SHARED VALUES IN SOUTH AFRICA?:
A selection of value orientations in the field of personal ethics

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Abstract

South Africa experienced a relative peaceful transition from authoritarian rule to democracy. Some observers ascribed this to the large number of overlapping value orientations in the South African population. In particular the examples of Christian, family and moral values are used. This article is a presentation of data from the 1995 World Values Survey that may contribute to a better understanding of the influence of these value orientations in the area of personal ethics.

1.   Introduction

South Africa is possibly one of the most deeply divided societies in the world. The fact that several racial and cultural groups live, work and engage in politics next to one another means that there will be a continuous struggle between the forces that bind society together and those that tear it apart. A further complicating factor is the unequal distribution of wealth. For a long period in South Africa's history racial and class divisions corresponded to a large extent.

Throughout the world, where similar differences in material welfare correspond with ethnic divisions, the result tends to be a cumulative effect on the potential for conflict. In South Africa these conditions have been historically induced by the white minority, which has deprived other groups of voting rights in order to create a state which institutionalised white privilege. This deliberate and sustained exclusion of the majority of the population from the process of political decision-making is one of the most conspicuous characteristics of the political history of South Africa.

Against this reality there were numerous predictions of an eminent revolution in South Africa during the apartheid era. The state's severe legitimacy crisis has periodically flared up when various contenders had challenged its racist nature. The immense mobilisation of resistance, in the 1950s the early 1960s and during the 1980's which saw the African National Congress (ANC), and to a lesser extend the Pan Africans Congress (PAC), emerge as direct challengers to the state was mainly based on the exclusivist nature of the state and society.

The appointment of FW de Klerk as State President in September 1989 heralded a new era for South Africa. Burdened by the financial cost of apartheid, increased resistance from the disenfranchised and the socio-economic challenges which urbanization, unemployment, housing and education posed, the De Klerk government opened the way in February 1990 for a democratic settlement. Black resistance movements were unbanned and Nelson Mandela was released. An immediate start was also made in the dismantling of the remaining pillars of social apartheid. This period can be described as the 'liberalization' of South African politics[1].

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1.   O'Donnel, G et al. (1986): *Transition for Authoritarian Rule* (Part I-IV), Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, describe liberalisation as follows:'...the process of making effective certain rights that protect both individuals and social groups from arbitrary or illegal acts committed by the state or third parties' (Part IV, p7). They also define transition (Part IV, p. 73) as '...the interval between one political regime and another...delimited, on the one side, by the launching of the process of dissolution of an authoritarian regime

The process of democratisation that started in 1990 has resulted in more political, economic and social change than was experienced during the period of 70 years following the establishment of the state in 1910. Soon after the acceptance of the Constitution the country represented a significant example of an apparently successful democratic transition in Africa. In the light of the predictions of many Afro-pessimists that the disintegration of authoritarian rule would necessarily lead to conflict between racial or ethnic groups, the role of shared values in creating a tolerant society that can sustain democracy becomes of pivotal importance.

In the literature on the process of democratisation an emphasis is placed on the one hand on structural elements, such as the level of economic development and economic growth rate, political institutions and violence as causes for transitions and breakdowns, while on the other hand cultural values and psychological orientations are advanced as causes. The world over it is becoming increasingly clear that the establishment of a stable democracy cannot take place simply by raising the rate of economic growth, writing a sound constitution, holding elections and extending human rights. For this reason, recent writings tend to place greater emphasis on the role of values.

The aim of this article is therefore to present a descriptive overview of the value orientations within South Africa. An important assumption is that an understanding of values is indispensable for the answer to the relative stability of the South African society. The focus will be on a survey of some selected elements of shared value orientations, namely the element of Christian ethics, including religious, family and moral values.

2.   Values and the measurement instrument

The definition of values that I use in this article was selected to fit the purpose of the analysis. Because attitudinal measures form a key element in the empirical analysis of the absence of societal conflict or the potential for protest and violence the following conceptualisation of Van Deth and Scarbrough was selected: 'Values are seen as conceptions of the desirable which are not directly observable but are evident in moral discourse and relevant to the formulation of attitudes. For heuristic purposes, we understand these conceptions as hypothetical constructs, which constrain attitudes. The claim for the empirical relevance of values, we argue, is demonstrated by evidence of patterning among attitudes. We call these meaningful patterns *value orientations*'[2].

This analysis is based on the World Values Survey that Markinor conducted in October 1995 and published in 1996[3], .The WVS survey was administered to a probability sample and the realised sample size was 2, 935. The sample was weighted and projected onto the universe and are thus representative of the universe – the South African adult population - from which it was drawn.

Value orientations reflect the different patterns of political socialisation. Changing these values is a slow process because it can only take place through a process of re-socialisation. Thus, only when the new democratic culture in South Africa starts to impact on socio-economic attitudes will value patterns start to change. Testimony to slow process are the slight changes in value positions measured between the 1991 and 1996 WVS in for instance

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and, on the other, by the installation of some form of democracy, the return of some form of authoritarianism, or the emergence of a revolutionary alternative'.

2.   See Van Deth JW and E Scarbrough (eds) (1995): *The Impact of Values*, Oxford: Oxford University Press , p46

3.   In fact, Markinor conducted three surveys, the first in 1981, the second in 1991 and the third in 1996. The survey used here forms part of the World Values Study (WVS), which was conducted in 50 countries during 1995-1996.

the value patterns on the moral value scale discussed in this presentation. Value orientations are therefore relatively stable constructs.

In the discussion all the value patterns will be graphically displayed.

3.   Religious values

There are a number of general theories explaining the role of religiosity in the modern world.[4] The essence of these explanations can be encapsulated in the proposition that as societies become more industrialised, religious values will become more eroded and rationalism will spread.

Van Deth and Scarbourgh summarise the above proposition as follows: 'The rise in secular value orientations can be conceptualised as a process - originating in occidental rationality - of detachment from the beliefs, values, and practices of traditional churches. The process has become evident in many West European countries in the last few decades. From one point, if churches lose their monopoly to define religious and moral norms, the whole moral system of a society; or generally accepted norms and fundamental values, might break down. A less dramatic scenario points to the gradualness of change, to the diversity and more flexible interpretation of norms, within which individuals arrange their own private set of religious beliefs.[5]'

We can therefore expect, South African being a semi-idustrialized country with a predominance of pre-materialist value orientations, that there will be a relatively high level of religiosity[6].

The diversity of cultural identity in South Africa is replicated in the church, religion and theology. During the apartheid years the church was politically active in a number of ways. Loader[7] distinguishes three broad religious traditions in South Africa: passive participants, critical churches and pro-apartheid churches. Passive participants included churches such as the Pentecostal churches, conservative gospel churches, charismatic churches and the independent Black churches. The critical churches included all those affiliated to the South African Council of Churches, along with the Roman Catholic Church. The pro-apartheid churches included the NG Kerk, the Nederduits Hervormde Kerk and the Gereformeerde Kerk. The latter in particular made a significant attempt to defend racial divisions under apartheid and promote ethnic distinctiveness.

Religion in general, and churches in particular, plays an important political socialisation role. The so Protestant churches and in particular the Afrikaans mainline churches played a significant to perpetuate the apartheid ideology. In contrast, a church such as the Catholic Church played an important role in fostering a culture of protest during the apartheid years.

To categorise the following question was asked:
- 'Do you belong to a religious denomination? If yes, which one' (See Figure 1). Thus, the division in this analysis will between the following categories:

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4. See for instance Van Deth and Scarbrough, *op cit*, pp.77-83.
5. *Ibid.*, p.11.
6. See Taylor, H (1998): *Squaring the Circle: Towards a Valid Values Dimension for South Africa*, Unpublished MA-thesis, which is based on an analysis of the these value dimensions in South Africa. *Post-materialist values* based on social and self-actualisation include support for: Beautiful cities/nature; Ideas count; free speech; less impersonal society; more say in work/community; more say in government. *Materialist values* based on physiological needs include support for: strong defence force; fight crime; maintain order; stable economy; economic growth; fight rising prices. *Pre-materialist values* based on subsistence needs include: food; land; clothing; water; education and shelter.
7. See Loader, JA (1985) : 'Church, theology and change in South African' in Van Vuuren, DJ et al (eds), *South Africa: A Plural Society in Transition*, Durban: Butterworths.

Protestant churches;
Catholic church,
Black Independent Churches,
Other churches (smaller denominations for example Jewish, Muslim, Hindu etc); and,
No Affiliation – those respondents that have indicated that they do no belong to any denomination.

Amongst the items tapping the different dimensions of religiosity were the following:

- 'Were you brought up religiously at home?'(See Figure 2).
- 'Apart from weddings, funerals, and christenings, how often do you attend religious services these days?' (See Figure 3).
- 'Do you believe in God?' (See Figure 4).
- 'How important is God in you life?' (See Figure 5).
- 'Do you find that you get comfort and strength from religion?' (See Figure 6).

4.   Family values

Families, in the traditional sense, are still important to South Africans. However, important differences regarding the size of the family reflect the cultural diversity of the country.

To describe the different forms of families, sociologists use mainly two categories: the nuclear family and the extended family. The first refers to a household with parents and their dependent children and the latter refers to a family where two or more generations and their families live together in the same household. The nuclear family is in most instances the result of the industrialization process[8].

The form of the nuclear and extended families rests mostly on the social and cultural values of the period. More recent changes in the pattern of family life includes:

- An increase on the importance of personal fulfillment;
- An increase of families which fall outside the conventional marriage patterns
- An increase in separations;
- An increase in single parent families – especially those without fathers
- A decrease in the size of families.

Closely linked to the family life and communities is the concept of 'ubuntu' amongst the blacks. The depth and the impact of this concept in the African culture, should not be underestimated in politics. In general the liberal base of the South African Constitution with its emphasis on the individual creates an uneasy background for an understanding and implications of 'ubuntu'. Community, communality, and family play an important role in the African culture, and is expressed as follows: 'Umutu ke mutu ke batu' (Zulu), which basically means, 'a person is a person because of other people'. Other aspects contained in the concept of 'ubuntu' are 'uzwelo' or empathy, and 'inhlonipho' (respect and dignity).

The underlying assumption of 'ubuntu', is that the primary political entity is not necessarily the autonomous individual, but rather individuals seated in communities. The assumption is that individuals with all the rights and responsibilities allocated to them by the liberal democracy do not decide, think or act autonomously from other individuals. Although rights are allocated to individuals, the wider community context within which

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8.   See in this regard Sussman, MB and SK Steinmetz (eds) (1987): *Handbook of Marriage and the Family*, New York: Plenum Press.

individuals live those rights, are just as important. The role of cultural and religious communities is therefore important in the socialization process.

Orientations to some of the above aspects of the family life were measured in the WVS. Amongst others the following statements were put to the respondents:

- 'If someone says a child needs a home with both a father and mother to grow up happily, would you tend to agree or disagree?' (See Figure 7).
- Do you think that a women has to have children in order to be fulfilled or is not necessary?' (See Figure 8).
- 'Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Marriage is an out-dated institution' (See 'Figure 9).

Looking at the spread of orientations regarding elements of family life it becomes clear that South Africans regard themselves as very religious and pro-family. It is therefore to be expected that they will also be conservative on moral issues.

5.   Moral Issues

The following issues from the '95 WVS were combined in a 'moral value' index: 'Homosexuality, prostitution, abortion, divorce, suicide and euthanasia', to gauge the reaction of respondents (See Figure 10). The classification represents a continuum from very liberal to very conservative. Respondents were asked to react, on a 10 point scale, to statements that for instance prostitution 'can always be justified, never by justified or something in between' (where ten meant that this behaviour was always justified and one meant that it was never justified). The following categories were used to categorise the respondents on a continuum from very liberal to very conservative orientation on these issues: 'Very liberal, liberal, neither liberal nor conservative, conservative and very conservative'.

With the value patterns of the elite in mind (reported elsewhere in this Journal) the moral index was also crosstabulated with party support (See Figure 11). To compare the position of the general public with that of the elite the spread of orientations on the justifiability of prostitution (See Figure 12) and euthanasia (See Figure 12) were also included.

6.   Concluding Remarks

The patterns of value orientations included in this article suggest firstly, that all South Africans report a very high level of religiosity. Secondly, they hold the family in high esteem and thirdly, they are conservative on a selection of moral issues. As was to be expected a significant gap exists between religious and non-religious people. The non-religious people tend to be relatively more liberal with regard to individual ethics. Overall, they would take a more lenient attitude toward the preferences of other people. However, there is no significant difference between the different church traditions on most of the value orientations.

On the two issues, 'prostitution' and 'euthanasia' which were included for the sake of comparison with the elite, indicated that there is a large gap between public and elite on these issues. The somewhat more liberal attitude of Democratic Party (DP) supporters on these issues correlate with the patterns found amongst the elite of the same party.

The significant overlap in value orientations between the different race groups in South Africa regarding Christian ethics may indeed have had an important influence in the nature of the transition. This under-researched aspect of the transition needs to get more attention from researchers working in the field of values.

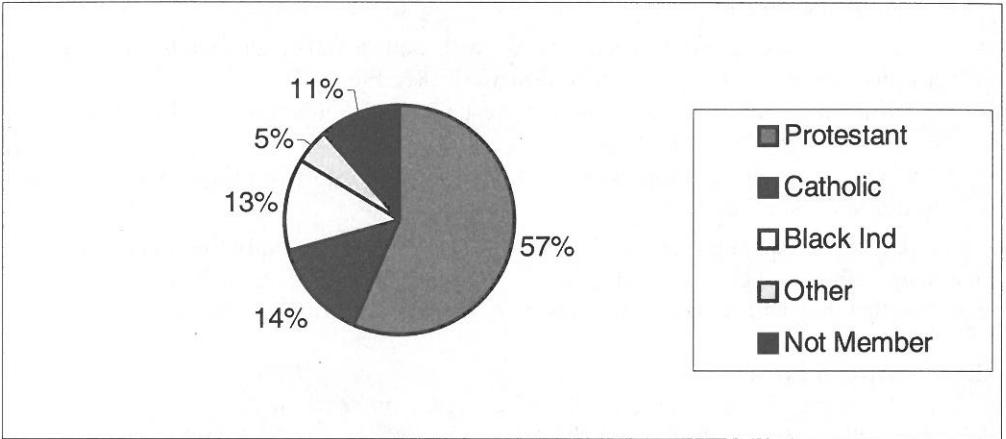Figure 1: Percentage of respondents that belong to a religious

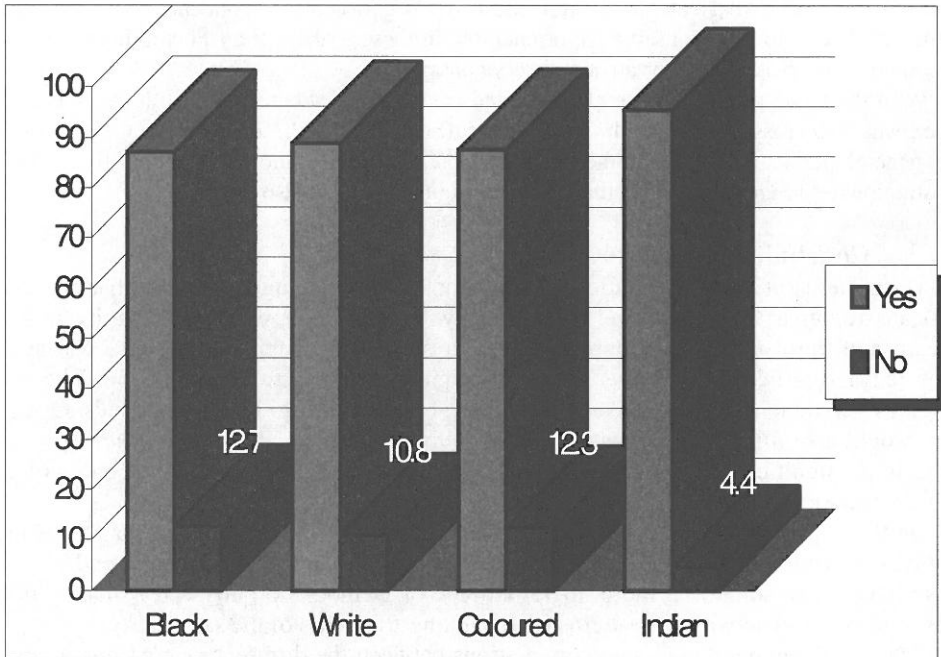

Figure 2: Brought up religiously

Figure 3: Attending religious services

Figure 3: Attending religious services
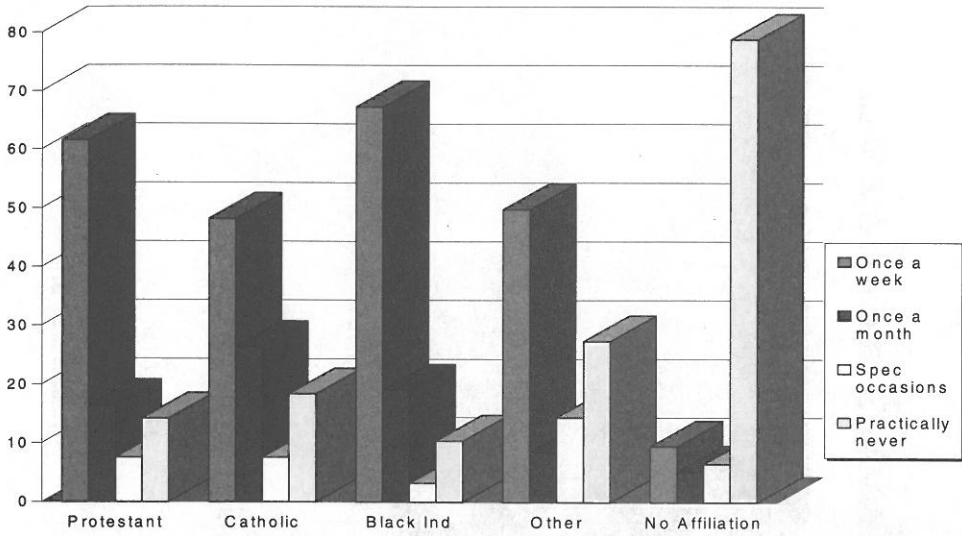
Figure 4: Believe in God

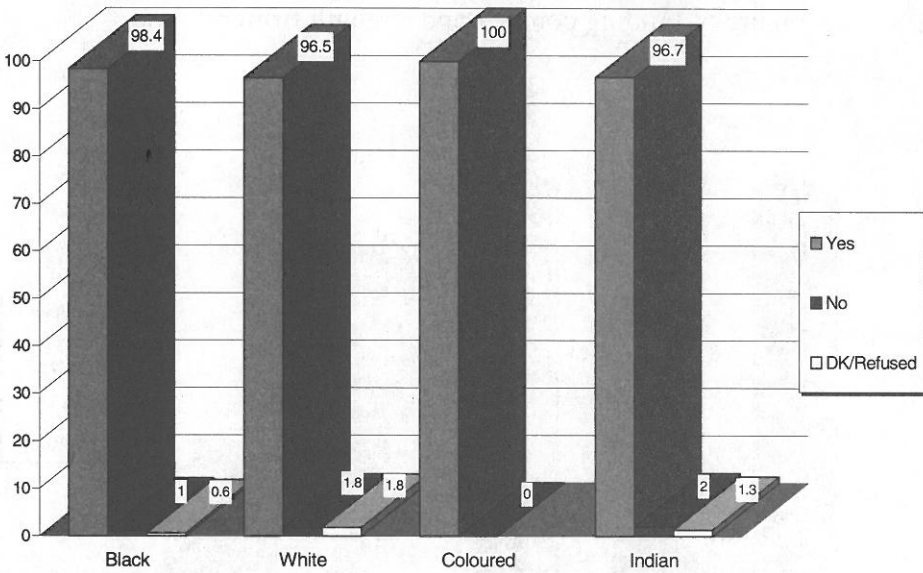

Figure 4: Believe in God

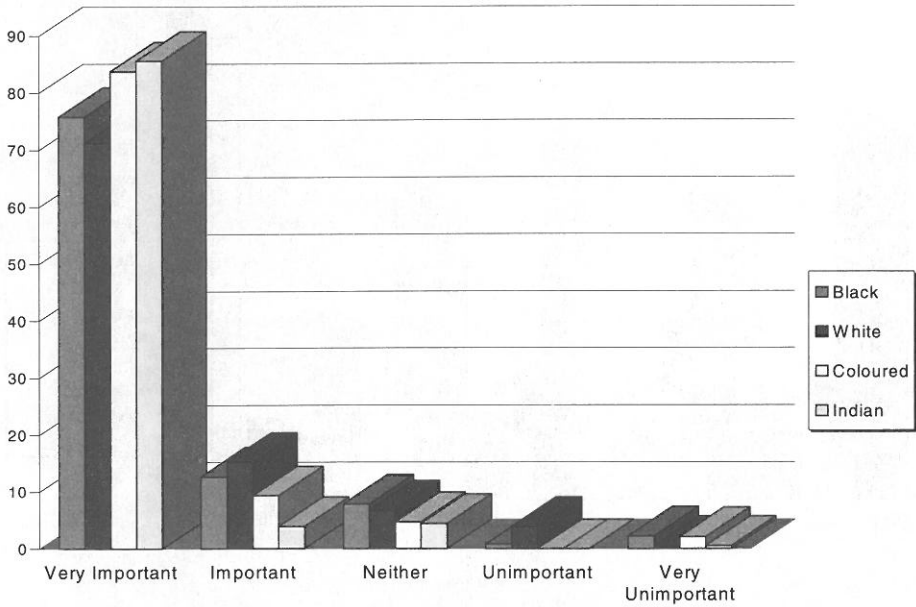Figure 5: Importance of God

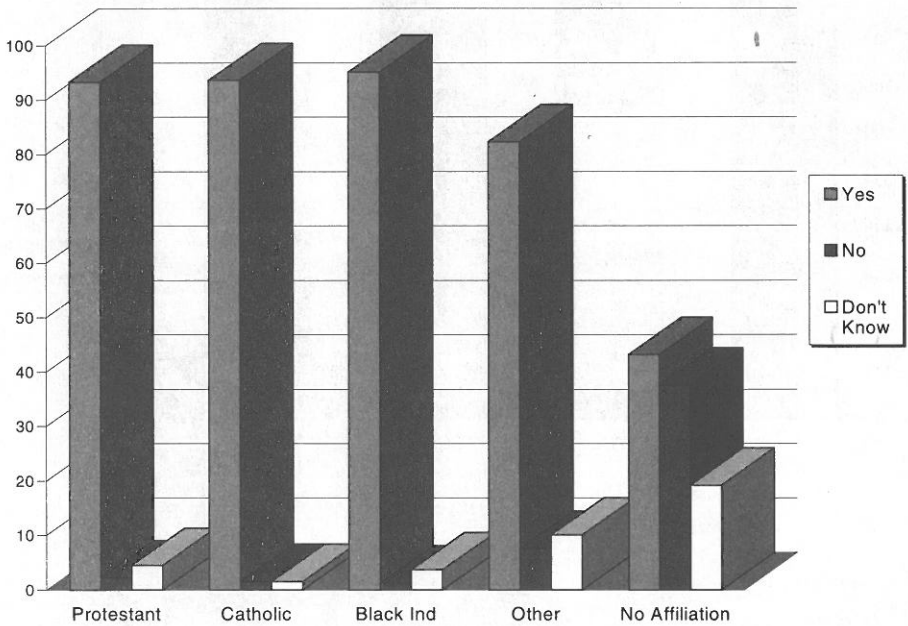Figure 6: Finding comfort and strength from religion
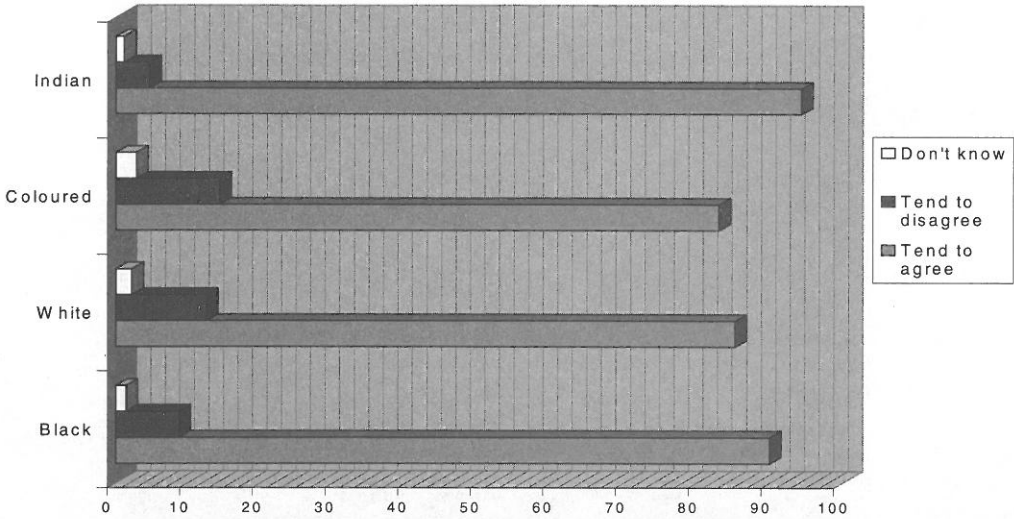
Figure 7: A child needs a home with a father and mother

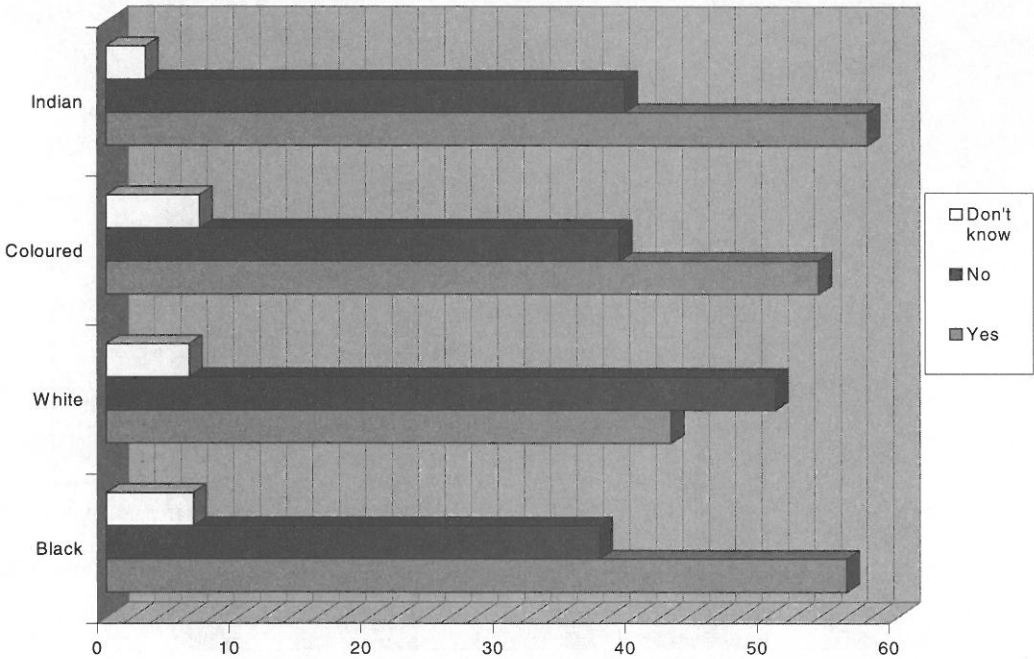## Figure 8: To be fulfilled a woman has to have children
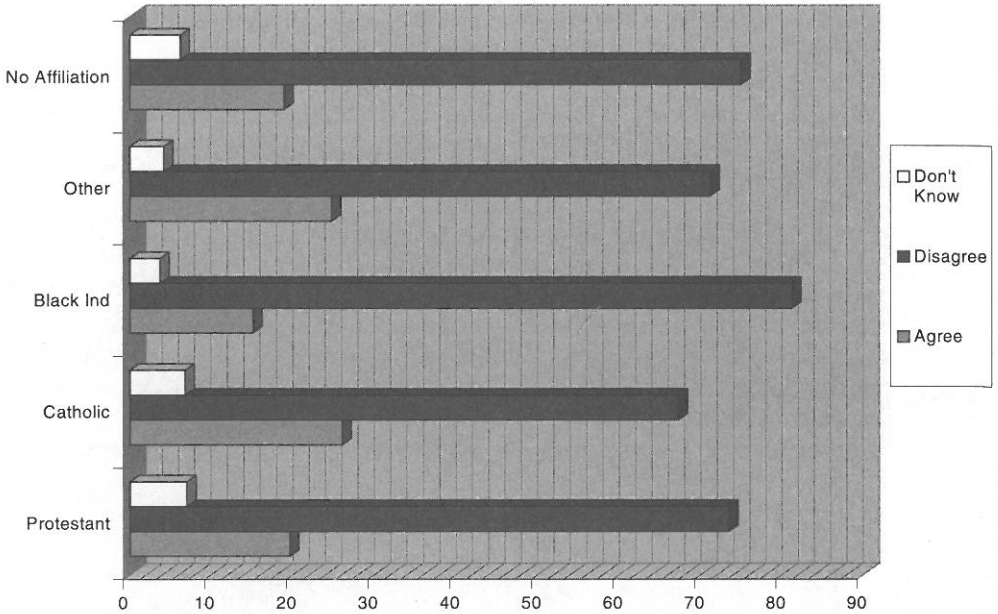
Figure 9: Marriage is an outdated institution

Figure 10: Moral values index

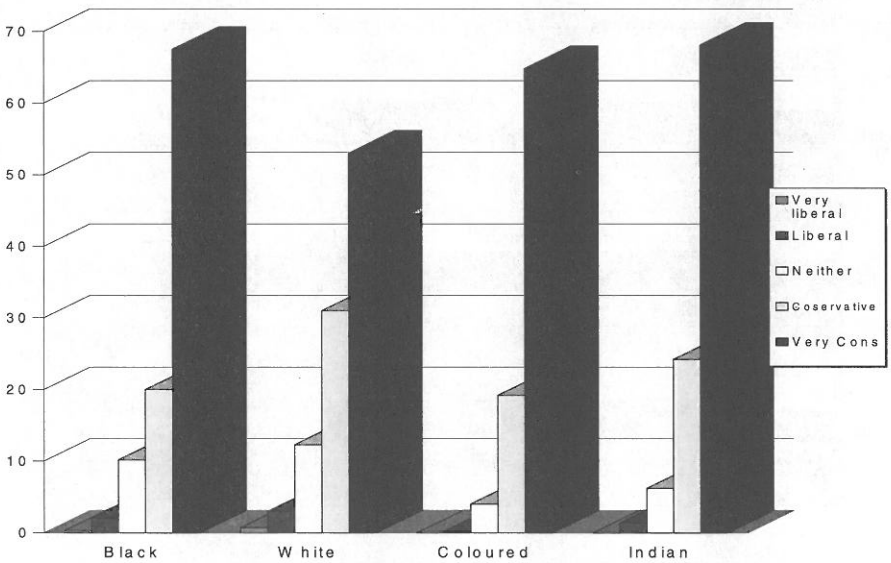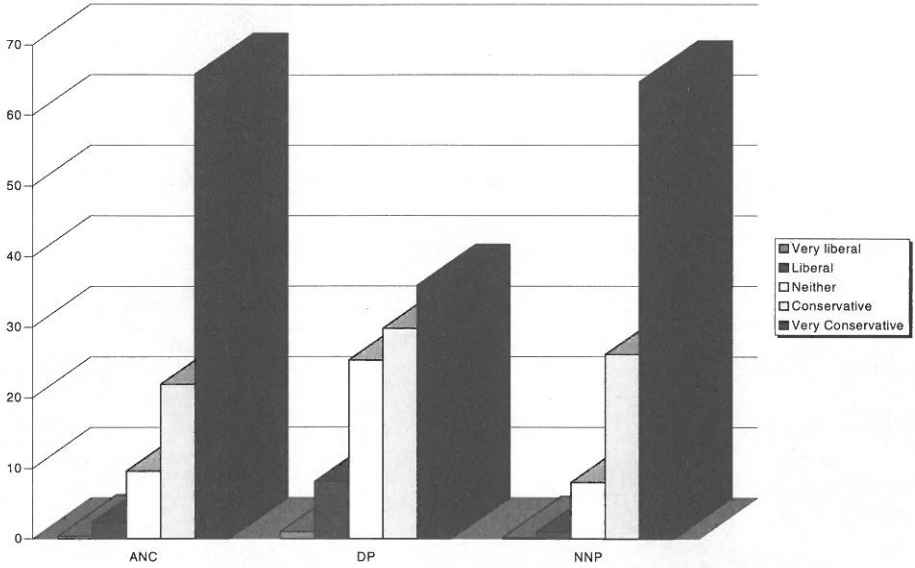## Figure 11: Moral values index by party support

Figure 12: Position on prostitution scale