Racism out of fear of crime in South Africa and the complexity of discrimination through interdisciplinary qualitative research

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ABSTRACT

A qualitative ethnographic approach in South Africa finds a very low persistence of supremacist ideology while many admit adopting excluding attitudes towards blacks based on a high concern about crime, something akin to attitudes seen round the world towards foreing people or collectives thought to carry a greater risk to transmit coronavirus. The research highlights the complex nature of racism and exclusion in today's South Africa, in contrast with the basic aproach exposed in the governmental plan NAP that simplifyies the issue pointing to predemocratic times as the cause of the problem and the need of tackling poverty as the answer. Promoting qualitative analisis is going to be basic to understand the complexity of today's phenomenon in its bio-phsyco-social-cultural interrelated dimensions.

INTRODUCTION

This text is the result of a qualitative ethnographic work carried out in the urban areas of Johannesburg and Cape Town, and a rural area between Gauteng and Free State between November 2019 and January from 2020. 65 people were contacted according to their social profile, 14 of which interviewed in depth. Most of them from the white and coloured minorities expresed a big worry about crime and how it was affecting their attitude towards unknown black people.

At the beginning of the work upon arrival in the country as a foreigner, one quickly perceives the racial issue and its relationship with the country's social classes. While white, black, coloured (mestizo) and Indian people are seen among the upper, middle and working classes, there is a large underclass of informal workers or unemployed black people living in a high precariousness and considered by non blacks as a major source of crime, many of whom pointing at their colour as a most commont feature of the lawbreakers.

The crime issue is ubiquitous in South Africa in all kinds of settings; it is a worry that often came up from informants at first contact even before the ethnographer raised the subject. Anti-theft protections are visible in every property, something that carries a great expense for families, companies and institutions. Taking all kind of precautions is something common and constant stress get many to the extent of making plans to leave the country. Some discriminating practices are found in those precautions such as avoiding contact with unknown blacks a behaviour that comes, they say, out of fear of crime and not related to a supremacist ideology linked to their predemocratic period of history.

History, economy and exclusion

When addressing the issue of racial discrimination in South Africa, one must consider the country's particular history with a period of white minority rule that lasted until 1994 year of the beginning of universal democracy. Since then, the country

has undergone profound changes, extending the right to vote, eliminating institutionalized discrimination based on supremacist ideologies, and thus achieving a society with equal rights under the same law for all ethnic groups in the nation.

The two first decades of democracy and social changes went along an economic boom although the new wealth did not reach all social groups equally whereas an economic stagnation in recent years has reduced hopes of a rapid progress in reducing poverty. As mentioned before a large proportion of black people are today at the lower or excluded class many of them in large areas of poverty in the urban centers something that contribus to maintain the identification of black people with poverty and illegal activities.

In 2019 the South African government presents N.A.P. National Action Plan to combat racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, which focuses in poverty. The plan links poverty and discrimination both caused by historical pre-democratic rule, claiming then that the fight against poverty and old supremacist logics is the way to go. The goal is therefore to tackle the legacy of history rather than a taking a more comprehensive approach that included other possible current causes of discrimination, causes, dinamics and dimensions that can be best approached through qualitative ethnographic research.

Perception of crime and attitudes of exclusion

When addressing the subjectivities of the informants the great importance of crime in their lives emerges quickly with their testimonies about feelings of stress, adopting especial security mesures and taking precautions in interpersonal relationships. At another level, I sought to perceive in the speeches both reason and emotion being the feelings of insecurity and fear so intense and therefore so able to alter reason, as it is stated both from psycho-social and neuroscience fields[1,2]. Next I will expose the information gathered in both rural areas where the culture tends to be more tradicional and more cosmopolitan urban settings. Either context will often show similar worries, emotional thinking patterns and wider social and cultural issues to be addressed.

Boers farms, crime and racism

White farmers living inland South Africa are a collective exposed to a tense political debate about land distribution from an interethnic view. This particular population away from the city centers is also known to keep to a good extent a traditional culture with core values such as family and religion.

Regarding insecurity, farmers contacted in Free State and Gauteng consider themselves the target of a particular type of crime: the attacks on Boers farmers. A problem perceived to be increasing and caused by simple robbers (theft of livestock) and also because of racial and land redistribution ideologies. At the interviews the racial issue also appears by pointing out an incompetent government they can no longer trust as the lack of security forces and firemen show.

This lack of security is expressed based on first hand episodes of robberies and assaults in recent years. The most common tipe is the theft of cows, which they regularly count as annual losses. In response they say they have organized themselves via radio so that when an emergency occurs farmers from the area come in support, either in the presence of criminals or possible fires.

"Unfortunately we have to be alert and learn to handle weapons because we cannot expect a reaction in time from the police, in my own house we chased away thieves by shooting into the air (...) usually when cows are stolen you don't realize until it has happened " (Farmer, male, 30, white).

That concern grounded in actual cases of assaults on their own property or that of neighbors or relatives makes is described as of primary importance in their day-to-day life to the point of having come to consider selling the farm and emigrating. Regarding this, when asked why they have not done so they allege various reasons: from a decreasing value of property that does not ensure them enough money to start comfortably elsewhere to a reluctance of becoming employees after having been employers or the attachment to his family roots in those lands and a hope of a better future derived from his religious beliefs. When asked if they can think about how the situation could improve in the coming years, they find no rational reason for it, it is from their religiosity that they bring hope for improvement.

"God must have a good destiny for this country and we are part of it (...) we owe nothing to anyone, my ancestors bought this land back then, we have not stolen anything." (Farmer, man, 35, white)

The racial question related to crime arises when white farmers identify crime either with the current mismanagement of the country or pointing at color of people who commit crimes in their environment. On the other hand, when asked about the ethical behaviour of actual known people of that color, they undoubtedly recognize their worth as it is in the case of their own black employees.

Since they think that the ANC government works far from the interests of the whites, I asked about a possible government without base in one or another ethnic group but with honest and prepared people from all of them (trying to get the racial issue out of the debate). Their answer is positive showing that even when they identify ANC with a black background on the other hand they seemed to have abandoned the interest in a government run only by their own ethnic group.

The conection between acts of racial exclusion and fear of crime appeared in the precautions taken before strangers, attitudes and behaviours sometimes emphasized based on the color of the skin. In this sense, we find expressions such as the following ones:

"When you approached the farm this mornig if you had been black we would have been on alert and you would not have passed the gate without us making sure who you are" (farmer, woman, 52, white), "I have to get to know a black very much in order to let them in at home" (carrier, man, 46, white)," when we see unknown blacks near the farms we already call each other just in case " (farmer, man, 55, white)

Among those contacted, I collected descriptions of social problems that distinguished between whites and blacks as an over-generalization in two categories that assign a more civic behavior to the white group, although again it was an abstract type of thought that did not materialize in actual nearby people as it did with "the government" or "the thieves". Trying to bring about a different frame on civility based exclusively on ethics, I proposed to extend the subject to four categories,

"Would you agree there are good and bad blacks and good and bad whites? (Answer) Completely, I can tell you that my black employees and others I work with are well behaved and hard-working" (farmer, male, 55, white)

This attempt to reframe it is immediately accepted although as the interview progresses the previous two categories reappear as if in the case of an established habit that tends to over-simplify or something related to a emotional driven brain as stated by[2,3] neurologists that set the ground of the emotional intelligence that is widely in use at today's psychosocial disciplines. As they affirm when we face a dangerous situation and feel fear emotional brain circuits overtake reason driving action that may be the adaptive response, a process developed in human evolution.

Urban environments, insecurity and racial exclusion

The ghettos of Johannesburg and Cape Towns often linked to black people, poverty and crime are a particular problem of the large urban centers. The plan to fight poverty as the way to end exclusion assumes the link between poverty and crime but doesn't mention issues such as urban management to deal with the spatial elements that enhance exclusion, the presence of drug trafficking and organized crime in places highly excluded in every way where security forces have a difficult access.

Below there are testimonies collected from different urban social profiles about their perception of insecurity and their behaviors in this regard. Crime and the worsening of their standard of living tend to be seen by the white working class as their two main problems. The attempt to emigrate in the short or medium term, if given the opportunity, is common among the contacted individuals from this social group.

An employee indicates a maximum period of one to two years to migrate with his wife and son also commenting that many of his friends have already done so. The insecurity stands out again in ways that go from big risks to common small thefts.

"With current salaries it is very difficult for us. They (blacks) wash diapers and walk, we don't have these habits. It is already very difficult for us to pay the rent of a small apartment, and there is also the issue that this is no longer a safe place to start a family, they rob you even at the gym locker, there is permanent insecurity. " (Shop assistant, 29, male, White)

A truck driver explains the precautions that must be taken when driving on the coastal road, where you sometimes hire security escort and other times avoid the route completely. All this carrying an extra cost and a concern hard to asumme,

"It is difficult to live these days from your work, even with my wife also working. With one of my children with health problems things have gotten worse. I try to convince my wife to migrate to another country but she feels very much attached to her parents." (Lorry driver, man, 46, White)

The economy and insecurity come out again and again as major problems but also distorted logics that link insecurity and racism as shown below when I asked the same interviewee about the precautions he takes to feel more secure.

"I have two big dogs for protection apart from electric fencing and private security but we still don't feel safe (...) when we are not at home we avoid black people areas trying to keep a distance from them. Many parts of the city are very insecure, we move around white places. "

Others despite acknowledging the crime problem don't feel overwhelmed by it. A hotel employee points at the economy as his main worry instead,

"I do not feel so much threatened by crime but I do avoid conflict zones, the center also makes me annoyed with so many beggars. (question) -Do you identify insecurity with blacks? (answer) –I am not a racist but there are people from those (black) neighborhoods ready to kill when they go to rob in houses. I suppose that in no country are you safe (...) I am trying to emigrate to the United States but more than anything else because the salaries there allow you to live with dignity. " (Hotel front office, man, 42, White)

Among the white middle class, the feeling of insecurity also stands out along with their constant

precautions. With a better standard of living emigration is not always their goal though. Two young women from upper middle class neighborhoods in Cape Town tell about their perceptions of the country and decisions about their future.

"As soon as my younger brother finishes his studies we the whole family will move to Europe (…) yes insecurity is the main issue, we think we'll have a better future over there." (Sport events manager, 26, woman, White)

"I rule out leaving. This is my country. It is very hard, I lost a friend last week when his house was raided, I am having a very bad time but this is my country and I refuse to leave it." (Health professional, woman, 28, White)

It also showed common in this social class a complanining of insecurity along with the state of the economy and government performance managing social services and infrastructure. After collecting testimonies from the white middle class, I approached the South African minority called coloreds or mixed race. I found middle-class individuals in both urban centers visited, finding similar positions to those from the white middle class, with the particularity that among this group the majority did not consider leaving the country. They also expressed avoidance of black areas especially degraded suburbs. Some of them were less concerned about it, but most named insecurity as their main problem.

"Of course there is crime but it is a mistake to leave the country, we have to fight for it. The priority right now should be the drug addiction that is wreaking havoc. The fact that white people are leaving the country will clearly affect the economy but others will come so there is no need to worry too much." (Therapist, man, 53, colored)

A Muslim civil engineer shows sadness regarding the social situation, especially the lack of opportunities, crime and a drop in the educational standard.

"The educational level has dropped and with it the opportunities for graduates, some relatives moved to the Emirates (…) I am very concerned about crime. A war may soon break out between drug traffickers from the N2 zone here in Cape Town did you heard the news? Other black criminals have specialized in mugging Indian shops lately. If I were younger I would also emigrate. " (Civil engineer, man, 57, coloured)

Several contacted school teachers and heads of education said that the change I've been told about in the educational standards is not such, stating that the level is only less demanding with less advanced students because more students are included now than in other times and that the strategy is meant not to leave large numbers of students off the hook, trying instead to keep schooling the lowest performers.

Some of them with extensive experience in classroom-level education and educational management they feel closely attached to the country and its future. They have lived the path to democracy and the educational extension in the last decades. When asked about insecurity they greatly regret the financial investment they must make in their homes to feel better protected, living in middle class neighborhoods where most houses have been robbed at least once. One of the teachers suffered an armed assault at home the day I met her after I left.

Another useful perspective in this phenomenon exposed here is to know what is the experience regarding crime from the black population itself. If crime was racially motivated the aim of criminals would be non-blacks. Next there are some quotes from middle and working class black informants that state their point of view on crime who said to be victims of it as well as those already quoted above.

Some of them living in "difficult" neighborhoods could give us some insigths of a phenomenon in which crime motivators may not necessarily be related to poverty. A widespread addiction to illegal drugs emerges as a major part of the problem, and also possible consequences of a consumer society that encourages the purchase and display of products as a sign of personal worth.

A black office worker reminds me of the precautions she has to take against thieves. An office worker when asked about the kind of people she thinks are behind so much robbery and assault whether they are hungry people or not (extreme poverty), and who they tend to assault, answers:

"No one is safe from this, and it is not the poorest who are causing so many problems (…) they are not doing this out of hunger, they are the ones wearing brand clothes, expensive things, who do not want to work and the ones that spend the day drinking expensive alcohol and bragging out out there. " (Office worker, woman, 39, black)

The owner of a B&B also showed his surprise at the type of robberies and assaults so common in his town, unable to understand how they can break the law for even getting objects that are worth only a few rand.

"They jump over the gates with all their protections to take anything to steal say that old broken chair over there what can that be worth? You see your property being raided for the smallest thing. It must be totally desperate people I don't understand it" (B&B manager, man, 41, black)

These desperate acts are explained by others as caused by a high number of heroin addicts. I then interviewed a recovering long time heroin addict white in his forties who tells me about a world of addiction and misery highly widespread and related both

to robberies and to the large amount of beggars seen in the streets.

"Even here not my town I tell you I could get heroin in less than half an hour as it is highly available, there is much anywhere (...) a dose costs about 20 rands (1.3 € approximately) depending on the quality that's why so many are insistently asking for any money in the streets, with just that little cash they can have the dose they need so urgently. The vast majority of those you see asking for money on the streets do so to get their dose (...) of course a broken chair is worth it if they get for it even 10 rands(...) it is not only heroin many other drugs are taken as well". (Unemploied, man, 43, White)

When I show surprise about the low price of heroin he points at the privileged location of the country in the world sea routes well connected to Asia.

Insecurity as we see is an evil that affects South African society widely regardless of skin color or social class. We hear about its connections with poverty but also with drug addiction and other social influences like consumerism stressing the need to feel self value by getting products as signs of status, something that in a middle-income country is not at reach for most.

It has also been quite clear that the association between insecurity, depressed areas and black communites appears to be relevant in the excluding or racist behaviors from non-blacks. The South African government, for its part, through its plan against racist and xenophobic exclusion, focuses its objectives on the eradication of poverty.

Among the non-black participants in this research we find that although they do not agree with an racist ideology we do see among their security precautions the avoidance of black people. In some cases even some logics that try to legitimize that exclusion, separating themselves from the blacks as a whole based on concerns of insecurity. This kind of racism or simplifying thought that generalizes the action of some individuals to the group is also described by informants as something that is not the result of racism but of extreme precautions simply the result of an frightening situation that leads them to apply drastic measures.

Either way, we are faced with the act of encompassing an entire population based on the action of a (proportionally small) part of its members, something analoge to the formation of stereotypes, which as defined by[4] are "cognitive structures that contain the perceiver's knowledge, beliefs and expectations about human groups", therefore not based on a knowledge well-founded on facts but on simplifications. That brings about again the phenomenon of emotionally driven brain in which fear incites actions that bypass the reason, as stated by neuroscience. But let's now return to the South African government's plan against racism, xenophobia and related intolerances.

Is NAP a comprehensive approach?

The national plan presented in March 2019 as a guide of action of the central government on racial and xenophobic discrimination reads in his chapter 4 (p.21), under the title "what tears apart? Grappling with the fault lines" that the cause of discrimination goes back to the times when the black population lived without full rights of citizenship. The cause of inequality, poverty and housing problems is then located in the pre-democratic period, something that coming from the past has not been improved enough despite subsequent redistributive policies. It reads "Poverty, land, housing go hand in hand with racism, xenophobia", as well as an unequal distribution of land and the lack of adequate education for blacks also inherited from the past. That approach lacks an important focus in today's dinamics of exclusion.

In this anti-racism plan we find the central focus on poverty and the past in a way that implies that ending poverty means ending discrimination and racism. More specifically as an ideological problem we read in the pages 26-27 that "although not openly acknowledged, notions and beliefs of White supemacy still exist equally among some White and black South Africans (...) (need of) deconstructing and exposing the hollowness of racist beliefs strategy", again an effect of the country's past "heritage of racial discrimination continues to define race relations and integration" then it moves to propose a way of overcoming the problem through the "promotion of a sense of common belonging and a celebration of diversity".

This paper does not intend to ignore the effects that a past of discrimination may still cause today but it wants to stress the need to expand the analysis of exclusion to all its complexity that means towards each of the dimensions that appear involved in current discriminatory acts, apart from those inherited to get further by adding its varied dynamics that emerge from bio-phsyco-sociocultural contexts of human behaviour.

As noted above, understanding human behavior in its bio-psycho-social complexity includes paying attention to phenomena such as alteration of cognition through emotional dragging that arise in the face of perceived dangers, something that leads otherwise sensible people to end up acting guided by fear and stereotypes.

From a more sociological point of view, the statement that poverty relates to past exclusion may be also extended in the other direction analyzing racism as something arising from the perception of poverty as something culturaly negative. Furthermore, we cannot limit ourselves to the analysis of poverty, the perception of crime, linked to poverty or not, has a clear conection with racial and non-racial excluding actions as I am arguing. Drug addiction not necessarily linked to poverty is linked to crime, as well as the need of people to get status signs in the culture of a consumer society that transmits value to people depending on what they can

buy and show; the consumerist culture of modern societies as[5] puts it.

The influence of late modernity worldwide spread has come along a liberal capitalist ideology that adds another source of low self esteem for many, that is, its discourse of the supposed existence of equal opportunities that justifies the actual inequality implicitly on the basis of a different effort or personal capacity. Getting products as signs of success can then be a way out of the frustration and feeling of failure. Next let's go back to the relationship between perception of crime and exclusion from the cognitive-emotional field.

Crime as trigger of emotional thinking and discrimination

To understand more in detail the dynamics of emotional drag that can lead to avoidance and exclusion, let's review some of its foundations from the postulates of emotional intelligence, as [1]teaches us:

 "The more intense the feeling the more dominant the emotional mind becomes and, consequently, the more ineffective the rational mind" (p29) "One of the drawbacks of this system is that it has become obsolete on many occasions today, especially in today's changing social world." (p46)

To see this related to an everyday situation when we may respond emotionally to signs of danger let's think about walking on the street and making the change of sidewalk in the presence of some kind of people. You feel a danger having little information and time to check it and our emotional brain takes over.

But there could be another step to develop ideology out of it, something that might be the result of a repeated conflict between reason and emotion finally resolving to reach an ideological compromise, an assignment. This hypothesis stems from the difficulty that usually exists in accommodating contradictions or paradoxes in many people, even though the compromise brings another one: "I am not a racist but I take precautions when I am in a place where there are many blacks." The known: I'm not … (racist, xenophobic, intolerant…)… BUT … (statement of intolerance)

Theese days we have another example of racial, xenophobic exclusion or irrational discrimination towards a generalized whole group as we see what happens round the world with the attacks on foreigners or any social group thought to bring a greater risk or transmiting coronavirus. Chinese people were rejected at the beginning of the spread in other countries then foreigners have been rejected in China, even health personnel have been avoided or expelled from a place at different locations, as an example: "Doctors and nurses at Melbourne hospital racially abused over coronavirus panic" (The Guardian).

How can a complex analysis of discrimination help us?

The schooling and wider educational system is one of the areas where we can work to promote a detailed view of the phenomenon while also enphasizing how stereotyping works contrasting ideas with facts. An emotional intelligence program would address the bio-phsicological dimensions brought about here involved in the racist behaviour linked to the fear of crime and stereotyping, further, an understanding of our own society through the impact of consumerism and neoliberalism in today's culture is relevant and necessary, with the help of social anthropologists and sociologists. That teaching can be expanded to the media and working environments where emotional intelligence programs are starting to be popular these days.

We can educate about these emotional and cognitive processes through those emotional intelligence programs and the influx of social environment drawing from social anthropological knowledge, so that people may be able to be aware of these processes it while they are happening. This can achieve that those often unconscious processes do not develop being one unaware of them, and using a computer analogy get installed.

We must consider the true social and cultural impact of crime, in terms of its power to alter trust as well as the social relations, the creation of stereotypes, racism and exclusion, elements that go beyond the immediate physical or material damage. We must remember the relationship between public housing policies, urban planning and crime, a wrong combination of them increasing social degeneration and exclusion in every way.

Conclusions

A qualitative ethnographic approach in three social South African contexts, two urban and a rural area shows the great importance of crime in the lives of the contacted inhabitants. Also it is also perceived that there is an association of criminality with black people, which has led to avoidance and racism by non whites emotionally guided by continued concern and fear. Specifically in large cities the spatial distribution of poverty with large areas of excluded black citizens is found to make a association of black people with crime.

The testimonies collected from non-black individuals express a disagreement with supremacist ideologies from the past but at the same time recognize extreme precautions regarding unknown blacks, something driven by fear that often results in over generalization and/or estereotiping followed by avoidance behaviours that can be a form of racism.

The current governmental plan against racism and xenophobia focuses on poverty as the central problem something

inherited from previous institutional discrimination. However, as the analysis of testimonies and observation shows it is necessary to extend the fight against racism and all kinds of social exclusions to the wide complexity of the phenomenon. Discrimination as a product of the political past is only part of the picture and misguided as the only approach so it is needed an extensive analisis that includes cognitive-emotional dynamics as well social and cultural ones.

So poverty must be addressed in order to tackle discrimination but crime by itself should be another major focus being something not necessarily linked to poverty and often related to a major drug addiction problem that also must be a priority of the authorities. Emotional-cognitive dynamics so relevant here can be worked through emotional intelligence programs at educational centers and in the media, expanding them in bussines contexts where they are more and more popular these days for its many benefits for business environments. The social and cultural dimensions of exclusion are well studied by social anthropologists and other social disciplines that can be brought to a program to teach about how society assigns value to the individual in terms of their purchasing power or the feeling of failure for being poor in the society of opportunities.

Analyzing extensively the phenomena of exclusion from its multiple dimensions will allow us to tackle the problem more diligently and thus be in a position to promote social awareness at all levels beyond the necessary fight against poverty. For this, it is necessary to carry out continuous qualitative studies of an ethnographic nature beyond the usual surveys that show us a general scenario but do not go deep enough into its processes and causes.

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