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Perceptions of the future of South Africa: a 2009 replication

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Abstract

While socio-political instability and social change have marked effects on all members of society, youth appear to be particularly vulnerable to such instability. There is however, a dearth of research on how youth make sense of and orient themselves to such social change. Karl Mannheim (1936) argued that in times of social upheaval and instability individuals would engender "situationally transcendent ideas", or ideologies, about the future of their society. In South Africa a tradition of research on future ideologies was begun in 1956 by Kurt Danziger (1963). Thereafter, Danziger's original research was replicated in three subsequent South African studies. These studies were conducted during, and shortly after, the era of apartheid, which was a context characterized by extreme socio-political instability. After the abolishment of apartheid, the South African socio-political landscape seemed to have finally reached a plateau of stability; however, the recent political events in which prominent ANC members publicly severed their alliances with the longstanding leading political party and formed a rival political party, threatened to reconfigure the South African political landscape directly before the upcoming 2009 elections. This political vicissitude prompted South African citizens to reflect carefully on the future of the country, and this thus signified the ideal time at which to conduct an additional study on South Africans future ideologies and in so doing, continue Kurt Danziger's line of research. The sample of the current study comprised 223 University of the Witwatersrand students. To garner their future ideologies participants were required to write brief essays on the history of South Africa projected into the future, as well as complete an optimism scale, a relative deprivation scale and a social group identification checklist. The essays were then analysed by means of quantitative thematic content analysis to identity the predominant future ideologies that are present amongst University of the Witwatersrand students. It emerged from the content of their essays that the sample most frequently foresaw futures of Liberalism, Deterioration and Catastrophe; however, these perceptions were not found to differ significantly in terms of race. An interesting finding was that a sizeable proportion of the sample used their essays as a way to vent about the current circumstances in the country and seemed to experience difficulty envisioning a possible future for the country. A generalized logistic regression revealed that optimism about the future and perceived relative deprivation are both significant predictors of whether one endorses Liberal, Deterioration or Catastrophic future ideologies. The limitations of the current study and recommendations for future research are discussed.