

IDENTIFYING LABELS AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN THE NEW SOUTH AFRICA A Retrospective Study

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This article examines the relationship between political change and university students' sense of identity in South Africa during a 10-year period. Prior to 1994, identity in South Africa was largely based on ethnicity and language; is this still the case today? The new government has not only forced people to face changes in political issues but also changes in identification issues. Nowhere are these issues more striking than in an institution of higher learning, where students from diverse ethnic backgrounds are unified by a similar goal—an education. In an attempt to address the issue of identification, a survey was conducted at Rand Afrikaans University in Johannesburg, South Africa, to determine if the change in government is causing a change in how people perceive themselves.

Keywords: *South Africa; language; identity*

South Africa is a multiethnic country. Among the principal groups are Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, Tswana, Venda, Ndebele, Tsonga, Swasi, Pedi, Colored, Afrikaner, English, and Indian. Prior to 1994, South African citizens, for the most part, identified with one of these groups (Jung & Seekings, 1997); however, in the new South Africa, identity has become less defined. Before 1994, apartheid provided a classification system for its citizens (and a way to maintain power and status; Collier, 1998), so they knew which identifying labels they could lay claim to. *Labels* here refers to those ethnic or cultural groups with which people identify. Some people refer to themselves as “South African,” whereas others (including Whites) refer

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to themselves as “African.” Can a White person born in Africa be called an African, or should the identifying labels used during apartheid also be the labels used after apartheid? Further complicating this question is whether people’s own sense of identity meshes with the way others view them. By imposing identification labels, the government provided its people with an identity. As South Africans move from a society based on “pigmentocracies” to one based on a “multiracial democracy” (Kennedy, 1999), however, they are not so sure which identification label to claim.

This study seeks to determine which identifying labels South African students claim after the fall of apartheid. The study focuses on students within an institutional setting of higher education as a means of providing insight into how the larger South African population may identify themselves. An institution of higher learning was selected because of the unique characteristics of the student population: They were born into the old system of apartheid; they had witnessed the transition from the old system of government to the new system of government, at an age that they could appreciate the magnitude of such a transition; and they will help to shape the new South Africa as members of the educated class. These students can help to provide a model for how populations, which have been segregated, view themselves when they become integrated, as these students have done in the university setting.

IDENTITY WITHIN THE INSTITUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The notion of identity is very much a conundrum because there is no one definition that truly captures the essence of this concept and all of its manifestations and because it is continually being explored, examined, and experienced by people at the national, local, institutional, and individual levels. Often, depending on the setting, a different identity may emerge. Thus, it may be that “who I am” depends, to an extent, on “where I am” (Carbaugh, 1996). Yet, despite the diversity of one’s identity, there usually is an overarching identity that an individual lays claim to. This identity is often

based on one's ethnic heritage and native language, although it also can be affected (in terms of group membership) by variables such as age, gender, religion, and socioeconomic group. For the purpose of this study, identity is about belonging to a group that provides people with a framework with which to articulate who they are. In this case, it is a community of students within the institutional setting of higher education.

In fact, institutions of higher learning have been the focus of much of the postapartheid research on identity. Thesen (1997) looked at the discrepancy between institutional categories used to identify students in higher education and the way students identify themselves. Jenkins (1994) found that label appropriation soon becomes internalized by the labeled groups to the extent that their "own senses of identity [are] mediated by the labels which had been ascribed to them." The relationship between individual conception of identity and state [and institutional] constructions of identity in a transition society is especially worthy of investigation in educational settings, where new social meanings are created, generating new social roles (Bock, 1982). A student's sense of personal identity in South Africa today is continually being renegotiated to the extent that the institutional categories and self-defining categories have the opportunity to slowly merge together. So perhaps a good place to seek answers to the identification problem is within the very institutions that often impose them.

METHOD

RESEARCH SITE

This study was undertaken at Rand Afrikaans University (RAU), a diverse institution of higher learning located in Johannesburg, South Africa. The university was established in 1967 for Afrikaans-speaking students in the greater Johannesburg area. In the early 1990s, however, RAU transformed from a predominately Afrikaans-speaking university to one intended to attract a diverse student population. The university now enrolls 20,000 students at both

the undergraduate and graduate levels, from every ethnic and language background in South Africa.

SURVEY DESIGN AND PARTICIPANTS

A survey questionnaire (see the appendix) was designed to tap into the students' sense of identity in the postapartheid era. A survey design was chosen in this investigation because this type of data collection procedure offers the advantages of economy of design, a rapid turnaround in data collection, and the ability to identify attributes of a population from a small group of individuals (Babbie, 1999). The survey requested the following information: demographic and language background information, as well as categorical scales on identity, rating scales on the importance of language and other variables on identity, and a rank-ordered scale on the defining characteristics of identity. A cover letter, explaining the purpose of the survey, and a consent form, which was detached from the survey upon signing it to ensure anonymity, were attached to the survey. Once permission was obtained from the students, they then proceeded to answer the 14 questions in the survey questionnaire. The purpose of the survey design in this study was to determine if the dramatic changes that occurred in South Africa in 1994 included a change in ethnic or cultural group identification. The survey was administered in four separate classes to 145 students (both undergraduate and graduate) enrolled in education courses offered within the Faculty of Education and Nursing at RAU.

RESULTS

The data were analyzed descriptively to establish trends. Although the sample size is small, the data do, nevertheless, reflect trends that are revealing. All 11 official languages are represented, as are a variety of age groups and educational levels among the student participants (see Table 1).

TABLE 1
Characteristics of the Students Who
Participated in the Survey (N = 145)

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>%</i>
Native language/fluent language	
English	44
Afrikaans	8
Zulu	11
Sesotho	12
Tswana	6
Xhosa	1
Ndebele	2
Venda	2
Swati	2
Tsonga	5
Sepedi	6
Other	1
Age (years)	
18-20	18
21-24	19
25-30	15
31-40	34
41-50	13
50+	1
Sex	
Male	21
Female	79
Academic status	
Undergraduate	19
Postgraduate (honors)	68
Master's	13
Major	
Education	90
Other	10

English is the most widely spoken language (44%) among this group of students, followed by Sesotho (12%) and Zulu (11%), respectively. The most representative group of students by age was the 31- to 40-year-olds (34%), most of whom were in their honors year, which is the first year of postgraduate study after the 3-year undergraduate degree. Ramphele (1999) explains that the majority

of Black graduate students, especially, tend to “come from an older age cohort.” Furthermore, of these 145 students, 111 were female (79%) and 29 were male (21%) (5 students did not indicate their sex). The majority of the participants (90%) were education majors, whereas 10% of the students listed a variety of other majors.

Table 2 illustrates the perceived identity of these students in 1990, 1994, and 2000 as well as how they believe they will identify themselves in 2010.

With regard to one’s sense of identity in South Africa, any movement (or lack thereof) during the past decade appears to be dependent on one’s ethnic or cultural heritage. What is most striking is that there has been virtually no movement among the African peoples. When asked about their ethnic identity, Africans (who claimed a mother tongue in Zulu, Sesotho, Tswana, Xhosa, Ndebele, Venda, Swati, Tsonga, or Sepedi) identified themselves (and believed they would continue to identify themselves) as “African” in 1990 (24%), in 1994 (transition—26%), in 2000 (26%), and (projected) in 2010 (26%). Despite the fact that there is no discernible trend in the population who claim an African-based language as their native tongue, the slight change that did take place occurred in 1994, during the time of transition in government. Not only was this a turning point in the history of South Africa, but it was also a turning point in terms of identity stabilization within the African people. From 1994 to the present, speakers of the nine official African languages who participated in the study identified with their own ethnic group and were willing to articulate this identity: Whereas 54.5% of the Zulu speakers referred to themselves as African in 1990, 64.3% did so in 1994; whereas 75.0% of the Tswana speakers considered themselves to be African in 1990, 85.7% did so in 1994; and whereas 50% of the Venda speakers considered themselves to be African in 1990, 100% did so in 1994. There is a newfound prestige in being African; the speakers of the nine official African languages perceive themselves as being African and want to be perceived as being African.

Whereas the African identity remained fairly constant, there appears to be a shift in identification labels—from an ethnic label to

TABLE 2
Identification Over Time (in percentages)

	<i>1990</i>	<i>1994</i>	<i>2000</i>	<i>2010</i>
African	24	26	26	26
South African	54	60	64	68
Afrikaner	1	1	0	0
Colored	12	8	6	4
Indian	9	5	4	2

a national label—among the non-African language speakers. The percentage of students within this group who identified themselves as South African has steadily increased since 1990: 54% in 1990, 60% in 1994, 64% in 2000, and (projected) 68% in 2010. This movement toward a more unified South African identity has increased by 10% in the span of 10 years, absorbing many of the Afrikaner, Colored, and Indian people. Among the non-African language speakers who claimed to be South African, English speakers identifying themselves as South African rose from 63.0% in 1990, to 77.2% in 1994, to 81.0% in 2000, to (projected) 83.0% in 2010; and Afrikaans speakers identifying themselves as South African rose from 45.5% in 1990, to 54.5% in 1994, to 72.7% in 2000, and to (projected) 81.8% in 2010. Furthermore, the number of students who claimed a Colored identity in 1990 (12%) decreased to 8% in 1994, 6% in 2000, and (projected) 4% in 2010; and the number of students who claimed an Indian identity in 1990 (9%) decreased to 5% in 1994, 4% in 2000, and (projected) 2% in 2010. The trends show that both the Colored and Indian populations are moving away from their “ethnic” identity and moving toward a more national and inclusive South African identity.

Of particular interest are those students who claimed an Afrikaner identity in 1990; they no longer make that claim even though 8% claimed Afrikaans as their mother tongue, the university was primarily Afrikaans just a few short years ago, and the medium of instruction is still Afrikaans (along with English). RAU was established primarily to serve the Afrikaans-speaking community, and a quarter of the total student population (and 55% of the White popu-

lation) continues to be (White) Afrikaners. Yet, despite the strong influence of Afrikaans within the country, within the university, and within the classroom, only 8% of the participants in the survey claimed Afrikaans as their native language and no one identified himself or herself to be an Afrikaner.

Table 3 compares the students' perception of their identity in 2000 with their perception of how they believe the government would identify them, how their fellow classmates would identify them, and how they believe their mothers would have identified themselves.

In response to the question asking how they believed the government would categorize them, the students overwhelmingly (80%) felt that today's government would identify them as South Africans, whereas 9% said the government would identify them as African, 6% said they would be identified as Colored, and 5% said they would be identified as Indian. The students also believed that classmates would see them somewhat differently than the way the government sees them: 59% believed that their classmates would see them as South African; 24% believed they would see them as African, 0% believed they would see them as Afrikaners, 9% believed they would see them as Colored, and 8% believed they would see them as Indian. The data also show a similarity in trends in both the Colored and Indian populations (see Table 2). These two groups believed that fellow classmates would still identify them in the same way that they (the participants) believed their mothers would have identified themselves: 11% of the people thought that their mothers would identify themselves as being Colored, and 9% of these same people believed that their fellow students would consider them to be Colored as well. Likewise, 8% of the students thought that their mothers would claim the label of Indian, and 8% of these same people believed that their classmates would label them as Indian too. This mismatch in the way people identify themselves and the way they believe others identify them may be at the very heart of the identification question in South Africa. Who truly determines identity, one's self or others? It may be that in many unconscious habitual ways, the old categories of identity are being

TABLE 3
Participants' Perceived Sense of Identification Compared
to How Government Would Identify Them, How
Others Would Identify Them, and How Their Mothers
Would Identify Themselves in 2000 (in percentages)

	<i>Student's ID</i>	<i>Government ID</i>	<i>Others' ID</i>	<i>Mother's ID</i>
African	26	9	24	31
South African	64	80	60	46
Afrikaner	0	0	0	4
Colored	6	6	9	11
Indian	4	5	8	8

reinforced, although these “ethnic categories are neither natural or immutable” (Marks & Trapido, 1987).

To determine how much movement in terms of identity perception has taken place over a generation, a question was asked concerning how these students believed their mothers would identify themselves. The perceived identity label of these students' mothers by the students suggests that there has been some movement from one generation to the next, especially in terms of those who claim a South African label: 31% of the students stated that their mothers would identify themselves as African (compared with 26% of the students who claimed that identity); 46% believed that their mothers would identify themselves as South African (compared with 64% of the students); 4% believed that their mothers would identify themselves as Afrikaner (compared with 0% of the students); 11% thought that their mothers would claim a Colored identity (compared with 6% of the students); and 8% thought that their mothers would identify themselves as Indian (compared with 8% of the students).

The participants also responded to a question concerning their language use, given the primacy of language in South Africa and because languages carry “a range of social perceptions, attitudes, and goals” (Ndebele, 1994). During the apartheid years, linguistic cleavages (Eastman, 1990) created obstacles to communication

among the South African peoples. Language was inextricably tied to identity, serving both to unify a particular group of speakers and to separate this group from other groups of speakers. Table 4 shows the level of consciousness in language choice in various settings.

Table 4 confirms a link between language and social setting. The more formal the situation, such as that of an academic institution, the more conscious one is of language choice and of language use: 29% of the students were very conscious of their language and 22% even changed their language use in certain settings. These findings suggest that language is, indeed, very important to people in South Africa and that people may alter their language in various settings to be perceived in a certain way. Norton Peirce (1995) contends that "language is not conceived of as a neutral medium of communication but is understood with reference to its social meaning" (p. 13). This point is supported by the data. In contrast to the strong trend of conscious language choice in the two right columns, the two left columns show no such trend. Those people who are not too conscious of their language choice or who are not at all conscious of their language choice when speaking in different situations make the transition between various settings rather easily: If interactions are in one's native language, then the transition from setting to setting is not difficult and, therefore, often not conscious.

The survey also sought to determine other characteristics students believed affected identification in addition to language. In Table 5, the students rank ordered characteristics often found within social science research (Babbie, 1999). The participants could select more than one characteristic as most important down to least important for any given characteristic, which is why the percentages do not sum to 100.

The participants prioritized the above characteristics in defining one's identity. Again, reinforcing earlier survey data, language was the most important characteristic in defining oneself. The second most important characteristic, according to the participants, was race, which has been the cause of friction in South Africa for generations. Some students believed race is still a major issue, and some believed that it is not very important at all. One must wonder whether those students who put race last in the survey are people

TABLE 4
Consciousness of Language Choice in
Various Settings (in percentages)

	<i>Not Conscious</i>	<i>Somewhat Conscious</i>	<i>Very Conscious</i>	<i>Consciously Changed</i>
Casual setting	57	21	9	13
School setting	41	16	28	15
Formal setting	31	18	29	22

TABLE 5
Defining Characteristics of Identity (in percentages)

	<i>1 (most important)</i>	2	3	4	5	<i>6 (least important)</i>
Ethnicity	21	15	29	8	11	16
Race	24	15	13	14	8	26
Religion	20	9	9	15	19	29
Language	30	19	7	19	11	14
Gender	13	16	14	9	19	29
Socioeconomic status	15	9	11	10	11	45

who never had to worry about race or whether they truly believe that in the new South Africa, race should no longer be an issue. As the table shows, the characteristic of least importance among the majority of these university students is socioeconomic status. It seems that status does not play an important role in the lives of these matriculated students. They have a strong sense of who they are, and their status within the university has very little to do with it. However, status is important in friendships. The participants indicated, as shown in Table 6, that a similar socioeconomic status, race, and language are the characteristics that most of them share with their friends. Thus, whereas socioeconomic status is not very important in determining one's own identity, socioeconomic status is very important in a friend's identity.

TABLE 6
Do You Share These Defining Characteristics of
Identity Within Your Friendships? (in percentages)

	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
Socioeconomic status	65	35
Race	63	37
Language	62	38
Ethnicity	54	46
Religion	50	50
Geographical region	50	50

Table 6 indicates that among university students, friendships, socioeconomic status, race, language, and ethnicity are crucial, whereas religion and geography play a somewhat less important role. Generally, people feel most comfortable with those who share similar attributes.

The final question (see Table 7) sought to determine if the students believed that any perceived limits in the new South Africa were based on one's identity.

Table 7 indicates that the participants overwhelmingly believed that a person's identity does place limits on both occupational opportunities (73%) and opportunities within the government (72%). In terms of education, 54% believed that one's identity places limits on opportunities whereas 46% did not believe so. For travel, 38% believed that travel is affected by one's identity whereas 62% believed that it is not.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The students who participated in the survey were in one university, in one part of South Africa, and (primarily) of one gender and one major. Yet, despite the skewed nature of the participants, the information gleaned from their responses cannot be discounted, as it invites continued dialogue on postapartheid identity, and it invites continued research in other parts of the country, in other uni-

TABLE 7
Imposed Limits Based on Identity in the
New South Africa (in percentages)

	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
Educational opportunities	54	46
Occupational opportunities	73	27
Government opportunities	72	28
Travel opportunities	38	62

versities, and in other majors. The data indicate that there have been some important trends with regard to identification labels since 1994.

First, the majority of the African students have maintained their identity labels. Those who claimed an African identity prior to 1994 continue to do so today with very few exceptions. The African people, especially, identify with the new African-ruled nation in the African continent. This identity maintenance among the African people is further heightened because all the other groups indicated some changes in their identity perception since 1994: The majority of these students embraced a South African identity, not only to reflect movement toward a new, inclusive South Africa but also to reflect movement away from the categorical shackles of the old South Africa.

Second, no matter which identification label one uses, it is strongly tied to one's native language, followed by race, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, and gender, respectively. According to Weedon (1987), "Language is the place where actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested. Yet, it is also the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is constructed" (p. 21). Thus, just as language was crucial in ascribing identity during the apartheid years (Makoni, 1996), it is still the primary means of characterizing a person's identity. During apartheid, language was seen as a "boundable, boxable and homogenisable phenomenon" (p. 262). South Africans do not necessarily see themselves as

“boxed in” to a particular language; however, the findings of this study do suggest that language still is inextricably tied to identity. In fact, 90% of the students believed that language is deeply ingrained in their sense of self.

Still, yet another finding emerged from the data with regard to language. When asked which and how many languages they were fluent in, more than a third of the students claimed fluency in three or more languages, one of which, at least, was an African language. Of these multilingual participants, three fourths of them claimed an African language as their mother tongue. Thus, the majority of the multilanguage students who participated in this study are not only of African descent, but most of them know at least one other African language, as well as English and/or Afrikaans. In contrast, those students who claimed a mother tongue in English and/or Afrikaans do not speak any African languages fluently.

Finally, the struggle for identity within a pluralistic society must begin with one’s self. For the South African people to build a new sense of community, they need to negotiate their notions of identity both within themselves and within their new, shared world. Nowhere is the negotiation process more effective than within education because education can function as the single most influential force for ameliorating social conflict and directing social change (Bock, 1982, p. 80). Students are at the forefront of reaffirming or renegotiating their identities, and as they do so, they are establishing new trends in the new South Africa.

APPENDIX South African Survey

Please put an X in the appropriate space:

Year at university in July 2000:

1st _____ 2nd _____ 3rd _____ 4th _____ Master’s _____ Ph.D. _____

Major at university: _____

Sex: Male _____ Female _____

Age: 18-20 _____ 21-24 _____ 25-30 _____ 31-40 _____ 41-50 _____ 51 or older _____

Native language (mother tongue):

English___ Afrikaans___ Zulu___ Sesotho___ Tswana___
Xhosa___ Ndebele___ Venda___ Swati___ Tsonga___ Sepedi___
Other_____

Languages spoken fluently (check off all that you speak):

English___ Afrikaans___ Zulu___ Sesotho___ Tswana___
Xhosa___ Ndebele___ Venda___ Swati___ Tsonga___ Sepedi___
Other_____

Please put an X in the space that best reflects your thoughts and feelings:

1. If someone asked you about your ethnic identity, how would you respond?
I am a(n) African___ South African___ Afrikaner___ Colored___
Malay___ Indian___ Other_____ (please specify)
2. If someone asked you about your ethnic identity during the transition of government in 1994, how would you have responded to the question?
I am a(n) African___ South African___ Afrikaner___ Colored___
Malay___ Indian___ Other_____ (please specify)
3. If someone were to have asked you about your ethnic identity 10 years ago, during the time of Apartheid, how would you have responded to the question?
I am a(n) African___ South African___ Afrikaner___ Colored___
Malay___ Indian___ Other_____ (please specify)
4. If someone were to ask you about your ethnic identity 10 years from now, how do you think you will respond?
I am a(n) African___ South African___ Afrikaner___ Colored___
Malay___ Indian___ Other_____ (please specify)
5. If your mother were asked about her ethnic identity, how would she respond to the question?
I am a(n) African___ South African___ Afrikaner___ Colored___
Malay___ Indian___ Other_____ (please specify)
6. If you were asked about your ethnic identity by a South African professor at your university and by a non-South African professor from a university outside of South Africa, would your response be the same or different?
Same___ Different___
If different, how would your responses differ?

7. If you were to apply for a driver's license or a passport, how would the government classify your ethnic identity on these documents?
African___ South African___ Afrikaner___ Colored___ Malay___
Indian___ Other_____ (please specify)
8. Do you believe that your own sense of ethnic identity has changed in the new South Africa (since 1994)? Yes___ No___

If yes, how has it changed?

9. How do your fellow students identify your ethnicity?

African____ South African____ Afrikaner____ Colored____ Malay____
 Indian____ Other _____(please specify)

Read each question and indicate which response best reflects your own thoughts and feelings:

10. How strongly is your ethnic identity tied to your native language?

(circle letter of response)

- a. Strongly tied to my identity
- b. Somewhat tied to my identity
- c. Very little tied to my identity
- d. Not at all tied to my identity

11. How conscious are you of your choice of language use in specific settings?

(indicate each with an X)

	Not Conscious	Somewhat Conscious	Very Conscious	I Consciously Change My Language
a. School	_____	_____	_____	_____
b. In casual settings (friends)	_____	_____	_____	_____
c. In formal settings	_____	_____	_____	_____

12. Within the university setting, how would you prioritize those characteristics associated with a person's identity? (please number 1-6 [7]; 1 is the most important and 6 is the least important)

- a. Ethnicity (heritage) _____
- b. Race (biological) _____
- c. Religion _____
- d. Language _____
- e. Gender _____
- f. Status (upper, middle, lower) _____
- g. Other _____(please specify)

13. Do most of the people in your peer group (friends) and you share the following characteristics? (please mark each response with an X)

	Yes	No
a. Socioeconomic status	_____	_____
b. Race	_____	_____
c. Ethnicity	_____	_____
d. Language	_____	_____

- e. Religion _____
- f. Geographic region _____
14. In the new South Africa, do you believe that ethnic identity (one's ethnic background) places limits on:
- | | Yes | No |
|--------------------------------|-------|-------|
| a. Educational opportunities? | _____ | _____ |
| b. Occupational opportunities? | _____ | _____ |
| c. Government opportunities? | _____ | _____ |
| d. Travel opportunities? | _____ | _____ |
15. Comments? (Please make any comments you feel would be pertinent to this study.)
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