Chapter 7: Conclusions and discussion

This final chapter is structured in three different parts. First, I will describe how my study has contributed to a fuller understanding of the dynamics of the process of national identification, particularly as it manifests itself in the talk of ordinary people. Second, I will address the insights the study provides concerning the process of national identification within the specific context of South African society, a young democracy undergoing a process of large scale social transition. Third, I will discuss how the insights obtained contribute to our understanding of processes of collective identification elsewhere, and how they could benefit persons working outside the field of academia. In the chapter on methodology, I have reflected extensively on the potential limitations and shortfalls in the ways in which my research project was set up and conducted. In addition to these points, I am aware of the caution that befits drawing conclusions from a small scale, qualitative study. Even though grand generalizations are not in place, I am firmly convinced that my study provides a rich and thorough analysis of an important phenomenon, and has implications for the study of similar processes elsewhere.

Contribution to theories on national identification

In the introductory chapter, I described the phenomenon that grasped my attention at the time when I was conducting this research project. It was the way in which South African national identity seemed to develop across a highly erratic pattern in reaction to two critical events: the international sports triumph and the outburst of large scale xenophobic violence across the country. I witnessed the national mood peak and plummet within a short stretch of time, and was fascinated by what this might suggest about processes of national identification. How could it be, I wondered, that people can be ‘overcome by nationhood’ (Brubaker 1996) in one moment and manifest symptoms of a national identity crisis in the next? How do ordinary people make sense of these intense shifts in relation to their national identities? What does it tell us about the meaning of national identities? Do national identities, as common sense has it, tell us anything definite about the character of a national community, about the traits that members of a community share, or about the characteristics of a certain place? Or are they something completely different: the elusive, volatile and ambivalent products of social processes? And what to think about the question of identification specifically: how is it that individual
people identify themselves with whatever meanings of their nation circulate in the public domain at a given moment in time?

Scholarly literature on nationhood and national identity is characterized by an emphasis on the ‘national’ at the cost of attention to ‘identity’. The ‘traditional’ literature on national identity fits in two categories. The first is the body of work that concentrates on political philosophical debates about the character of nations but entirely neglects the question of how ordinary persons come to identify with those nations on a daily basis. A question that has dominated this literature is which characterization fits the nation best: a primordial naturally grown, organic community or instead a rational, modernist response to broad macro-social developments. This is further marked by an emphasis on the political, the ‘state’-dimension of the nation-state. The limitation of this focus is the suggestion that once the question of the definition of the nation is settled – once a nation’s identity is ‘accomplished’ – national identity is something that people simply ‘have’. It becomes something that can be measured. The wide range of quantitative surveys into national identification, either within countries or in international comparisons, is testimony to this perspective. This is the second category within national identity literature: a body of work that focuses on measuring the strength of people’s national identification through large quantitative surveys. The problem with the latter approach is the assumption that the content of national identities is stable, unproblematic and understood in similar ways by all respondents in such surveys, thus allowing for measurements and comparisons across large samples. The picture we get is that once we shift the focus to the level of ordinary citizens the ambivalence over the character of nations – so present in the political philosophical literature – evaporates. What is missing is an insight into how processes of national identification unfold in practice, how the nation is given meaning on a continuous basis by individuals, and how ambivalence manifests itself at that level. If we instead shift the focus from identity as an entity to identification as a process, the idea of an unproblematic, unified, accomplished notion of national identity immediately breaks down.

In this dissertation I have developed a lens through which to analyze that process of national identification as it unfolds in practice, at the level of ordinary persons. My approach builds on insights from beyond the traditional literature on nationhood mentioned above. One classic study, Anderson’s famous work on ‘Imagined Communities’ (originally published in 1983, reprint 2006) did offer a useful point of departure. His notion directs us to the realm of imagination, beliefs, ideas, discourse and the generation of meaning for the study of national identification. This basic idea proved very useful, but
what Anderson himself did not explore are the concrete processes through which this national imagining is carried out and sustained on a daily basis.

To begin to unpack those concrete processes, I drew on the broader literature on collective identification. Barth’s social interactional perspective on the constitution of ethnic groups provided insights that could be extended to the study of national groups. Most valuable was his emphasis on the role of social actors themselves in categorizing themselves and others, and the idea of boundaries. To this, I added insights from later approaches (inter alia Cohen 1985) emphasizing the role of internal processes of shared meaning-making and symbolism within collective communities: the ‘cultural stuff within the boundary’. Another important source was more recent post modernist literature, with its emphasis on the ways in which identities in the contemporary era are ‘productions’ – always in process, and closely linked to questions of representation (e.g. Hall and Du Gay 1996). It is also in this literature that the fragmented, ambivalent and ever dynamic character of identities is emphasized. From postmodernist work one gets the firm and convincing message that there will always be multiple and often conflicting ways of giving meaning to one and the same identity category.

Let us look back for a moment at the question of the collective shared content, the cultural stuff that represents the imagined national community. One important collective resource on nationhood are discourses formulated at a political level. These repertoires may acquire a degree of stability, of durability over a longer stretch of time. This said, political repertoires about the nation are intrinsically ideological; they construct a particular version of the nation as part of a particular political project. They present a particular version of the themes of people, time and place that serves this political project. It follows that they are open for contestation, and that competing ideological repertoires are available at the level of the collective resources. In Chapter Two, the three main ideologies of nationhood that feed into national narratives worldwide – ethnocultural, civic and multicultural nationhood – were discussed. It was also suggested that in practice, political narratives on nationhood are often composed of a combination of elements of these different ideologies. Narratives on the nation are thus never singular but will always compete with counter-narratives or be prone to internal contradictions. In addition, national narratives are bound to vary across time. This latter variability was emphasized by Brubaker when he argued for an ‘eventful perspective’ on ‘nationness’ (1996). In this perspective, nationhood is not something that develops gradually over time but something that ‘crystallizes’ in reaction to short-term dramatic events. Lastly, postmodernist works helped me to understand the important role of discourse, of
language, as central site for the production of collective identities. Indeed, large
categorical identities such as national identity depend for a large part on ‘the production
of ways of speaking about them’ (Calhoun 1997:48).

From these different works and disciplinary perspectives two of the key premises of my
theoretical framework were derived: identities are constituted in processes of social
interaction and in these processes language plays a central role. A further source of
inspiration was the growing body of work on ‘personal nationalism’ that begins to fill the
hiatus in the literature on the reproduction of nationhood at the level of everyday life, by
ordinary people: an area that is gradually being covered by social psychological and
anthropological work.

Billig’s 1995 work on banal nationalism describes the everyday affirmation of national
identity as an active process, and highlights how this is reinforced by what he calls banal
symbolism: national flags, talk about the national ‘we’ and so on. Within anthropology,
scholars have paid attention to the question of how ‘the grand images presented by the
leadership’ are recast by ordinary persons ‘in the more familiar terms of local experience’
(Herzfeld 1993:49). Social psychologists introduced the term ‘idiosyncratic remakes’ to
describe these individual, local appropriations of collective identities (Klandermans and
De Weerd 2000:75).

Bringing all these insights together, a central element was still missing: an examination of
how these processes play themselves out in practice. Even though Brubaker made the
important call to study national identification as an eventful process, he did not
empirically examine this proposition himself. Of the studies mentioned above, only Billig’s
work contains a concrete but small empirical study – examining the reproduction of the
language of nationhood on the pages of British newspapers (Billig 1995:93). As Condor
argues, almost all accounts of commonsense national representations rely on analyses of
cultural texts (tourist brochures, national newspapers, political speeches, etc), but the
analysis of the talk of ordinary people is neglected (Condor 2000:180).

The aim of my study was not only to develop a comprehensive theoretical framework of
processes of national identification. It was also, and most importantly, to empirically
examine how these processes unfold in practice, at the level of ordinary people and how
meanings vary across persons and across time. If we focus on identification as a verb, we
must focus on where the action is. If nations are reproduced by people talking about their
nation, that is where the focus of the empirical analysis should be. What fascinated me
specifically about national identity talk is how expressions of national identity are
simultaneously composed of collective, shared repertoires and individual, idiosyncratic elements. National identity talk is never a neat, unproblematic reproduction of the collective, ideological repertoires. The reproduction of these collective repertoires is always flavoured by the immediate, local context of an utterance at the moment of their discursive instantiation. Every individual expression of identity is made up of a patchwork of collective and idiosyncratic elements, and inherently variable across different persons.

It is this complex interplay between the collective and the individual – between situated, local constructions of meaning and their wider societal context – that I have tried to grasp in the analysis in this dissertation.

If constructions of identity are variable across persons and across time, talk about the nation can be expected to reflect that variability. To address this variability across time, I have taken up Brubaker’s notion of an ‘eventful perspective’ on national identification and developed it further within an empirical research setting. The usefulness of an eventful perspective is that it helps us to recognize that the collective resources for national identity talk at the macro-social level consist of more than just carefully formulated political repertoires. People may draw on a wide variety of resources in their national identity talk, and these may include sudden events and developments at the macro-social level. National identity talk is highly responsive to sudden critical events that happen at the macro-social level and that in some way or another invoke questions of national identity. Such events are as much part of collective resources for identity talk as are the more durable, political and ideological repertoires, but they differ from the political repertoires in their suddenness and their unpredictability. If we truly want to grasp the complex interplay between the collective and individual, idiosyncratic elements that feed into identity talk we need to include the question of immediate events in the analysis. We need to ask ourselves how events of the moment impact on constructions of national identity, how individuals incorporate these events in their talk, and how constructions of national identity shift in the light of different, unfolding events. In other words: we need to apply an eventful perspective to processes of national identification.

Within the literature on nationhood and national identity, there are a few studies that have taken this next step to examine national identity talk in detail and in context. This is particularly in the field of social psychology; the works of Reicher and Hopkins (2001), Condor (2000, 2010), Condor and Abell (2006) and Wodak et al. (2009) are cases in point. Within sociology, this type of approach is rare, and many of the existing works are situated in the context of the United Kingdom (for instance Bechhofer et al. 1999, Kiely et al. 2001, 2005, Fenton 2007). Beyond the specific issue of national identity, however,
there is a wider social psychological literature on the construction of identity categories in talk. The field of critical discursive psychology – including studies on the production of racial (Wetherell and Potter 1992, Wetherell 2003) and ethnic identity categories (Verkuyten and de Wolf 2002) – offers interesting insights into the production of identities in talk. Within the specific South African context, the works of Steyn (2001 and 2004) and Steyn and Foster (2008) served as important sources of inspiration. This wide range of works helped me to develop an approach for the analysis of the construction of national identities in talk. Reicher and Hopkins’ 2001 work clearly demonstrates the variability of national identity construction across people and across time, labelled respectively ‘synchronic’ and ‘diachronic’ variability by the authors. They demonstrate how the same politician forwards a different version of the Scottish nation at various occasions, because he or she is mobilizing different constituencies at each occasion. Critics might argue that this finding is not surprising in a study of the talk of politicians, as they can be expected to strategically adjust their accounts to different audiences. But other works mentioned here, such as Condor’s 2000 work, suggest that strategically tuning an account to a given context is as much part of the talk of ordinary speakers as it is of politicians.

To understand these dynamics, the idea of identity claims as actions upon the world proved helpful, and this idea takes a central place in my analysis. Instead of analyzing what an identity utterance reveals about a person’s stable, internally felt attitude about his or her nation, we need to ask ourselves why a person would choose to formulate his or her national identity in a particular way at a particular moment. Critical discursive psychology departs from the assumption that individuals actively pick and choose from collectively available resources to compose a version that best suits the demands of a particular conversational context and audience. Analyzing the work that identity claims accomplish in context involves mapping out the broader macro-social context and the different ideological repertoires about the nation. It also involves examining how momentary, critical events feed into identity talk. The key point about events is to recognize that they too are open to multiple interpretations, and can be framed in particular ways to serve particular identity projects. The action orientation can thus be applied as much to the interpretation of events as to the reproduction of collective resources. But, importantly, the analysis must also include an examination of the immediate conversational context.

In this dissertation I have applied this approach to the analysis of a substantial body of interview material on South African national identity. My empirical study differs from the
work of Reicher and Hopkins because of its focus on ordinary speakers, in this case, young people. It is also different from Condor’s work in that all material is collected through focus groups. Following the premise that identities are constructed in processes of social interaction, I deliberately chose focus groups for my data collection. This way, I was able to capture complex processes of talk-in-interaction within groups, and this generated rich and complex insights into the ways in which speakers constantly tune their accounts to the immediate context and the audience present. Another feature that distinguishes my study is the temporal dimension. Because I collected interview talk with the same groups of people at two distinct moments in time, I was able to assess the variability of identity expressions not only between different persons but also between different moments in time.

Theoretical implications of the empirical analysis

In Chapters Five and Six, I described the specific empirical findings of the study in great detail. In this concluding chapter I will highlight the broader implications that can be derived from this study for our understanding of the process of national identification. First of all, my study demonstrates the validity of the constructivist perspective on national identification. Narratives on nationhood can rightly be regarded as ideological myths, aimed at promoting a particular version of the social world. Nationhood in itself goes unquestioned, and speakers almost automatically produce the building blocks of national narratives in terms of people, time and place. The interesting part of the analysis begins when we explore the particular meanings they give to these themes, and the ideologies informing these meanings.

The narrative or ideology on South African national identity that unquestionably emerged as dominant from this study was Mandela’s narrative of South Africa as a Rainbow Nation, with its subthemes of non-racialism, unity in diversity, equality and new patriotism. Even though within public and political debate competing narratives are clearly available, at the level of the ordinary talk collected here the Rainbow narrative went by and large unchallenged. My study clearly demonstrates how the repertoires formulated at a political level trickle down to the level of vernacular talk. In this sense, the distinction between formal and informal – or political and personal – nationalisms seems artificial: the two spheres are undeniably mutually reinforcing.

In terms of organizing people’s talk about their nation, the Rainbow narrative can thus be regarded as successful. Importantly, this is not to imply that it is also successful in bringing into effect a society along the lines of the discourse – a point to which I will
return in greater detail below. Instead, the narrative is about a society that is being aspired to, it is a prospective project, and not a description of reality as it is. This came out clearly in the study of the interplay between the two events and national identity talk, which will also be addressed below.

The strong presence of a collective repertoire about the nation tells us something important about national identity construction. It is through a successful myth that expressions of national identity acquire a degree of stability across persons and across time. Postmodernists have rightly challenged the idea of a stable, fixed essence for collective identities. But in their emphasis on eternal fragmentation and flux they have neglected the stability that results from strong, successful national narratives that have nestled themselves within a nation’s common sense. This stability has nothing to do with essentialist truths or the innate character of the nation in question. What it does is confirm the constructivist idea about the strength of nationhood as an ideology, and the ways in which a successful ideology that manages to touch the right chord with ordinary people may become a durable, internalized building block of national identity that is able to stand the test of time. This is possible as much for narratives based on ethnocultural nationalism as it is for those based on civic nationalism or, in the case of South Africa, multicultural nationalism. In the process, reified qualities may be attributed to the national narrative and come to be seen as a description of the way the world actually is.

The study also demonstrates how the Rainbow narrative in itself is clearly an action upon the world. It is an ideological project intended to promote a particular kind of society: a broad, inclusive society that allows for a sense of belonging for South Africans across different racial, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. A central function that the narrative fulfils is of ensuring inclusion. The idiosyncratic remakes manifest themselves when we start to look at the specific stakes different speakers have in inclusion. Depending on a person’s position within society, these stakes have been shown to be different. In the same vein, the question of what a speaker fears to be excluded from is variable. For the black African speakers in this study, for instance, exclusion from the national community is not so much the main threat but instead exclusion from their own black African community. Inclusion is never a given for any speaker, but a successful narrative offers a flexible solution to each. In the process, elements of the narrative might be redefined in order to serve these idiosyncratic interests. In the case of the Afrikaner speakers we saw how unity in diversity was given a distinct meaning in order to serve the interest of protecting language and cultural rights. The strength of the narrative is that it is able to accommodate these various different projects and still be upheld as a consistent
whole. Indeed, its success is that it offers that ‘umbrella of similarity uniting an otherwise very heterogeneous group of people’ (Jenkins 2008:134). The Rainbow narrative is successful in structuring ordinary speakers’ national identity talk across different racial groups.

The Rainbow narrative also serves to promote a particular image of South Africa on the international stage, or, in the language of inclusion: to include South Africa as a respected member of the international family of nation-states. This process of international positioning is equally dynamic and shifts in accordance with the rhetorical interests of the speaker. Here, too, the Rainbow narrative proved to be flexible enough to be adjusted to a wide range of identity projects.

One point – again – needs firm emphasis here: my study examined the ways people talk about their national identity. We must not fall into the trap of drawing conclusions about inner feelings of identity and belonging on the basis of a study of discourse. If the Rainbow narrative is the dominant narrative in my respondents’ talk, this by no means implies that my respondents feel like ‘Rainbow People’ (Moller, Dickow and Harris 1997). We should be cautious when drawing conclusions about people’s lived realities, and whether the values of the Rainbow narrative – non-racialism, unity, equality, reconciliation – are actually ‘experienced’ in practice. On the contrary, as we have seen, the somewhat formalistic reproductions of the Rainbow narrative were often contradicted by accounts of everyday experiences. It is these contradictory dynamics that allowed us to identify the strongly prospective character of the national identity talk: it is talk about the type of country South Africa is aspiring to be, rather than a description of South Africa as it is.

In Chapter Five, we already saw evidence of tensions between the type of society the narrative promotes and everyday experiences speakers refer to that attest to feelings of exclusion. That discrepancy became even more prominent in the analysis in Chapter Six that focused on the two events. The main finding was that the events either facilitated or hindered the identity project of the Rainbow narrative. The events changed the discursive field in which national identity is constructed, by shedding different light on the available resources. When comparing the talk of 2008 with that of 2007, the key thing to note was that there was a lot more ‘going on’ in the 2008 discussions. The talk about the xenophobic attacks took up significantly more space in the conversation, triggered very lengthy responses, and a lot more contestation and debates within each of the focus groups. In short, speakers had to do a lot more ‘discursive’ work to incorporate the event of the xenophobic attacks in their accounts about South African national identity. Most
important for the overall argument of this dissertation was what the analysis in Chapter Six revealed about the character and workings of ideological repertoires about the nation. More strongly even than the Rugby World Cup, the xenophobic event brought to the fore the prospective, future-oriented character of the Rainbow project, and the gap between that project and perceptions of everyday reality. The eventful perspective and the research set-up brought this future orientation into full focus. Evidence for this was found directly in the data, in the statements of several speakers who were suggesting that ‘this is not the nation South Africa is supposed to be’.

At the same time, the findings demonstrate the unrelenting strength of a successful ideological repertoire about nationhood, even in the face of events that clearly and evidently contradict these repertoires. The clear pattern in all focus groups was that, despite the contestation, the varying interpretations of the event and the complex discursive work that had to be done, the majority of speakers regrouped around the consensual project identity of South Africa as an inclusive Rainbow Nation towards the end of the conversation. The prospective identity project of South Africa as a Rainbow Nation, I suggest, served as a compass giving direction in times of upheaval caused by critical events.

This empirically based finding offers a novel contribution to our understanding of national identification. It implies that successful national narratives must have a dual quality: they must offer a degree of stability across time and a strong direction for the future, but they must simultaneously be malleable and flexible enough to be appropriated in idiosyncratic ways and to be maintained in the face of critical events of the moment. They must be available for individuals as resources in order to accomplish their interests in national identity talk under circumstances of change and flux. We have seen in this study that a good set of thematic building blocks for national identity offers a fairly durable set of resources that may stand the test of time. The narrative holds despite critical events, and events are assessed in relation to the dominant narrative. This resonates with what scholars have suggested about the need for national identities to be cast in the language of continuity, while being able to tactically respond to changing situations (Brown 2000:19).

Another key point in the data analysis was the clear confirmation of the idea that individuals are strategic agents, who skilfully adjust their accounts to a context. In my study, they were found to be actively engaging with and interpreting events in order to pursue their identity projects. If need be, they shifted from one end of the identity spectrum to the next in order to attune their accounts to the demands of the moment.
This is a different picture from the idea of people suddenly being ‘overcome with nationhood’, as suggested in the article by Brubaker. The data suggest that people are actively aware of the socially constructed nature of identity categories, confirming similar findings of Reicher and Hopkins (2001) and Condor (2000). Ordinary speakers understand the potential of discourses on nationhood very well, and they use it cleverly to advance their own cause. Their identity claims are as much projects that forward particular versions of the world as are the claims of politicians. They are also aware of the ideological dilemmas that are part of the discourse on South African nationhood, and they are skilfully managing these dilemmas in their talk. Indeed, the contrary themes of common sense represent the materials through which people can argue and think about their lives (Billig et al. 1988:8). This insight about the agency of individuals also speaks to the broader sociological debate on structure versus agency, formulated as follows by McCrone:

> Is our identity conveyed by the social and political structures which are the frames within which we operate, or do we have greater capacity to choose these frames and move between them? (McCrone 1998:34).

Based on this study, the answer would be the latter. My study clearly demonstrates how processes of national identification are characterized by the complex interplay between collective resources generated at the macro social or political level, and the idiosyncratic reproductions of individuals. The emphasis is on agency; speakers are not simply positioned by collective discourses but are actively using them for their own benefit, in ways that serve their own specific interests within a particular context.

A specific insight emerged from the use of focus groups as the method of data collection: in the South African context the Rainbow narrative has acquired a normative, imperative quality. This dimension could only be discovered by zooming in on the details of the conversational interactions within the groups. In this analysis it became clear how deviating from the normative discourse was problematic for participants. Speakers were clearly struggling to formulate their points of critique on the Rainbow nation in acceptable terms. In some instances, they were immediately corrected or silences by other members of the group. The Rainbow narrative thus has not only become commonsensical, it has also become normative. More generally, expressions of national pride and patriotic sentiment seem to be normative in the South African context (Eaton
It is plausible that survey studies – which are restricted to registering the first reaction of a respondent on the question of national identity – fail to capture this normative dimension. Qualitative interviews are able to probe beyond that first, socially desirable answer and explore the ambivalences and negotiations underneath. Because my interviews were held in a focus-group setting, I was able to analyze how this norm operated within the immediate social context of groups of South Africans of various backgrounds. This analysis further helps to illuminate our understanding of how contexts impact on national identity talk, especially the immediate social context of a group conversation – a question only marginally addressed in the literature on focus groups to date (with the exception of Hollander 2004). One-on-one interview settings would have been unable to bring this dimension so clearly to the foreground.

**Implications for understanding national identity in South Africa**

I began this study with a description of the highly erratic pattern that national identification and the ‘national mood’ in South Africa seemed to follow. The overall impression that emerged from the interview material of both 2007 and 2008 was indeed one of South African national identity construction being indissolubly linked to immediate events. Identity construction follows a capricious pattern, moving from one positive event via a negative event on to the next positive event. In other words: South African national identity is intrinsically eventful. Towards the end of the 2008 conversations, the topic that overshadowed the debate was the next anticipated critical event: the 2010 Soccer World Cup. That upcoming event was constructed as an opportunity for South Africa to confirm its prospective identity even more than the Rugby World Cup had done. While a handful of speakers were worried about the Soccer World Cup in the light of the xenophobic attacks, most believed it would firmly establish South Africa as a hospitable, successful, respectable, united and non-racial nation. In doing so, it would have the potential to annihilate the negative impact of the 2008 event. This unrelenting optimism could be interpreted as a hopeful sign for South Africa and for the chances for success of the nation-building project underway in that country.

At the same time, I have emphasized above that the dominance of the Rainbow narrative should not be taken as a measure of the sense of inclusion experienced in the everyday

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59 Interestingly, Condor’s work has shown the exact opposite for expressions of British patriotic sentiment. She concludes that ‘it seemed that respondents were hesitant about articulating positive accounts of their country which they oriented to as potentially hearable as chauvinistic prejudice’ (2000:193).
realities of these young South Africans, let alone the broader communities around them. In a similar vein, it should not be taken as evidence that the South African nation-building project has been successfully accomplished. If we read the accounts of these young focus group participants carefully, we see that they reflect the complexity of life in post-apartheid South Africa at a critical moment in its history, characterized by the power struggle between Mbeki and Zuma.

We also see that this generation, despite being ‘born free’, is not in any way ‘free’ from the historical legacies that continue to mark their everyday environments. For one, the voices of the generations before them repeatedly ‘take the stage’ when references to parents are made (and they are made frequently!). Optimistic, proud, forward looking and unitary accounts are interspersed with expressions of concern, insecurity and fatalism. A number of different factors give rise to these insecurities; most of them have been discussed in Chapter Three. To a certain extent, anxiety is fuelled by trends at the level of public discourse, such as the trend towards stigmatizing, exclusive discourses that manifests itself for example in the controversial accounts of former ANC Youth League leader Julius Malema. More significantly, however, are the more structural conditions within South Africa that will continue to present a serious challenge to the nation-building project; the extraordinary socio-economic inequality being the first and foremost among these. The ticking time-bomb under the nation’s stability is not racial antagonism, but it is the still unacceptably wide gap in living standards between the rich and the poor. In a recent, critical work on South Africa’s economic policy Hein Marais speaks of a country ‘pushed to the limit’ (2011). The South African government cannot but address the urgent situation of the vast amount of South Africans living under the poverty line. As Gevisser argues, there is a ‘crisis of expectation’ among the nation’s poorest (2009:2). But doing this requires drastic measures for redistribution, measures that are interpreted and perceived as threatening by the previously advantaged minority (and, as we have seen, also by the previously disadvantaged Indian and ‘Coloured’ communities). This constant, almost impossible balancing act between redistribution and reconciliation is the most important contradiction that runs through the new South Africa. At their core, most concerns and anxieties that are reflected in the accounts of my respondents have to do with this contradiction. Interestingly, the overwhelming majority of my respondents felt that the time for affirmative action was over – whether they were white learners in well-equipped schools or black African learners in the impoverished township schools. However, it is significant to emphasize that my study was limited to learners in urban schools. Two important groups of young people are not represented in my study: young people in rural areas and young people that have not made it to secondary schools at all,
‘school drop-outs’ or those that have never had the opportunity to attend school (orphans, street children). Even though I spoke to young people across different class backgrounds, all of them had opportunities the opportunities offered by education.\textsuperscript{60}

The contradiction between reconciliation and redistribution will not be resolved in the short term, as the transformation of the socio-economic situation requires cautious, incremental and long-term policies. Observers to the left of the spectrum are sceptical about the poverty gap being resolved at all, against a backdrop of dominant global capitalism and the neo-liberal path that post-apartheid governments have followed (Marais 2011). Despite promises to substantially address the plight of the poor, the current President Zuma has not introduced any fundamental changes in the economic policies pursued by his predecessors. Rather than being resolved, this contradiction is thus bound to remain a defining feature in both South African experiences and in the discourse on nationhood. For the time being, the Rainbow narrative appears to be strong enough to hold despite this contradiction, but for how long? Noteworthy in the interview material was also the strong presence of Nelson Mandela as a key point of reference. It remains to be seen what the strength of the Rainbow narrative will be in a post-Mandela era.

The second contradiction that is likely to remain part of the South African discourse on nationhood relates to the position of South Africa in Africa, a position that is fraught with ambivalence. It is in the hostility towards African non-nationals – documented to be widespread across South Africans of all racial and class backgrounds – that the malign face of nationalism rears its ugly head (Croucher 1998). One phenomenon particularly struck me in the analysis of the focus-group discussions: the multiple ways in which speakers attempted to downplay or trivialize the xenophobic attacks. Theoretically – and to the outside observer – the contradiction between the identity narrative of the new South Africa and the event of the xenophobic attacks seemed flagrantly obvious. In reality, the picture was not so clear-cut, and the accounts of my respondents attest to this complexity. Many speakers managed to uphold the Rainbow image in the face of the attacks. Here, too, the Rainbow narrative proved to be flexible enough to accommodate even an event that directly challenged its founding values. We saw that in addition to the Rainbow narrative, the event triggered another familiar discourse on South African identity: that of exceptionalism. The two narratives appeared to be compatible and speakers employed resources from both in their making sense of the attacks.

\textsuperscript{60} This said, it is well known that large numbers of South African matric graduates remain unemployed despite their qualifications.
As we have seen in Chapter Two, discourses on national identity – and more broadly, on collective identity – are about the simultaneous construction of similarity and difference. Even in the inclusive Rainbow narrative that has diversity as its key organizing principle, diversity is not unconditional. Diversity is tolerated among those who are ‘autochthons’ – autochthons in the South African case being equated with South African born citizens. In this case, autochthony is not based on ethnocultural markers – as is the case in other parts of the world – but on civic markers. What we see here is that the inherent dynamics of nationhood always include a form of differentiation on a particular level, and even a nation aspiring to a broad inclusive national identity project is not immune to scapegoating and ‘Othering’.

All these observations attest, again, to the strength of the Rainbow narrative – critical, negative events do not fundamentally alter the identity project aspired to for the future. They only alter the discursive resources that can be used to promote this project. The discursive construction of South African national identity thus clearly follows a pattern of ebb and flow, with one event minimizing contradictions and the next illuminating them, capriciously shifting across short spans of time. A question for discussion is whether this type of pattern is specific to the context of a nation-state with a short collective history, a transitional society that has only recently embarked upon the project of building a united nation like South Africa. Indeed, we could imagine that events have a stronger impact in a context where there is little inclusive collective history and more space for events to become moments of history-in-the-making. The 1995 Rugby World Cup triumph certainly has become such a moment in post-apartheid South Africa’s collective history. In a longer-established nation-state, it is less likely that a similar event would acquire such a status. Possibly, the pattern of ebb and flow is more explicit, and the volatility of national identification more visible in such a young nation-state. It is also highly possible that the strategic, future orientation of the national identity project is more pronounced in a context where the past is divided and offers no resources for a sense of collectiveness. As Alexander (2003) argues, in a country in transition, it matters a great deal which discourse is chosen.

61 Interestingly, most of the victims of the 2008 attacks could be seen as ethnoculturally close to their South African aggressors. For an interesting analysis of the socio-emotional dynamics of what has been labelled the ‘Afrophobia’ of South Africans, see Matsinhe 2011.
The fact that the Rainbow narrative is so clearly prospective does not in any case diminish its strength. By contrast, it remains resilient, and available to people in the face of the erratic pattern. It serves as a discursive guiding framework that people fall back on at the end of the conversations. A question for debate is whether the optimistic Rainbow project will be able to survive a longer series of negative, identity-discrediting events. In the timeframe that I studied, positive events alternated with negative events, with another positive event (the 2010 World Cup) already looming on the horizon. The question is how the optimistic narrative will fare in the face of a series of negative events.

Another factor that is possibly impacting on the findings of this study is its focus on the members of a particular generation, the ‘born free’. Is the tendency to end on a positive note and hold on to an optimistic future perspective something typical to a generation that is at the threshold of adulthood, with the future lying wide open in front of them? Specifically with regard to the South African context: is there a process at work by which the ‘born free’ generation ‘internalized’ the weight of expectation placed upon them by powerful actors in society (political leaders, their elders)? Does the task of becoming the generation that ‘makes the new South Africa work’ trickle down in the ways in which these young people talk about their nation? As stated already in the introduction, how appropriate is the term ‘born free’ when a generation carries both the legacy of the past and the weight of future expectations on its shoulders? These are poignant questions for discussion and interesting leads for further research. An evidence-based answer to these questions is not possible at this point. However, the mere fact that the optimistic Rainbow narrative is the dominant framework that organizes these young persons’ national identity talk is in itself significant. As Jenkins argued, when people collectively identify themselves and others, and conduct their lives in terms of those identities, those identities become intersubjectively real and have practical consequences (Jenkins 2008:111). When a particular discourse on our social world and the relations between people within that world becomes dominant in structuring our talk, it has become meaningful as a framework through which we look at the world. A framework that might – ultimately – become tangible and real in its consequences. Indeed, when phrased in an inclusive way, ideologies on nationhood might become the ‘glue’ that holds fragmented, segregated and diverse societies together, enabling an idea of ‘deep horizontal comradeship’ across members of a national community (Anderson 2006). Scholars have emphasized the importance of such ‘glue’ in the case of South Africa (Brown 2001; Chidester et al. 2003). The potential of inclusive repertoires about nationhood is that when they become meaningful for people, they can become a source of hope for future
progress. They can motivate a commitment to stay in a country, generate a sense of belonging and foster social cohesion.

**Implications for studying collective identification elsewhere**

In the introduction, I described how contemporary debates across the globe are dominated by questions about belonging and in- and exclusion. What are the implications of the insights from this study for processes of national– or more generally collective identification elsewhere?

At the level of scholarship, the analysis developed in this thesis of the dynamics of national identification as it unfolds in concrete practices – in this case discursive practices – can be translated to the study of processes of collective identification elsewhere. Whether the focus is on national, ethnic or any other categorical collective identity, the dynamic interplay between collective repertoires and idiosyncratic remakes is applicable in each of these processes. The action-oriented approach offers a useful method to examine why speakers articulate their collective identities in the way that they do. Whether it is in the case of young South Africans or second-generation immigrants in Western-Europe, whether the talk is about national or subnational identities, in each of these processes our analysis can be advanced by posing the question of ‘why this utterance here’? Why does this person choose to formulate this identity in this particular way in this context? What could be at stake here? What could be the impact of the audience on how the speaker constructs his identity? The eventful perspective can also be applied to different contexts. What is the interplay between events of the moment and constructions of national identity? This way, we begin to breakdown the commonsensical notion that identities are essentialist, unchangeable items that we carry with us and that we reproduce unproblematically.

For policymakers working more concretely on questions of integration and cultural diversity, it can be insightful to approach identity positions from this angle and to emphasize the agency of individuals. That approach helps us to see potential for change, for the shifting of positions, the transcending of dividing lines, even in the most rigid of all identity conflicts. For at their core, all processes of identification are dynamic and contextual. This might contribute to taking the sting out of the identity politics that paralyze so many debates on belonging in nation-states across the globe.

A final comment needs to be made on the specific context of South Africa. On the one hand – as we have heard so often in relation to South Africa – the national context is
unique in several respects, the most important reason obviously being the transitional dimension emphasized above. The discursive space for the construction of identities in South Africa opened up post-1994, and a radically new narrative on nationhood was possible and necessary. This description is oversimplifying the immense baggage from the past weighing upon this process, baggage that we have seen continues to greatly challenge the project. But the core point here is that in the South African case a new, fresh nation-building project was embarked upon, something that is not applicable to nation-states in Western-Europe that are wrestling with their identities. This opened the way for South Africa to formulate a broadly inclusive narrative that perhaps befits the contemporary era better than the narratives that developed over time in its Western European counterparts. These latter narratives might be more straightforward, but they are also commonly infused with ethnocultural elements that lack the flexibility of the Rainbow narrative. Would it not be interesting if these ‘established’ nation-states take up the challenge to redefine their dominant discourses on nationhood all together? If, instead of polishing up old, reactionary versions, they would start from scratch, taking their changed societies as a starting point?

For despite increasing global ties, transnational connections, and redefinitions of the concept of place, the language of nationhood remains by and large unquestioned as a dominant framework in the organization of our social worlds. To quote from Calhoun: ‘As moderns we are all participants in the discourse of nations, whether we like it or not’ (Calhoun 1993:214). Where the room for manoeuvre is, is at the level of the meanings we attribute to national identities.