrant the protection of the state—a speech act which aggravated the violence already being

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11 https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2007/09/05/report-dismisses-human-tsunami-migrants-claim retrieved on 9/12/20

12 Crush, Jonathan; McDonald, David A. (September 2001). "Introduction to Special Issue: Evaluating South African Immigration Policy after Apartheid". *Africa Today.* 48 (3): 1–13. retrieved on 9/12/20

inflicted on non-national communities.

Finally, the media has played a prominent role in distilling this mythology of the "criminal" or "thieving" immigrant within South Africa. Derogatory labels such as "illegal immigrants," "job steal-ers," "criminals," and "drug traffickers" are common in the pages of South African newspapers, and South African media corpora-tions have depicted particular nationalities as being associated with certain crimes, such as Nigerians with drug distribution and Con-golese with passport fraud. In their paper "Writing Xenophobia: Immigration and the Print Media in Post-Apartheid South Africa" (2001), authors Danso and MacDonald write that:

> "Highly sensationalized, Africanized and negative reporting of migration issues is generally in the form of superficial, statis-tics-happy articles that do little to inform the reader about the complexities of migration or how it fits with broader social, po-litical, and economic developments in the country/region."

In their review of depictions of foreign residents in the media, Dan-so and Macdonald found that 24% of articles referencing non-na-tionals used the word "aliens," while 25% used sensational head-lines such as "Illegals in SA add to decay of cities," and 9% used sensational metaphors in the body of the text. The authors also note that none of the major newspapers have journalists dedicated to covering issues of immigration, which contributes to the oversim-plification and ignorance propagated by media outlets. In combi-nation, these practices by the media industry serve to cement and circulate the idea of non-natives as dangerous, pervasive, and in-human, tropes which feed into the mythology of the criminal alien.

coalition are perceived similarity and whether the stigmatization is occurring along the same identity dimension, such as race. In South Africa, black people are the racial majority and racial stigma is not explicitly at play in the high unemployment rates present in South Africa. However, there are nevertheless persistent racist atti-tudes amongst white and Asian South Africans which are directed towards black people regardless of nationality, and both groups are impacted by the legacy of colonialization. Although the experience of unemployed or poverty-stricken black South Africans and the discrimination currently faced by non-native communities do not operate along the same axis, there are nevertheless the shared iden-tities of race and socio-economic status, and the shared experiences of racism and historical inequality, which may serve as the basis for mutual understanding and support.

While South Africa continues to experience xenophobia within its borders, the beginnings of this form of coalition-building are visi-ble, and voices are being raised in protest of violent and exclusion-ary attitudes. In 2015, 30,000 people took part in a march through Johannesburg in protest of a spate of xenophobia attacks[13]. They were led by the premier of Gauteng province, David Makhura, who told the crowd, "We will defeat xenophobia like we defeated apart-heid." Influential leaders such as Makhura may help to develop a new facet of South African identity: the idea that all black people within South African borders are united and depend upon one an-other, especially in the current moment. While further media rep-resentation, interrogation of our understanding of national identity, and education on prejudice and stereotypes are necessary to de-crease the prevalence of xenophobia, this is a first gesture towards tackling xenophobic violence in South Africa.

THE FUTURE OF INTERGROUP RELATIONS IN SA

The current violence directed towards non-natives in South Africa can be understood as the product of the construction of an 'excep-tional' South African social identity at the end of the apartheid re-gime, in conjunction with the real conflict imposed by job scarcity. However, the fact that immigration is not a significant contributor to unemployment, in conjunction with the virulent, dehumanizing rhetoric circulated about immigrants, points to a further cause of the violence being explained via Ideological Scapegoat Theory and the positioning of non-natives as a 'parasitic' outgroup that is re-sponsible for the poverty and lack of opportunity that persist de-spite majority rule.

One political avenue that offers hope for the future is that of stig-ma-based solidarity (Craig & Richeson, 2016). While Social Iden-tity Theory proposes that threats to social identity may provoke negative intergroup relations so as to bolster the ingroup's esteem (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999), as has so far been the case in South Africa, the promotion of a more coalitional and co-operative mindset may decrease this effect and instead empha-size solidarity in the face of shared hardship. An emphasis of the difficulties faced by both migrant workers and lower-income black South Africans may promote this form of solidarity, as shared ex-perience is associated with greater coalitional propensities among stigmatized groups (Cortland et al., 2015; Tedin & Murray, 1994). Important factors involved in whether or not groups will pursue

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13 https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-32432205, retrieved 3/7/2021

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