

Intergroup Contact, Social Context and Racial Ecology in South Africa

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In 1956, South African race relations were like what race relations must have been in my native South about a decade before my birth. Indeed, there is a 20- to 30-year lag in much of South African history compared with that of the American South.

(Pettigrew, 1993, p. 163)

In 1956, Thomas Pettigrew visited the Union of South Africa with his supervisor and mentor, Gordon Allport. He spent six months working at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Natal in Durban, continuing his research on racism, intrigued by the parallels between South Africa and his native American South.

Pettigrew's work in this period addressed individual and societal racism, and the corresponding political issues of segregation and desegregation. The prevailing theories of prejudice were individualistic, the Authoritarian Personality taking centre stage (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950; Duckitt, 1992). While in South Africa, Pettigrew conducted a series of projects investigating race attitudes and race perception, social distance, authoritarianism, and conformity (Pettigrew, 1958; 1960). Of most significance was the 1958 comparative study on the relationship between authoritarianism and racist attitudes in South Africa and the American South. This study showed that while the level of racism in both places was manifestly higher than in most other regions, the level of authoritarianism and the correlation between race attitudes and authoritarianism did not differ. These findings

led Pettigrew to reassess the role of personality factors in racial prejudice in favor of a sociocultural explanation linking the heightened levels of prejudice to conformity to the politics, norms, and supremacist ideology of the South African and American Southern societies. This argument was influential then, and the paper is still considered seminal (Hogg & Abrams, 2001).

Pettigrew's work offers a rich legacy for social psychological research, as this volume attests. A key principle in this heritage is that research is not merely an intellectual activity; it ought to be actively political and committed to social justice. This is exemplified in Pettigrew's research and advocacy on intergroup contact, which is widely regarded as an important mechanism for improving intergroup relations. In this chapter we interrogate the role of interracial contact in race relations in South Africa. We begin with an overview of the small body of research conducted during Apartheid, and then discuss research conducted after the instatement of universal franchise in South Africa. A particular focus will be our own work in this area.¹

Intergroup Contact: The Apartheid Years

Race segregation and discrimination did not begin with Apartheid. From the arrival of the Dutch settlers in 1652, the history of South Africa was marked by intergroup conflict. Expansionist wars over land and resources were fought at various times and in various combinations between the Dutch (or Boer) settlers, the Khoisan, Xhosa, Zulu, Sotho, and Ndebele, and the British. The ultimate victors (usually the Boers or the British) imposed racialized privilege on the vanquished (when they were Black), including seizure of their land, restriction of residence and movement, and invariably disenfranchisement.

This period of South African history follows a similar pattern to other European colonies. What is different is the period after 1900, and particularly after 1948, when the vision of a totally segregated South Africa was given legislative and political force. While the rest of the world was moving towards the elimination of legislative and sanctioned race discrimination, the South African government was elaborating and enforcing the extensive segregationist and racist program of "Apartheid."² This program made White South Africa globally infamous for nearly half a century. People were assigned to one of four race groups at birth (Whites and the three Black groups—Africans, Coloreds and Indians/Asians), which were rigidly separated in all aspects of life, including education, residence, and leisure,

reserving the best for the White group. Entire countries within the national borders were invented for Black people, and they were forcibly removed to them, causing immense hardship. A vast repressive political and military apparatus was created in order to oversee this phantasmagoric scheme. (For a more extensive introduction to the history of Apartheid in South Africa, see Worden, 2000).

The segregationist policies of Apartheid South Africa led to its characterization as a "non-contact society" (Foster & Finchilescu, 1986). However, this did not imply that there was absolutely no contact between race groups. Interracial contact existed, but was largely hierarchical (e.g., boss-servant) or bureaucratic (state agent-suppliant), and was frequently oppressive and violent. Occasional exceptions resulted from "loopholes" in Apartheid legislation, allowing a small number of Black students to enroll at "White" universities and attend private or church schools. This near exclusion of positive interracial contact undoubtedly discouraged research on the effects of intergroup contact, but the sociopolitical context was also important. Apartheid ideology was deeply internalized by the White population. In addition, the government controlled and censored radio, television, newspapers, and school curricula, limiting the potential for intellectual resistance. Only a small number of activist academics produced research and writings antagonistic to Apartheid, placing themselves at considerable risk (Savage, 1981). Many were placed under house-arrest or assassinated (e.g., Rick Turner, David Webster), and their writing was often banned or restricted (e.g., Govan Mbeki, Ruth First). In this climate, it is perhaps no surprise that few researchers (most of whom were White) questioned the desirability of segregation or actively promoted the reduction of prejudice. However, it cannot be gauged whether the limited research in this area stems from the lack of contact opportunities or the political pressures.

South African research on intergroup contact dates mostly from the 1950s and early 1960s, before the Nationalist government had consolidated its power, or from the 1980s when the regime was losing its grip under extreme pressure from resistance forces both within and outside the country. The main sites for research on interracial contact were neighborhoods or educational institutions.

It is unclear what predictions should have been made for the effects of intergroup contact at that time. The contact hypothesis suggested that interracial contact, under specific conditions, would diminish prejudice. However, the extreme prohibition against interracial mixing coming from authoritative institutions in South Africa violates the most basic of Allport's optimal conditions. Pettigrew and Tropp

(2006) have argued that Allport's conditions are facilitative rather than necessary. Their findings demonstrate that contact can have a positive effect without the optimal conditions being present. However, other research has shown that contact that is perceived as threatening or anxiety-provoking can exacerbate prejudice instead of diminishing it (Paolini, Hewstone, Cairns, & Voci, 2004; Stephan & Stephan, 1985).

Of the small body of research, only one study was quasi-experimental and could make any claim of establishing a causal relationship. Luiz and Krige (1981) instituted a contact intervention among White and Colored school girls. They measured the race attitudes of the White girls before and after the contact, and compared these with a group that did not have contact. This study provided clear evidence of the positive effect of contact on intergroup attitudes, an effect that was still evident a year later (Luiz & Krige, 1985).

In another rare study of schoolchildren in this period, Mynhardt (1982) considered the attitudes of White English-speaking girls from ten private secondary schools who had mixed classes containing some Black children. Significantly more negative attitudes were found in the respondents who had contact with Black children than those who had no contact (reported in Mynhardt & du Toit, 1991). A sociometric study by Melamed (1969) of a racially mixed class consisting of African, Indian and Colored university students also found strong ethnocentrism and reluctance to mix.

The only pre-democracy study on residential contact was conducted by Russell (1961). She interviewed members of a mixed Durban neighborhood, and found a range of different attitudes, some people refusing to interact with neighbors of a different race, and others developing friendships. In support of the contact hypothesis, she found a correspondence between lower degrees of prejudice and greater degrees of residential proximity.

A number of studies used contact in the work situation as the site of research. Spangenberg and Nel (1983) compared White lecturers working at a Colored university (with Colored colleagues and students) with a group of White lecturers in an almost all-White university. The contact group was found to have more positive attitudes to Coloreds than the non-contact group. However, this difference was not as strong when only Afrikaans-speaking respondents were considered. This study also found that cross-race friendships were associated with more positive race attitudes. Finchilescu (1988) investigated the effect of interracial contact among nurses training at private hospitals. One hospital trained White and Indian nurses, another trained African and Indian nurses, and the two non-contact hospitals trained White and African

nurses respectively. Interracial contact had a positive effect on attitudes (toward Indians), but only for the White respondents. Indian and African respondents exhibited strong ethnocentric attitudes. Van Dyk (1988, cited in Mynhardt & du Toit, 1991) considered the relationship between White housewives and their Black domestic servants, which was a site of extensive interracial contact during the apartheid years. She found that the housewives were generally positive towards their domestic servants, but these attitudes did not extend to the Black group in general.

A study in 1986 investigated the effect of a number of contact variables (amount of social contact, general contact, and experience of contact) as well as a number of demographic variables and group identification on the attitudes of Afrikaans-speaking Whites and Coloreds to each other in the Western Cape (Bornman & Mynhardt, 1991). Attitudes were generally negative, influenced by gender and group identification. However contact, particularly social contact, was found to be associated with more positive attitudes among White Afrikaners, but not for the Colored sample. The exception was the working Colored subsample, where experience of contact was associated with more positive attitudes to White Afrikaners. This asymmetric result reflects a frequent finding in the literature—the relation between contact and prejudice is weaker, and often qualitatively different, for subordinate groups relative to dominant groups (Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005).

These studies do not provide much support for the notion that contact improved intergroup relations in South Africa during Apartheid. With the exception of the Luiz and Krige (1981) study, the studies were correlational in nature, lacked longitudinal measures and generally involved anomalous situations. Thus, the positive results cannot be causally attributed to the effect of intergroup contact. However, neither do the studies indicate that contact leads to deterioration of race relations, one of the central justifications of the Apartheid regime. The obvious point is that the political and ideological context was overwhelming, and it would have been foolhardy in the Apartheid years to expect that anything but radical and fundamental political change could improve intergroup relations.

The Post-Apartheid Years

The Apartheid edifice began to disintegrate in the late 1980s, leading to the unbanning of the African National Congress (ANC) and the

1990 release of Nelson Mandela, in what has been called a bloodless revolution. In 1994 the first democratic elections took place, and the ANC came to power. Apartheid laws were scrapped and desegregation commenced. However, sites of contact remain limited, and there is still polarization of wealth and resources along race lines. This, together with cultural and linguistic differences, has retarded racial transformation. Neighborhoods were slow to change and by 2001 were barely more integrated than under Apartheid (Christopher, 2005). The desegregation of schools was accomplished under resistance, with frequent eruptions of intergroup violence among pupils (Vally & Dalamba, 1999). The high levels of crime, which had previously afflicted mainly the Black communities, spread to the White suburbs. The fear of crime, often seen as racially based by Whites, further deters intergroup contact. Thus, the main sites of naturally occurring racial contact in South Africa are educational institutions and the workplace. The university context arguably provides the best instance of an interracial contact situation in which the groups meet on a relatively equal status basis.

The number of studies testing the effect of contact on race relations, post 1990, is still small. A number of surveys have been conducted, giving largely positive results. Gibson's 2000/2001 survey questioned a representative sample of 3,700 South Africans and found strong relationships between reported level of interracial contact and an index of positive attitudes toward race reconciliation—Africans: $r = 0.24$; Whites: $r = 0.45$; Coloreds: $r = 0.38$; Indians $r = 0.40$ (Gibson, 2004a). Finchilescu, Tredoux, Muianga, Mynhardt, and Pillay (2006) surveyed 2,559 African and White students from four universities, measuring the amount of interracial contact and prejudice using both an affective prejudice scale and a social distance measure. They found strong inverse relationships (i.e., the greater the amount of contact, the lower the affective prejudice) for all groups in these universities, ranging in magnitude from $r = -0.23$ to $r = -0.56$. Somewhat lower correlations were found on the social distance measure, particularly in the case of the Black students. Cross-race friendships and experience of contact were also important predictors of improved intergroup relations. Dixon, Durrheim, and Tredoux (2007) report a nationally representative survey of 1,917 Black and White South Africans, in which self-reported contact was correlated with support for policies and practices aimed at rectifying the injustices of Apartheid. They found that among Whites, greater contact was associated with greater support for such measures, but that the reverse pattern held true for Blacks—greater contact led to greater opposition to such measures. This pattern may be difficult

to interpret, but it does resonate with the frequently reported asymmetric contact effect for minorities or subordinate groups.

A number of recent studies have considered the effect of contact in school and university settings. Holtman, Louw, Tredoux, and Carney's (2005) study involved 1,119 learners in 18 schools consisting of African, Colored, White English-speaking and White Afrikaans-speaking adolescents. A number of measures assessed contact (i.e., in the school, outside the school premises, quality of contact), and attitudes of each group toward others. Contact, and particularly contact outside of school, emerged as a strong predictor of positive intergroup attitudes in all subsamples, and after taking additional potentially important variables into account (e.g., strength of ingroup identity). Additionally, Moholola and Finchilescu (2006) compared the attitudes toward Whites of Black learners who attended a multiracial school with those attending an all-Black school. Black students' attitudes were significantly more positive in the multiracial school; furthermore, the amount of contact with Whites they reported was significantly related to less-prejudiced attitudes.

An array of small group programs aimed at improving interracial relations have been developed and tried in South Africa. Central to all these programs is that they bring together people from different races to discuss or work on mutual tasks. Most of these programs report a decrease in prejudicial attitudes (Druker, 1996; Louw-Potgieter, Kamfer, & Boy, 1991; Naidoo, 1990; Nott, 2000; Wilhelm, 1994). Many of these studies are unpublished theses, often using qualitative measures. An exception is the study by McCool, du Toit, Petty, & McCauley (2006), reporting a program of prejudice-reduction seminars. The seminars failed to produce changes in scores on measures of intergroup attitudes.

Given the small number of interracial studies conducted in the dozen or so years of democracy, it could be argued that these results present an optimistic picture of the prejudice reducing effect of intergroup contact in South Africa. However, the causal sequence problem (Pettigrew, 1998) remains an issue—we cannot be sure that it was the contact that resulted in improved race attitudes. It could equally be argued that the participants who agreed to work or take part in these interracial contact situations may already have been less prejudiced. The strongest effects of intergroup contact occur where it is possible to control extraneous variables, and to ensure the (facilitating) conditions identified by Allport (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). This leads to more confidence that the effects are causal, but it also raises concerns about the ecological validity of the contact hypothesis.

In order for intergroup contact to have a positive effect on intergroup relations in naturalistic settings, groups must come into contact with each other as a regular part of their lives.

The question, therefore, goes to the frequency and nature of interracial contact. Of central concern is the extent of "natural" intergroup contact in society; how this manifests; and how it is perceived by the protagonists. Are opportunities for contact under favorable conditions available, or are they actively avoided? In the remaining part of the chapter we will discuss recent attempts to address these questions in South Africa. Specifically, we will consider investigations that estimate the incidence of interracial contact and friendship, as well as studies that investigate interracial contact *in situ*.

The Ecology of Interracial Contact

A strong theme in social psychological research in post-Apartheid South Africa, and in our own work, is the study of what could be called "the ecology of interracial contact" (Dixon & Durrheim, 2003, p. 4). This research investigates the interactions between race groups in a variety of contexts, using a variety of methods from surveys to observational methods.

Self-Reported Interracial Contact

Several nationally representative social surveys have been conducted in South Africa in the period 2001–2006, and they have gathered data that allow us to estimate the amount and quality of intergroup contact. Gibson (2004b) reports a representative nationwide survey ($N = 3,727$), conducted in cooperation with the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR); and Durrheim and colleagues have recently conducted a representative cellular telephone survey on a sample of 2,091 South Africans (Dixon et al., 2007). We will report the data for only African and White South Africans here (which together constitute over 90% of the South African population).

Each of these surveys posed specific questions about the amount and kinds of contact respondents experienced with members of other groups, in a variety of formal and informal settings. Though posed in slightly different ways, the results are very similar: They reveal a racially skewed picture. A near majority (> 40%) of Africans have very little contact of any kind with Whites, inside or outside of work settings, whereas most Whites report some degree of daily or weekly contact.

When questioned about social contact (e.g., contact in one's own home), more than 60% of Africans (as opposed to 25% of Whites) report no contact (Gibson, 2004b). The survey by Durrheim and colleagues also found that most African respondents reporting interracial interactions with Whites indicated that the White people they interacted with were of higher social status, whereas most White respondents reported interactions with Africans of equal social status. The majority of both African and White respondents reported that such contact as did occur was cooperative.

Interracial Friendship

Pettigrew's (1998) restatement of contact theory stresses the centrality of cross-race friendship. But if interracial contact is to have significant positive effects in real intergroup settings, then cross-race friendships need to arise in the ordinary course of group interaction. To what extent is this happening?

In Gibson's (2004b) survey, prevalence of interracial friendship in South Africa was estimated using a rating scale. He found that the majority of Black South Africans have no White friends at all, while only a small number of Whites (6.6%) report having "quite a number of African friends" (p. 163). It should of course be remembered that Africans make up approximately 80% of the South African population. It is thus unsurprising that most friendships that Africans have are with other African people. What is more pertinent is the rate at which cross-race friendship occurs when the opportunity arises.

University campuses may provide such opportunities. Prior to 1990, South African universities were highly segregated along race lines by law, but have changed dramatically since that time. For instance, the percentage of White students enrolled at the University of the Witwatersrand changed from 91.2% in 1980 to 36% in 2005. Many universities make provision for accommodating students on campus, and residences that house students usually have considerable numbers of both Black and White students. Since students share common facilities, such as dining and television/leisure rooms, a considerable amount of face-to-face interracial contact in these settings seems inevitable.

In a recent longitudinal study conducted over a six month period, Schrieff (2005) examined the formation of friendships among first-year university students in mixed race residences located in a university with a strong liberal reputation (University of Cape Town). Few students knew any other students on entrance. By the end of the

study, 285 friendships had been formed of which only 51 were cross-race. Friendships developed mostly along race lines. This pattern of friendship choices was matched by starkly segregated seating patterns in the residence dining rooms. Schrieff measured these using the dissimilarity (D) and interaction indices (xPy), treating individual tables as areal units with scores varying between 0 and 1, in opposite directions. She found average values of .9 and .04, respectively, indicating nearly complete segregation. Unfortunately, Schrieff has not yet reported cross-lagged or other analyses that could shed light on longitudinal change in this sample.

Observational Studies of Interracial Contact

Observational studies of interracial contact situations in South Africa have been conducted using beaches (e.g., Dixon & Durrheim, 2003), student refectories (Schrieff, Tredoux, Dixon, & Finchilescu, 2005), open outdoor spaces (Tredoux, Dixon, Underwood, Nunez, & Finchilescu, 2005) and nightclubs (Tredoux & Dixon, 2007) as research sites. This approach is rooted in the contention that research has tended to divorce intergroup dynamics from their societal contexts, failing to attend to the lived experience of intergroup interactions (Dixon & Durrheim, 2003). Observation and description, therefore, serve the function of contextualizing intergroup contact situations, of telling us something about the role of contact in the total intergroup repertoire. This question has a direct political purpose—if contact between races is to improve the state of race relations in South Africa, can we expect it to occur as a consequence of encounter?

The answer from a study of beaches on the South Coast of Kwa-Zulu Natal is “no” (Dixon & Durrheim, 2003). That study set out to investigate patterns of racial interaction, but the researchers discovered that interaction rarely occurred, and more importantly, that it was effectively precluded by the way people positioned themselves on the beaches spatially and temporally. Whites tended to arrive well before Blacks, early in the day, and usually left the beach before Blacks arrived in sizeable numbers. When Blacks and Whites were on the beach simultaneously, they occupied separate spaces. Indeed, time animations show a movement of Whites away from “Black spaces” as these become occupied, and an analysis of “umbrella spaces” (the base “areal unit” declared by the researchers) shows that 99.9% of these were racially homogeneous ($N = 2,654$). In short, race groups structured their encounters with each other to achieve segregation, and by inference to avoid contact with members of other race groups. Face-to-face

research interviews with several dozen people on the beach reinforced this inference, Whites declaring that they felt “pushed out” of the space, and Blacks declaring that Whites appeared to be “running away from them.”

Several observational studies of student residences at South African universities point to similar patterns of self-segregation and apparent avoidance of contact. Schrieff et al. (2005) demonstrated that Black and White students in two (male and female) residences self-segregated in a shared dining room at multiple levels; Alexander (2003) found the same pattern in the same residence one year later. Segregation on campus and the disinclination to form cross-race friendships are experienced by Black students as a system of exclusion. Woods (2001) reports a study of Black South African university students, who revealed that under the apparent “segregated but harmonious co-living” of race groups on campus, relations were in fact tense. Intergroup relations on campus were understood by respondents as ordered by “unspoken rules” to remain apart. While some reported agreeable relationships with White students, the vast majority experienced their White peers as racist. Aware that race groups on campus congregated in separate areas, Whites were perceived by Black students as making a concerted effort to maintain racial distance through consistently preferring separate social spaces.

Segregated seating patterns within a university residence dining room may simply reflect cross-race friendship choices: students sitting with friends and not making a conscious decision to avoid other races. However, an observational study found that segregation occurred in a particularly “fluid” informal space on one university campus (Tredoux et al., 2005). The space in question is a set of steps leading up to the central auditorium, which is used by students as an informal gathering area, typically over lunch. Spatio-temporal analysis of seating patterns over 5 days showed self-segregation of race groups in this space, and also showed the consistency of this segregation, Black and White students typically occupying the same areas on a daily basis. Data collected in a similar 5-day period two years later showed the long-term replication of this normative spatial racialization, despite the replacement of most students on campus through graduation and new enrolment.

The reproduction of “racial territories” as an apparent function of racial encounter is also shown in a set of studies conducted in the nightclub area of Cape Town (Tredoux & Dixon, 2007). Eight nightclubs that were reputed to have a good degree of racial mixing were selected for study. These were sampled at various times over two

years. Distribution of race groups over these clubs supported the general impression of racial integration. However, as the granularity of analysis was made finer, it became clear that the distribution of race groups was uneven. Whites and Blacks consistently occupied separate sub-sections of the clubs, and rarely sat at the same tables. They also rarely interacted—more than 80% of interactions involving White people were monoracial in character, for instance (but note the somewhat different figure of 57% for Black people).

Conclusion

What Does the Ecology of Racial Interaction in South Africa Tell Us?

An essential condition for interracial contact to improve intergroup relations is that race groups do come into face-to-face contact a significant amount of the time, and that they allow their interaction to unfold in a manner that promotes intimate acquaintance. It stands to reason that an important adjunct to contact theory is the study of race groups in interaction, in natural settings—what Dixon and Durrheim (2003) refer to as a “racial ecology.” This requires that we should attempt to establish the dominant behavioral forms that emerge when race groups are spatially and temporally copresent.

We have described a number of studies in South Africa that attempt this. The picture they reveal is one of continuing and profound racial isolation. There is, in particular, little contact of an intimate kind, and few cross-race friendships or marriages are formed. This is not explicable as a function of differences in spatial demography, as South African university students fail to make cross-race friends in significant numbers even when the opportunities are extremely good. Observational studies of interracial contact situations suggest that race groups in interaction self-segregate, actively avoiding contact.

This research does not say that intergroup contact does not “work.” It says instead that contact is not occurring, at least in South Africa at present. South Africa has only had universal franchise for a dozen or so years, and there is a bitter legacy of political and legal oppression, as well as pervasive social and economic inequality. This racial ecology may be specific to the South African situation. However, the intransigence of racial segregation and inequality in the United States (Anderson & Massey, 2001), despite considerable public investment in desegregation, suggests there are similarities.

One potentially fruitful line of future research concerns the determinants of contact avoidance. Prejudice itself is an obvious factor, as are socialization and conformity to social norms. Another obstacle to interracial contact is individuals’ anxiety about how they will be received by members of the other group in a contact situation. A form of metaperception termed metastereotypes is a useful concept here. Metastereotypes refer to the stereotypes that members of a group believe that members of an outgroup hold of them (Vorauer, Main, & O’Connell, 1998). Some of our recent research has shown that metastereotypes are a significant predictor of intergroup attitudes and desire for contact. A number of experimental studies involving simulated interracial contact suggest that metastereotypes are more important than prejudice in accounting for the anxiety felt by individuals in an intergroup contact situation (Finchilescu, 2006). Metastereotypes also emerged as significant factors in understanding prejudicial attitudes in the survey by Finchilescu et al. (2006) and the study by Moholola and Finchilescu (2006).

In this chapter we have shown that even in the worst days of Apartheid there were indications that intergroup contact may improve intergroup relations, particularly in laboratory and quasi-experimental studies. But, the numerous studies highlighting the persistence of informal segregation points to the necessity for research to address this issue. Understanding and combating resistance to interracial contact and mixing is an important step in improving intergroup relations.

Notes

- 1 This research was supported by Grant 02/21 from the South Africa Netherlands Research Programme on Alternatives in Development (SANPAD).
- 2 Beinart and Dubow (1995) argue that the various laws in existence in South Africa before the Apartheid era were more extreme than the “Jim Crow” laws in the United States.

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