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The role of national unity in nation-building: A participatory communication approach

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Abstract

The nation-building project, which depends on national unity for national development, has always been linked to the question of national identity. The questions that keep coming up are: What is national identity, and why is it such a powerful force? Is a social community of people always better off for having a concept of national identity? This study used the lens of participatory communication to examine nation-building in a development context, where local people—who are considered the nation in this study—are typically given the chance to actively participate in identifying and expressing their needs, potential, and goals. The campaign on nation-building, national unity, and social cohesion should be issue-driven and convey clear messages, according to the content analysis. In order to bring South Africans together, the campaigns should incorporate a variety of voices, including those of experts, social commentators, and the general public. The theoretical approach offers details of the communication approach as it is operationalised in its primary aspect of relationship building for nation-building and national unity in a diverse democratic country. The study came to the conclusion that the development of participatory approaches to development communication is strongly aided by a focus on participatory development concepts and community facilitation processes.

Keywords: Participatory communication, national unity, national identity, culture, racial identity, ethnicity, nation-building

Introduction

National unity is a key objective in the nation-building program (Chaka and Adanlawo, 2023). Many attempts were made to de-racialize and unite a diverse society that had endured years of forced segregation and racial hostility during South Africa's democratic transition. Writing a new Constitution and participating in initiatives like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the National Conference on Racism in 2000, and the World Conference against Racism and Xenophobia in 2001 were all part of this transition.

Smaller-scale legislation was enacted in a number of spheres of society, including business and education, with the goal of advancing equality for all people and fostering a culture free from prejudice and bigotry. Rather than giving up, the situation demands ongoing analysis and investigation of the events that have occurred. Only by taking decisive action will the required modifications and practical steps toward creating a national development and unity agenda that benefits all South Africans. The Government of National Unity and the first black president of South Africa, Nelson Mandela, took on this challenge with a committed dedication that emphasizes the significance of national unity as a primary objective in the state's post-apartheid nation-building program.

Building a nation and fostering national identity and unity is a key component of the historic goal of the post-apartheid era. According to Goldscheider (2019), nation-building has often been associated with bringing together various ethnic groups in a state; this is essentially community-building. One of the main goals of nation-building is to create new national identities at the nation-state level, replacing particularistic and localism identities, in order to bring the diverse parts of the population together into a cohesive whole (Trantidis, 2022; Kolstø, 2019). Nation-building includes the processes of forming and establishing the new state as a political entity as well as fostering among the populace a sense of national unity and viability in terms of adaptation and achievement.

The question of national identity has always been linked to the nation-building project (Zajda and Zajda, 2017), which depends on national unity for national development. The nation-building campaign usually serves many “national” symbols, which include flags, the national anthem, the coat of arms, and other symbols that everybody can identify with as a citizen of a country. Due to the extreme inequality in South Africa, the government's goal of establishing national identity and unity includes a significant portion of redistribution and equity, which is not only required by the constitution but also essential for the country's growth, development,

and stability. Growth itself becomes unstable in the absence of effective redistribution. It is also true, though, that in the absence of quicker growth, implementing a successful and long-lasting redistribution program may take some time.

Hence, racial identity was crucial, and thinking in racial terms was a part of life that could not be escaped (Nkomo and Adanlawo, 2024; Warnecke, 2022; Brooks, 2018). Segregated education was one institution that played a crucial role in keeping people of different races apart. The racial hierarchy was kept intact due to the disparities in the quality of education that was provided for the different race groups. Faced with the extent to which race was ingrained in people's minds and lives, the new dispensation still has an enormous task on its hands. However, the creation of a non-racial society could not be guaranteed by formal and legal changes alone. It was necessary for people's attitudes and ideas about other people to shift. This was a more challenging task because it required challenging one's own identity as well as that of others. The apartheid government, through the promulgation of a series of laws governing all aspects of social life, managed to create belief in the existence of a racial hierarchy. An individual's 'race' determined his or her position in life (Chambers et al., 2020; Boas, Darnell, and Lewis, 2021).

According to Horowitz (2023), South Africa handles the "national" issue very differently than it does the democratic one. The former is usually asked in the following format: how to bring deeply divided people together? The task was to create a nation by fostering the diversity of cultures, languages, and beliefs as a source of our shared strength, according to the ANC's 1994 election manifesto, *A Better Life for All* (ANC, 1994). In this case, nation-building is fundamentally an identity issue. In fact, this is the general attitude toward the question in South Africa. Numerous studies have examined nation-building processes worldwide, but in South Africa, there is not enough literature available, especially from a national unity perspective.

Most South Africans today are not familiar with the concept of nation-building. The optimism of 1994 has given way to cynicism; the ideal of unification has become a vortex of accusations; and the new country has evolved into a battleground for racial ego battles. Resolving the identity redefinition issue is the main task at hand, considering South Africa's particular historical opportunities and constraints. The questions that keep coming up are: What is national identity, and why is it such a powerful force? Is a social community of people always better off for having a concept of national identity? By providing a definition of the term and

highlighting the significance of national unity for the achievement of nation-building goals, this study aims to add to the body of knowledge on the subject.

The aim is to view nation-building through the lens of participatory communication in a development situation that normally gives local people (who can be regarded as the nation in this study) the opportunity to participate in determining and articulating their needs, potential, and aspirations. Participatory communication is justified by the fact that it engages audiences—that is, individuals and communities—in discussion, cooperation, and collective decision-making.

What is a nation?

A definition of what a nation is is necessary in order to comprehend the concept of nation-building. According to early definitions, a nation is a group or race of people who share a common history, culture, customs, religion, and language (Brass, 2024; Braunstein, 2021). Thus, the English, Irish, Scottish, and Welsh peoples make up the United Kingdom's four nations. Within the South African context, there is a dominant South African culture with different sub-cultures like Batswana, Basotho, English, Afrikaans, Zulus, Xhosas, Ndebele's, Swati's, Venda's, and Tsongas.

Building that shared identity is a component of nation-building since most people in a country have a common national identity. Some make a distinction between a civic nation and an ethnic nation based on shared identity, allegiance to a set of political institutions and ideas, and the relationship between citizenship and nationality (Tamir, 2019). The former is based on the social construction of race or ethnicity. These days, the terms "nation" and "state" are frequently used interchangeably, as seen in the United Nations. A state, on the other hand, is a group of people who have successfully asserted their exclusive right to employ force on land. Keep in mind that one of the state's attributes is "territory." In particular, individuals or other institutions currently only have the right to use physical force to the extent that the state authorizes it (Booker, 2022).

According to Anderson (2020), a nation is an imagined political community that is thought to be both naturally sovereign and constrained. According to Anderson, a group of people who think they have certain things in common mentally create the country. Therefore, the nation is a product of human thought rather than a natural phenomenon. He goes on to say that even though the citizens of the smallest country will never meet or even hear of the majority of their

fellow citizens, they all carry an image of their common humanity in their minds (Anderson, 2020, p. 283).

Expanding on Anderson's idea of the nation, other academics like Edensor (2020) contend that a nation is something that generates meaning as a system of cultural representation in addition to being a political entity. Individuals participate in the concept of a nation as embodied in its national culture in addition to being its lawful citizens. According to Hall, a nation is a symbolic community, which explains why it can inspire loyalty and a sense of identity. Maxwell (2020) includes a common origin and descent in his definition of the nation. He contends that for a people to be united in their homeland, there must be a convergence of culture, ideology, aspirations, and sentiments within the nation. According to Maxwell (2020), a country can be thought of as a fictional superfamily whose members are all related since they can all trace their ancestry to a common ancestor.

Still, this definition verges on mythology. Even for the early western European countries—Spain, England, and France, among others—where the concept of the nation is modeled, this is an unrealistic definition. Establishing a line of ancestry between members of a nation is extremely difficult and impractical. The continuous invasions and population migrations over time would cast doubt on any proof of this linked ancestry, even in cases where it could have been established.

Matin (2021) draws attention to the fact that the term "nation" has several different meanings in contemporary usage. According to him, the term is, on the one hand, used to describe a political community of citizens unified in a sovereign state, like the nations of Greece, South Africa, and other countries. However, he thinks the word refers to a community whose existence exists outside of a state, like in the case of the Welsh or Scottish nations, or it may cross the boundaries of multiple states, like in the case of the Basque nation.

According to Matin (2021), a nation is also a group of people bound together by kinship and shared history and customs, as well as a language and culture that have been developed over a considerable amount of time and include a common social structure. The meaning of a community of people, according to this author, is a group of people who are connected by a common life. He also emphasizes that the word "community" has no political organization associated with it. When taking into account the circumstances surrounding the creation of colonized nations such as Africa, this argument becomes untenable. Matin's (2021) definition suits the context of this study.

Defining nation-building

It is important to clarify the nation-building concept pertinent to this study, whose meanings and forms are often misunderstood. For the purpose of this study, the concept of nation-building is defined as follows:

Nation-building has been given many different definitions over time. Regretfully, there is no social science or other academic field where the idea is precisely defined and consistently applied. Ogbeide (2021) claims that the term "nation-building" is commonly used to refer to three interrelated but distinct tasks: democratization, economic reconstruction, and the unification of disparate ethnic groups. It has mainly been conceptualized by policymakers in terms of promoting dialogic and exchange processes between various linguistic, cultural, and regional communities.

According to Kolstø (2019), nation-building was often associated with bringing different ethnic groups in a state together. One of the main goals of nation-building is to create new national identities at the nation-state level, replacing localism and particularistic identities, in order to bring the diverse parts of the population together into a cohesive whole. Nation-building includes the processes of forming and establishing the new state as a political entity as well as fostering among the populace a sense of national unity and viability in terms of adaptation and achievement. According to Chaka and Adanlawo (2023), strengthening governance is a key component of nation-building efforts. Establishing democracy, combating corruption, upholding press freedom, and putting the rule of law into practice are all necessary for effective governance. The historical definition of nation-building included the endeavor to establish a stable, non-democratic government. These days, nation-building frequently refers to an effort to establish a safe and democratic state.

According to a third perspective (Isaacs and Polese, 2015; Alesina, Giuliano, and Reich, 2021), economic reconstruction is crucial to nation-building. It is proposed that a more stable and effective state can develop as the economy improves. Moreover, economic prosperity and democratization are linked. Contrary to popular belief, economic reconstruction and development are not synonymous. Economic reconstruction presupposes that the economy was previously strong but was damaged by unfavorable incidents like war or civil unrest, necessitating its restoration (Ogbeide, 2021; Adanlawo et al., 2021). State building is the process of creating, reestablishing, and fortifying a public institution in a certain area that is able to provide public goods. The establishment of sovereign capacities is a prerequisite for

state-building, the most fundamental of which is the ability to successfully and almost universally assert a "monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force" (Goldscheider, 2021).

What is nation-building within the South African context?

In both the theoretical and practical political spheres, the question of the nation and nation-building in South Africa has become highly controversial. As South Africa's post-apartheid goals aimed to shape the emerging new historical community, creating a nation or fostering national unity brings up a number of questions, including the nature and viability of social cohesion, the comprehension of a multicultural polity, intercultural communication, and class leadership and content in nationalist movements.

Building a nation involves a number of realistic prerequisites, including the practical integration of society. (Kolstø, 2019) In other words, it calls for increased public discourse and engagement, economic exchange, communication, and transformation. In other words, it calls for the various groups and subgroups to interact not only with one another but also with other groups and subgroups on a "national" level. It is viewed as essential to the "national" integration of society and the triumph of "primordial" or "pre-modern" communities, which are frequently categorically referred to as "tribal." Nation-building, then, is a tactic for achieving political, social, and economic advancement. Nation-building, in the opinion of Solomon and Aigbonoga (2023) and Zondi et al. (2023), necessitates the development of an ideology that supports and validates a "national" self-interpretation of the relevant community. It will be challenging to create a shared "nation" as long as society's members primarily see themselves as belonging to particular tribes, ethnic groups, or religious organizations.

According to Adanlawo and Chaka (2021) and King (2019), an ideology that unites, unifies, and integrates subgroups and subcultures need not necessarily supplant earlier ideologies and identities; rather, it must exist and be powerful enough to persuade its members that they share something significant and meaningful. Additionally, it sets them apart from other groups that might actually be members of the same linguistic, religious, or ethnic group but are dispersed throughout various states or societies. The underlying identities or ideologies may centre on overt "nationalist" ideas, but they may also revolve around ideas related to religion, language, "race," citizenship, etc.

Theoretical approach

Multiplicity theory of development

Concepts such as democratization, participation, and empowerment emerged from the rubble of the earlier prescriptive deterministic theories on development at the beginning of the twentieth century. Multiplicity, or another development, is a strategy related to the sustainable development paradigm, according to Edwards (2021). The assumption upon which multiplicity is based includes the following:

- Cultural identity, multidimensionality, and interdependence between nations are emphasized.
- Development is initiated by society (Edwards, 2021).
- basic needs are satisfied to eradicate poverty.
- Development creates self-reliance in the community;
- Natural resources are used responsibly and
- Participatory democracy is established, namely, government by the people on all levels of society (Edwards, 2021);

In the mid-1980s, Servaes introduced a new paradigm called multiplicity in one world, which paved the way for new developments in the field. The difficulties of community participation in development activities were addressed by this new paradigm, which is frequently referred to as "Another Development" (Foster, 2018; Dodman and Mitlin, 2013). The human-centeredness theme of development, as recognized and discussed by numerous significant international conferences and declarations, was central to the discipline of multiplicity. "Multiplicity, pluralistic paradigm, includes methodologies such as the basic need-oriented approach, the endogenic approach, where there is no universal development model," "the ecological model, the sustainable development approach, the participatory paradigm of development," and "the self-reliant methodology," according to Edwards (2021). Development should therefore be viewed as a complex, multifaceted, dialectical process that incorporates aspects of socioeconomic, cultural, and other relative aspects.

Foster (2018) expands on Another Development: participatory democracy with a new tenet. This implies that "decision-making about development policies and practices should involve all people at all societal levels." The idea of participation in development communication, or "another communication," was subsequently born out of multiplicity. The application of

communication changed from being viewed as a sender-oriented process to one that is receiver-oriented. The development of participatory design was aided by this idea. Thus, communication for development suggests a dialogical, interactive, and bottom-up process, implying that decentralized, micro-level participation in decision-making processes is necessary for successful development.

Participatory development communication: A South African perspective

The planning, use of communication resources, and strategies in programs intended to bring about some progress, change, or development are highlighted in the South African context by participatory development communication. It also emphasizes the involvement of individuals, communities, and the nation in change efforts. Navarro et al. (2016) have also observed that participation in the African context, as in other contexts, refers to people actively participating in development programs and processes. They contribute ideas, take initiative, and articulate their needs and problems, while asserting their autonomy through development participation. In order to distinguish two-way communication processes from one-way communication approaches that entail spreading messages, transmitting information, or persuading people to change their behaviour, communication is frequently used to highlight the importance of two-way communication processes (Adanlawo, 2017). It favours bottom-up strategies that increase decision-makers' awareness over top-down strategies that promote discussion on problem analysis and solution search.

Basic development decisions in South Africa were made for the people under the previous regime, who were treated as passive recipients of development and were not given an opportunity to recognize their own needs, take action to address them, or determine their own fate (Rose and Miller, 2017; Datta and Mullainathan, 2014). Nonetheless, the South African governance model underwent modifications in the post-apartheid period. The Republic of South Africa's Constitution (Act 108 of 1996) describes this new strategy for an accountable, transparent government that responds to the needs and advancement of the populace. In keeping with the government's objectives of democratizing development and ensuring that communities actively participate in their own development policies, strategies and mechanisms have also been implemented to support the concepts of participatory communication at the local government (municipal) level (Department of Provincial and Local Government, 2005).

The benefits of participatory communication

The restoration of cultural pride, self-esteem, and identity in communities that have been marginalized, repressed, or neglected for extended periods of time is one anticipated benefit of participatory communication. Communities in authoritarian environments frequently exhibit social and political abandonment. Development programs that do not take into account the cultural perspectives of the communities that would be the target of planned social change initiatives have also been known to exhibit neglect (Adanlawo and Chaka, 2024).

A community's members assume the role of actors whose voices are represented in the material when they are encouraged to participate in public life. Being passive consumers of information that might not be related to their everyday experiences is not the same as this. Decisions about communication pertaining to matters that impact the communities are made without the involvement of third parties in this new setting. This process is a break from the prevalent development paradigm, which is characterized by top-down decision-making without a mechanism in place for community feedback during the program's planning, execution, and evaluation phases. When participation is ingrained as a dimension, People are engaged in the process rather than serving as the human subjects of social change campaigns (Xaba et al., 2024).

According to research on development communication in Africa, a variety of factors influence how well development communication strategies are applied to support national programs in the continent. These include communication, involvement, and independence. According to Chaka and Adanlawo (2022), community participation is a necessary component of participatory development communication. All participants are expected to accept a common identity, which may be national in nature.

National identity

Building a nation is a necessary step in the process of creating a national identity, and vice versa. It is impossible to discuss national identity without first discussing the existence of a nation, since individuals who consider themselves to be members of that nation share a common identity (Anderson, 2020). There is a constant consonance between the two terms. Scholars define the two terms almost exactly in many cases, which emphasizes their nearly seamless relationship. It is significant to remember that national identity is created simultaneously with the construction of a nation.

People's collective identities remain fundamental to who they are. Over time, people have come to identify with various categories, such as race, class, gender, age, and religion. According to Edensor (2020), people have allegedly been willing to give up their own liberties and restrict those of others in the name of national identity. They are ready to violate the civil and religious rights of racial, ethnic, and religious minorities that that country was unable to include (Chaka and Adanlawo, 2024; Edensor, 2020). In fact, a significant portion of the literature on national identity has emphasized how important communication is. "A constructed and public national self-image based on membership in a political community as well as history, myths, symbols, language, and cultural norms commonly held by members of a nation" is how Omelchenko et al. (2015) define national identity.

Representation and identity in South Africa

To us, the media is a representation of our world; it may not fully and equally represent all facets of it. As a result, people consume representations of our reality, but the individuals who inhabit that reality are also represented by these creations. According to Dovidio et al. (2008), it is typical to examine how individuals are portrayed in terms of groups or types. Value statements about the ideals of that group and its members are included in this portrayal.

In this case, representation encompasses the symbolic systems and signifying practices that generate meanings and establish us as subjects.

Meanings are created by representations, which help us make sense of the world around us and ourselves. People are therefore exposed to these representations, which aid in their self-identification and enable them to create identities that are consistent with these representations. This implies that individuals will create their own identities based on the things to which they are exposed. Jovchelovitch (2019) and Reddy and Adanlawo (2018) assert that representation serves as a cultural process as well. It creates symbolic systems and individual and collective identities to offer potential responses to the following questions: Who am I? What could I be? And who do I want to be?

According to Jovchelovitch (2019), individuals can be part of a collective identity, such as a nation's nationality or culture, even though they have separate identities. According to the author, culture can be defined as a set of values, beliefs, and behaviors that are unique to a large group of people and are communicated through a variety of media. Culture is created over time, and all theories regarding cultural identity are artifacts that assume a particular perspective on a protracted and intricate historical process.

Identity: cultural and national

Although depictions in the media can be useful to characterize groups of people and their traits, it does not follow that individuals behave in accordance with those descriptions. People create their own identities, and the media they are exposed to may have an impact on this process (Adanlawo and Rugbeer, 2021). Since people are constantly exposed to shifting media, identities may not be fixed but rather are continually being reconstructed.

According to Hall's 1996 theory, identity is always forming and is reliant on psychological and ideological processes of identification and splitting. This entails realizing that the contemporary self is made up of many identities rather than just one. Culture forms identity by providing context for experiences, allowing one to choose a particular subjectivity. Identity represents the meeting point of our current social, cultural, and economic relationships with our historical background. Identity, then, is the point where our daily lives converge. Similar to how an individual's identity changes over time, societal changes also affect how a cultural identity is formed (Hall, 1996).

According to Adanlawo and Chaka (2024) and Zhang and Liu (2022), culture contributes to the creation of a sense of community, a source of identity, and a means of social interaction. Even though this might be the case, cultural identity is a product of socio-history and is subject to change over time. Because of this, culture can aid a group in creating an identity, but ultimately, collective identity is subject to change over time as a result of social factors.

In this paper, national identity highlights a different perspective. According to Zhang and Liu (2022), "it is an identity constituted at a given strategic level of a society." Formally speaking, South Africans must analyze processes of inclusion and exclusion in order to discuss national identity. Although, national and cultural identities may differ, they are both founded on the same ideas of collective identity. It is therefore a component of nationality and patriotism. Since the two ideas are related to the ideas of a country, state, or nation, they are essential to discussing a country. Understanding the formation of a nation requires an understanding of nationality and patriotism.

Nation-building can refer to the metaphorical building of a nation rather than the actual building of a nation. It alludes to the process of fostering pride and patriotism, raising spirits, and embracing all citizens of a nation. By promoting a sense of cohesion and unity, this seeks to fortify a country. Ogbeide divides the actions taken to support nation-building into two categories (2021). First, concrete steps are being taken to promote integration as well as a sense

of pride in the country. Second, governments have reacted by taking measures to lessen the political impact of racial and cultural divisions in society.

Conclusion

Anderson's (2020) "imagined communities" have made a fundamental contribution to the literature on nation-building, national identity, and national unity. According to the author, nations are imagined in the sense that they are the product of common beliefs held by individuals who consider themselves to be a part of that community. In fact, a significant portion of the literature on national identity has emphasized how important communication is. "A constructed and public national self-image based on membership in a political community as well as history, myths, symbols, language, and cultural norms commonly held by members of a nation" is how Edensor (2020) defines national identity. National culture as a discourse, according to Tsui and Tollefson (2017), "is a way of constructing meanings that influence both our actions and conceptions." Treating nations as "systems of cultural representations," this social constructivist view of the nation as an imagined community denaturalizes the conventional understanding of national societies as being fixed and stable in history and society (Isaacs and Polese, 2015).

A participatory development communication approach is thought to empower, mobilize, initiate actions, organize, and influence development processes and outcomes, based on the discussions surrounding the participatory communication approach (Geekiyanage et al., 2021). The community's ability to manage itself is strengthened by the participatory development communication approach, which also makes access to major decision-making domains easier. This participatory approach has been reflected in the recent handling of development-oriented communication campaigns. Participatory development communication becomes an emancipatory tool for individuals and communities when it permits participation in development.

Based on the content analysis, the campaign on nation-building, national unity, and social cohesion is supposed to be issue-driven and communicate clear messages. They ought to examine South Africans' contemporary national psyche rather than just focusing on the transition. In order to bring South Africans together, the campaigns should incorporate a variety of voices, including those of experts, social commentators, and the general public.

The theoretical approach offers details of the communication approach as it is operationalised in its primary aspect of relationship building for nation-building and national unity in a diverse

democratic country. It is also clear that communication is a process that acts as a tool of nation-building because it constructs the social realities of the nation. The evolution of participatory approaches to development communication is strongly influenced by the focus on participatory development concepts and community facilitation processes. It is now commonly acknowledged that the most promising strategy for reducing dependence and enhancing people's sense of self-worth and independence is participatory communication.

This study shows that government programmes can indeed contribute to building a previously unrelated and divided nation. Government programmes can indeed contribute to national unity and a common national identity because they foster cooperation and promote understanding as well as tolerance among diverse groups. In addition, government programmes can also foster inter-ethnic relationships that can build unity not only in a given community or area but can extend to the national, continental, and international levels.

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