

The Social Psychology of (De) Segregation: Rigorously Studied and Poorly Conceptualised

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The social psychological study of desegregation has been guided by contact theory and championed by contact research for over fifty years. During this time great inroads have been made both in theory and methodology. This paper argues that notwithstanding these developments, social psychology has, to a large degree, left the meaning of 'desegregation' poorly conceptualised. The paper argues that this conceptual poverty can be traced back to the manner in which early social psychologists conceptualised segregation. Consequently, and through a 'reductionist imperative', social psychology equates intergroup contact with desegregation, which the paper argues is both historically and politically misinformed. In the South African context, such an understanding is a disservice to the people who suffered as a result of segregation that was at the centre of colonial and apartheid regimes. Scholarly debate on the meaning of desegregation is needed.

After World War II, the study of intergroup relations was taken up by social psychology in the USA and was specifically championed by Contact Theory, the brain child of Gordon Allport, which he outlined in his text *The Nature of Prejudice* in 1954. At about the same time, and in fact even before Allport published his text (that would later become seminal in social psychology and contact studies) the *Brown v. Board of Education* case was underway before the Topeka Supreme Court. The Supreme Court ruling on this case set the stage for a 'social experiment' (Forbes, 1997) for social psychology and specifically for Contact Theory. Leading social psychologists and other social scientists at the time of the *Brown v. Board of Education* case made a significant contribution (on behalf of social science) toward the ruling of the Supreme Court. The social scientific input made by social psychologists became known as the 'Social Science Statement in *Brown v. Board of Education*'.

Writing about the contested meanings of social psychology Ratele (2003) reminds us that

"...definitions are never entirely neutral and innocent, because how a discipline is defined determines what it regards as worth studying, as well as which questions it asks and which answers it seeks. And the questions it asks and the answers it searches for serve as lenses through which it perceives and analyses objects, events, processes, interactions, and relationships. In general, a definition of a discipline directs the attention and activities of those working within it" (p. 11).

How segregation and desegregation are understood and defined in social psychology and specifically in the area of intergroup relations is not a matter devoid of political meaning. There are at least two reasons for this. First, the study of intergroup relations carries all the weight of the histories of colonisation, oppression and dehumanisation of one social group by another. In other words, it is a study that most directly attempts to

deal with the consequences of past political regimes and state policies that influenced and shaped how nations and various social groups within nations related to each other. The problematics, theories, concepts, methods and research programs in the study of intergroup relations are, as they have been in the past, a response to the works of past governments. Importantly too, they are a response to the attempts and agendas of present governments to redress past inequalities and divisions. Second, Contact Theory, which has guided studies on intergroup relations for more than a century, is now regarded as “one of psychology’s most effective strategies for improving intergroup relations” (Dovidio et al., 2003, p. 5). Contact Theory (together with Social Identity Theory) has also influenced recent models¹ that claim a stake in improving intergroup relations and promoting desegregation (or what others call social inclusion). For these reasons it is conceivable that the conceptualisation of segregation and desegregation informs the questions asked and the answers sought by these models.

This paper argues that from the inception of the social psychological study of intergroup relations, social psychology has had a conceptualisation of segregation, given to it by the authors of the social science statement, that is both historically and politically misinformed. Second, I argue that following this definition and logic the discipline has, to date, an equally depoliticised and over simplistic understanding of desegregation as interracial mixing.

Before turning to the arguments of this essay, perhaps a few words about the *Brown v. Board of Education* will help to contextualise the essay and particularly the first argument. The *Brown v. Board of Education* (which combined five cases from Delaware, Kansas, South Carolina, Virginia and Washington, DC) case was not the first of its kind to appear in a court of law with earlier cases dating back to 1849. Like the cases prior to it, *Brown v. Board of Education* was a legal (political and social) case against a racially segregated educational system (*Brown Foundation*, 2004). At a legal level, the case questioned the meaning of equality guaranteed to all American citizens by the Fourteenth Amendment of the US Constitution,

All persons born or naturalised in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any state deprive any person of life, liberty, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws” (cited in Forbes, 1997, p. 43).

The Supreme Court ruling also set the scene for the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960 in the USA (*Brown Foundation*, 2004).

¹ *De-Categorisation Model* (Brewer & Miller, 1984); *The Common In-group Identity Model* (Gaertner et al., 1989; Gaertner et al., 2000); *Mutual Intergroup Differentiation Model* (Hewstone & Brown, 1986; Vivian et al., 1997); and the *Dual-Identity Model* (Dovidio et al., 1998; Gaertner et al., 1994, 1999; Hornsey & Hogg, 2001).

THE SOCIAL SCIENCE STATEMENT AND THE CONCEPTUALISATION OF SEGREGATION

This section of the paper goes to some detail in outlining the ‘social science statement’ submitted by Clark et al. (1954, 2004) in the *Brown v. Board of Education*. The aim is to show that the conceptualisation of segregation given by these authors and the logic that supports it is historically and politically misinformed.

Social psychological research on intergroup contact after World War II began with the ruling of the Supreme Court of the United States of America in 1954 in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case. The Supreme Court commissioned prominent social psychologists at the time to pronounce on the matter before the Court from a social scientific viewpoint drawing on the social scientific knowledge fund available at the time. Kenneth Clark tabled the ‘Social Science Statement in the *Brown v. Board of Education* of Topeka Supreme Court Case’ titled ‘The Effects of Segregation and the Consequences of Desegregation’ before the Court along with thirty-one other social scientists.

Forbes (1997) argues that the contact hypothesis must be acknowledged among the *causes* of the changes in law and policy that began in 1954. The equal-but-separate principle had been used by the Supreme Court for more than half a century in making judgments on cases and in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* case the Court needed grounds to reject this principle. According to Forbes (1997) the issue was less that the Court lacked grounds to reject the principle than that the Court wanted to avoid using reasons that would undermine its own authority and thereby imply that previous Court justices had been unjust in their rulings. The Court justices, in other words, were seeking to do away with the equal-but separate principle that had been established by the same court in 1896 in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case.

In explaining its decision, the Court held that:

“Whatever may have been the extent of psychological knowledge at the time of Plessy v. Ferguson, this finding [that segregation has a tendency to retard the educational and mental development of Negro children and to deprive them of some of the benefits they would receive in a racially integrated school system] is amply supported by modern authority” (Forbes, 1997, p. 46).

In its decision then, the court argued that the separation of black children from their [white] peers “solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely to be undone” (ibid., p. 45).

The ‘modern authority’ cited by the justices, was Clark et al’s. (1954, 2004) ‘social science statement’. Clark et al. (1954, 2004) began their statement by acknowledging that racial and ethnic segregation was a serious problem facing the USA and that their social science statement served to summarise the contributions that social science could make toward its resolution. The authors held that the demise of segregation would involve moral, legal and factual issues and that in their contribution they confine themselves to the latter from which certain conclusions could be drawn, given the

available scientific knowledge at the time. The authors held that the 'factual issues' that they were pronouncing on dealt with the effects of segregation and the challenges that would arise in creating a desegregated society (Clark et al., 1954, 2004).

Clark et al. (1954, 2004) defined segregation as,

"...that restriction of opportunities for different types of associations between members of racial, religious, national or geographic origin, or linguistic group and those of other groups, which results from or is supported by the action of any official body or agency representing some branch of government" (ibid., p. 495).

There are a few noteworthy points about this definition. First, the definition tells us nothing more than that segregation was a denial of 'freedom of association' between social groups that was enforced by some or other branch of government. Second, it carries no psychological or politically nuanced understanding of segregation. Third, it shifts accountability for segregation from the whole system of government (political, legal, economic, social etc.) to some unknown branch or agency thereof.

Despite this narrow conceptualisation of segregation, Clark et al. acknowledged that segregation was located within "a social milieu in which 'race' prejudice and discrimination exists" (ibid., p. 495). They further observed, "The embeddedness of segregation in such a context makes it difficult to disentangle the effects of segregation per se from the effects of the context" (ibid.).

At this point Clark et al. failed, inadvertently or not, to name white racism (as such) that provided the socio-political context for segregation, preferring instead to speak of a 'social milieu in which race prejudice and discrimination exist'. Furthermore, while recognising that segregation was an integral part of a racist socio-political order, Clark et al. seem to have been concerned with disentangling the effects of segregation from the effects of its racist socio-political context. The concern with disentangling the effects of segregation from the effects of its socio-political context suggests that Clark et al. saw segregation and white racism as mutually exclusive phenomena whose effects could be shown to have equally exclusive effects on the lives of people. In so doing Clark et al. appear to have lost sight of segregation as an instrument of racist and oppressive politics.

Contrary to their view however, Cell (1981) notes that segregation took root in white racism. In the American South and in South Africa, he argues, race prejudice had long been in existence, having been imported by the earliest European settlers and became relevant in the relations between natives and settlers. He notes that

"The association of blackness with all things evil, ugly, and satanic and of whiteness with all things pure, beautiful, and godly was fundamental to their psychology [white settlers]...In these circumstances color prejudice was transformed into racism which permeated thought, mores, institutions and social relations" (p. 3-4).

Writing on the South African situation Dubow (1989) held that

“segregation denotes a complex amalgam of political, ideological and administrative strategies designed to maintain and entrench white supremacy at every level. It was elaborated in the context of South Africa’s experience of rapid industrialisation and was intended to defend the prevailing social order from the threat posed by the growth of a potentially militant African proletariat” (p. 1).

In South Africa, through government policy and legislation, segregation took on four main forms: land, political differentiation, urban control and labour which were supported by a series of laws² (Maylam, 2001). If we accept and juxtapose the views by Cell, Dubow and Maylam (historians) on segregation with that of Clark et al. (1954, 2004), not only are there fundamental differences in understanding segregation but one sees too how the social psychological view is both historically and politically misinformed. Furthermore, the understanding of segregation presented by Clark et al. neglected the violation, humiliation, identity displacement, and trauma suffered by black communities in the implementation of segregation and the South African example clearly shows this.

In South Africa forced removals were one of the mechanisms used by the apartheid state to segregate people and entrench racist ideology. Wilson and Ramphela (1989) report that an estimate of 3.5 million people, mostly black, were forcibly removed from one place to another between 1960 and 1983. Wilson and Ramphela (1989) recount an incident in a village called Mogopa in the Western Transvaal that had been bulldozed by the government as a prelude to moving people from this land to Pachsdraai, a homeland in Bophuthatswana. The fact that the people of Mogopa had purchased this land before the Land Act of 1913 that prohibited Africans to buy land in most parts of the country was inconsequential to the government’s segregation system. Instead of moving, the people of Magopa started rebuilding their community from the rubble and almost a year later in 1984 the process repeated itself,

“Women were carried into lorries and buses. Children were loaded with furniture and dispatched to Pachsdraai. All this happened in the presence of scores of armed police with dogs at their disposal. People caught standing together outside their houses were beaten with batons...No outsiders were allowed into Mogopa, except the police, of course, and the white farmers who had free access in and out to buy the people’s livestock at a tenth of its value” (Wilson & Ramphela, 1989 p. 219-220).

Interestingly, the conceptual poverty of the social psychological understanding of segregation is no less revealed by the authors of the social science statement themselves. Aiming to outline the “observable effects of the total social complex in which segregation is a major component” Clark et al. (1954, 2004, p. 495) refer to a fact finding report on the effects of prejudice, discrimination and segregation on the personality development of children,

² For example, the Natives Land Act of 1913, Group Areas Act of 1950 and the Industrial Conciliation Act of 1924.

“The report indicates that as minority group children learn the inferior status to which they are assigned—as they observe that they are almost always segregated and kept apart from others who are treated with more respect by the society as a whole—they often react with feelings of inferiority and a sense of personal humiliation” (ibid., p. 495-496).

The citing of this report by Clark et al. suggests that the authors concede that the inferior social status of African-Americans was not self-imposed but assigned to them, and that segregation was not a mere restriction of opportunities of association but a mechanism to differentiate those assigned to an inferior status from those assigned to its opposite. In other words, segregation was a creation and assignment of lesser life conditions and chances. Black communities were created, through segregation, as the wretched of white society. Clark et al. (1954, 2004) make this very point: “Where the action [segregation] takes place in a social milieu in which the groups involved do not enjoy equal social status, the group that is of lesser social status will be referred to as the segregated group” (p. 495). The segregated group is, therefore, the group that lives in “a pattern of social disorganisation...reflected in high disease and mortality rates, crime and delinquency, poor housing, disrupted family life and general substandard living conditions” (ibid., p. 495).

What was ignored by the understanding of segregation given by Clark et al. (1954, 2004) are the conditions of possibility granted and withheld by segregation and that segregation was a salient system of social differentiation and a design of observable and intangible difference in an oppressive social order. This blind spot however, is striking when it is considered that this fact finding report ‘*Effects of Prejudice and Discrimination on Personality Development*’ cited by Clark et al. was authored by Clark in 1950.

Even at this point, Clark et al. do not seem to have considered that the effects³ reported and cited in Clark (1950) could be the result of segregation but rather posed the question,

“what is it about the total society complex of which segregation is one feature that produces the effects described above —or...whether we can justifiably conclude that, as only one feature of a complex social setting, segregation is in fact a significant contributing factor to these effects” (p. 497).

These social psychologists, on the basis of psychological and sociological knowledge concluded that

“it seems likely that feelings of inferiority and doubts about personal worth are attributable to living in an underprivileged environment only insofar as the latter is itself perceived as an indicator of low social status and as a symbol of inferiority...While there are many factors that serve as a reminder of the difference in social status, there can be little doubt that the fact of enforced segregation is a major factor” (ibid., p. 497).

³ According to the report, the personality effects of prejudice, discrimination and segregation on minority group children include feelings of inferiority, a sense of personal humiliation, self-hatred and rejection of own groups, defeatist attitudes, confusion about personal worth, and low personal ambitions.

Put differently, living in an underprivileged environment characterised by high disease and mortality rates, crime and delinquency, poor housing and disrupted family life, come to have a mark on the personality (in a sense of inferiority, personal humiliation, self-hatred and rejection of own groups, defeatist attitudes and low personal ambitions) *only* if those living in such conditions view these conditions to signify their low social status and as a symbol of inferiority.

The contradictions in the thinking of Clark et al. refuse to go unnoticed here. On page 495 of their statement they refer to the social group assigned to an inferior social status in a social order of inequality as the segregated group thus, conceding that segregation was used as a marker of social status difference. On page 497 they speak of ‘an underprivileged environment’, ‘an inferior social status’ and ‘a symbol of inferiority’ as three mutually exclusive entities: as if it is possible to be underprivileged while you are a member of a superior social status group and to perceive the superior status of your group as a symbol of inferiority. Thus, taking the liberty to rewrite the conclusion reached by Clark and colleagues on page 497 of their ‘social science statement’ it would read as follows:

It seems likely that feelings of inferiority and doubts about personal worth are attributable to an inferior social status only insofar as the inferior social status itself is perceived as an indicator of low social status and as a symbol of inferiority.

It appears to me that by a simple manoeuvre of introducing ‘perception’ in this sentence, Clark et.al achieved remarkable results—social status difference and the segregation that reflected and entrenched it were turned into a non-issue and a non-event. What matters, they seem to argue, is perception. If change is to come, the conclusion implies, it is not in the total societal complex (including segregation) but in the perceptions of it held by the minority group. The fault lies with the social and political awareness (or ‘Black conscientisation’ in the words of Steve Biko) of the segregated and oppressed and not in the total system of inequality. As for segregation, Clark et al. want us to believe that it serves only as a major factor in highlighting difference in social status while they remained silent on the social difference itself. This view is held notwithstanding the fact that these authors recognised that “enforced segregation results from the decision of the majority group without the consent of the segregated”...and that “historically segregation patterns in the United States were developed on the assumption of the inferiority of the segregated” (p. 497).

Taken together then, what we come to at this point are the following realisations about the Clark et al. conceptualisation of segregation. First, it a conceptualisation emptied of its histo-political context and over simplified as denial of freedom of association. Second, it fails to see segregation as a racist political instrument, process and product and therefore, ignores the injustices suffered by communities that were segregated and assigned to poor conditions of existence and life chances. Third, it reduces the social realities of the segregated to perception and finds fault with them and not the system of segregation that worked through white racism. Put differently, through a kind of reductionist thinking Clark et al. turned a complex phenomenon that oppressed and dehumanised people into a prohibition of freedom of association and a matter of perception about that prohibition. It is in all of this that the Clark et al. understanding of segregation is historically and politically misinformed and inadvertently or not serves

the ideology of oppression. If a social psychological understanding and definition of segregation does not consider the conditions of existence and possibility (which in this case were conditions of injustice, inequality, impoverishment, violation, marginalisation and dehumanisation) of dominated people then an understanding of desegregation risks collapsing into a simplistic conceptualisation as intergroup mixing. It also subtly suggests that intergroup contact, as we see it today, is a gigantic leap in 'human evolution' that in itself deserves adulation. I take up these issues in the following section.

THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF 'DESEGREGATION'

The ruling of the Supreme Court in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case gave way to unprecedented contact between black and white children in the American school system. This contact and interaction was referred to as the desegregation of American education that "was promoted in the belief that greater contact would quickly produce more positive attitudes" (Forbes, 1997, p. 42). This event set the scene for social psychological research that focused on the contact and interactions of black and white children in the school system. Research in this area has also extended beyond its original focus on ethnic and racial contact to consider interactions for example, between children with and without mental (Manetti, Schneider & Siperstein, 2001) and physical (Maras & Brown, 1996) disabilities, students and people with HIV/AIDS (Werth & Lord, 1992), students and mental patients (Desforges et al., 1991) and interaction between heterosexuals and homosexuals (Herek & Capitanio, 1996).

Interestingly, the 1950s did not offer a social psychological conceptualisation of desegregation in light of the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling and the social psychological research that followed it. For instance, Gordon Allport, in both the 1954 and 1958 editions of his text *The Nature of Prejudice* gave no recognition for a social psychological understanding of desegregation. In the 25th anniversary edition (1979) of the same text both Kenneth Clark in its *introduction* and Thomas Pettigrew in the *foreword* offer no definition of desegregation. The same is true in some of the early studies that followed Allport's text, such as Campbell and Yarrow (1958) and Campbell (1958). In the 1970s, some reviews of contact research literature grappled with the meaning of desegregation. For instance, Cohen (1975), thinking at a conceptual level pronounced,

"The mechanism of desegregation is not intended to create universal love and brotherhood. The goal of the desegregation process is a reasonable degree of social integration and a lack of overt conflict whereby black and white, given an objective important to both, can trust each other and listen to each other sufficiently well to complete the task at hand, whether it be vocational, an educational task, or a political task" (1975, p. 273).

At the level of research practice, Schofield (1978) noted that "One of the major reasons for the apparent inconsistency of the results on desegregation is that researchers have studied vastly different situations, all of which have been subsumed under one term: *desegregation*" (p. 339).

Other reviewers grappled with desegregation at the level of racial representation. Two examples may illustrate the point:

"...it is any school that is open to all children regardless of race...most definitions are more realistic, specifying for instance that not more than 90% of pupils be of one race or that not more than 50% be minority group members... the ethnic composition of a school should reflect the ethnic composition of the nation, state, or local community... A desegregated school is...one in which there is proportionate representation of each racial group" (St. John, 1975, p. 3-4).

Writing in 1978, McConahay had this to say,

"My definition of school desegregation draws upon the commonly accepted meaning of the term. School desegregation involves the transformation of a school, classroom, or school system from a state in which the races were separated or segregated to a state in which they attend school or classes, or both, in more that token numbers. Thus, there are three important components of the term: (1) reunion or unseparation and (2) race mixing (3) in schools" (p. 78).

The American Psychological Association Dictionary of Psychology defines desegregation as referring "to the formal termination of practices that create a segregated society" (p. 866).

These attempts at understanding desegregation have never been subjected to social psychological scholarly debate. This may be partly because social psychology subscribes to the 'commonly accepted meaning' of desegregation as intergroup contact. This understanding in social psychology is however, not explicitly expressed but implicitly accepted. Let us once again take the *Brown v. Board of Education* case to illustrate this point. When the Supreme Court made its ruling in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case and mandated by law that black and white children come into contact in schools, this (as stated above) became known as the desegregation of the American school system (Forbes, 1997). In other words, legally sanctioned intergroup contact was declared as desegregation achieved. Even in those early years however, social psychologists doubted that intergroup contact alone would change the ways in which social groups related to each other (Dixon, et al., 2005). In other words, social psychologists did not question the logic of equating legally sanctioned intergroup contact to desegregation but accepted it to be so and only doubted whether 'desegregation' alone would change intergroup relations. From that point on social psychological research sought to "uncover the social psychological conditions that lead to favourable intergroup contact..." (Dixon & Reicher, 1997, p. 361). Consequently, numerous book titles, chapters and journal articles refer to the 'Social Psychology of Contact/Desegregation'. This research and tradition of work has been critiqued at both a theoretical and methodological level (see Pettigrew (1986), Stephan (1987), Dixon et al. (2005), Reicher (2007), Erasmus (2010)). I submit that such an understanding of desegregation is over simplistic and histo-politically misinformed (like the Clark et al. (1954, 2004) understanding of segregation).

To accept the social psychological imagination of desegregation as intergroup contact is to accept that segregation was fundamentally a denial of such contact and interaction.

To do this not only accepts the reductionism that Clark et al. applied to arrive at their understanding of segregation but it is also to import that reductionism to the understanding of desegregation. Unfortunately, this reductionism was accepted back in the 1950s and since then has gone unchallenged.

The prefix 'de' in desegregation suggests a temporal and ideological break with segregation and a beginning of desegregation—the end of a history and beginning of a future. Indeed, many would agree for example, that in the USA, the *Brown v. Board of Education* case of 1954 and the final collapse of apartheid in South Africa in 1994 signalled the political and legal demise of divisive policy and an oppressive political regime. In history, these events marked a time of political and legal change. Notwithstanding these political and legal changes however, research literature both in the USA and South Africa shows that strong patterns of resegregation and negative intergroup attitudes and behaviours continue despite increased intergroup contact and government policies to promote transformation (see Massey & Denton, 1989, 1993; Goldberg, 1998; Davis, 2004; Erasmus & de Wet 2003; Tredoux et al., 2005; Schrieff et al., 2005; Alexander, 2007; Friedman & Erasmus, 2008; Durrheim & Dixon, 2006; Tredoux & Dixon, 2009 for examples of this research literature). It is in the light of this literature and the challenges it reports that the contributions made by the social psychological study of intergroup contact has been regarded as one of the most successful ideas (notwithstanding the theoretical and methodological criticisms levelled at it) in the history of social psychology (Brewer & Brown, 1998). This tradition of work has laboured to find conditions that reduce negative intergroup attitudes and increase social harmony.

Ironically, it is also in the light of the above research that the understanding of desegregation as intergroup contact is rejected as simplistic. Today, social groups in South Africa, the USA and many other parts of the world co-exist in many contexts such as those of education, occupation, residence and leisure. However, it is also this very fact of co-existence that at a superficial level, masks the various social divisions, inequalities and conditions of existence created and imposed during the 'era segregation' (Maylam, 2001). These conditions of existence and possibility did not and in fact could not have disappeared with the Supreme Court ruling in the *Brown v Board of Education* or in 1994 with the first democratic elections. This is because segregation inscribed its double codes (of inequalities, injustices, trauma, displacement and violation), on the one hand and (privilege, security, wealth accumulation and land appropriation) on the other, at the macro and micro, the objective and subjective, and the embodied and structural levels. It is partly for this reason that embodied⁴ and structural histories of segregation refuse to be appeased by intergroup contact and to be contained by the 'de' of desegregation. Furthermore, it is also because the *Brown v. Board of Education* case, the Civil Rights Movements and the Liberation Movements in Africa and other parts of

⁴ An embodied history refers to the idea that both the injustices and privileges of segregation were inscribed on people's bodies as racialised lived experience. For example, race as embodied history is an abstract, political and historical artefact that became concrete when it was inscribed onto bodies thus making them racialised bodies (black and white). This racialisation was given material support through differentiated conditions of existence and life chances. The racialised experience of being and becoming in the world was accumulated over time and transferred from one generation to another with a high degree of stability notwithstanding gradual quantitative and qualitative changes.

the world were struggles for much more than intergroup contact. These were struggles for equality, humanity and an end to injustices inflicted on the basis of skin colour. These were struggles for the dreams and aspirations of black communities.

Therefore, the social psychological understanding of desegregation and research programs that has exclusively focused on the conditions (of social harmony) of intergroup contact has compressed and over simplified these struggles into a struggle for social harmony. Like the Clark et al. (1954, 2004) understanding of segregation, the present day social psychological understanding is devoid of both historical and political understanding. What was lost by Clark et al. and is lost by social psychologists today is the macro-micro dialectic of both segregation and desegregation. In other words, intergroup contact and relations are a piece in the complex aftermath of colonisation and apartheid.

From this point of view, the stereotypes that were once strongly held by many in the South African white community about black people as dirty, violent and drunks were not without their structural support in the form of overcrowded reserves that resulted in the easy spread of disease, violence, the breakdown of families and alcohol abuse. In a similar way, the sense of inferiority of black children reported by Clark et al. (1954, 2004) was not without the fact of living in an inferior environment characterised by a pattern of social disorganisation, despite the fact that Clark et al. would have us believe that this sense of inferiority was a consequence of perception. It may very well have been so but not without structural support. It is the conditions of such a perception that the social psychological understanding of segregation neglected.

Similarly, decades of contact research on desegregation is mute on the social structural conditions of desegregation (Durrheim (2005) is an exception) and pronounces only on the conditions of contact. For instance, in post-apartheid South Africa, white and black communities continue to live in different social and economic spaces even where there is insignificant geographical space between them (see Dixon & Reicher, 1997). Dixon and Reicher (1997) are correct in arguing that intergroup contact in this context acquires meaning within everyday practice and dialogue as individuals try to make sense of each other's co-presence. However, whether the stark contrast in the "...symbolic...experiential as well as material division of social space" (Dixon, et al., 2005, p. 397) has any bearing on the meanings of everyday contact and co-presence is not explored.

Consequently, the exclusive discussion of intergroup contact creates the impression that this is all that matters for desegregation. That this is not necessarily the case may not be a subject of dispute even among social psychologists. At the University of Cape Town (where there is growing social psychological research on the micro-ecology of contact) there is also educational and sociological research that presents a slightly complicated picture that complements the social psychological research. Among other things, this research uncovers issues of class alienation and place identity that are at play in the micro-level of everyday contact among students irrespective of race (see Bangeni & Kapp, 2005, Erasmus & de Wet, 2003). While the acceptance of students from various backgrounds into institutions of higher education may create the false impression of equality (we must all be equal if we are all in the same institution), this view is naïve and rejected by the work of Bangeni and Kapp (2005). Structural issues (some of them legacies of segregation) infiltrate and may very well shape everyday encounters.

While social psychology may not have political and economic power to transform the structural arrangements that in the 1950s and today generally ensure white superiority and black inferiority, to remain silent on these issues is a different matter altogether. It is one thing to be powerless on a given matter and another to not have a critical voice on that matter. In other words, intergroup attitudes and behaviours should not be viewed independent of social structural arrangements and particularly those that maintain social inequalities. Restricting the study of desegregation to intergroup contact whether this contact is at the macro or micro level is not enough for social psychology. Indeed, the kind of intergroup contact that we witness today, in the larger scheme of things, is admirable when compared to what was possible under oppressive regimes. This however, should not lead social psychologists to treat intergroup contact as if it were some kind of 'leap in human evolution' and that what remains is to get intergroup contact to 'work correctly'.

In this social psychological practice, the study of intergroup contact risks amounting to little more than a cosmetic treatment of a complex macro-micro dialectic that produces and reproduces itself at the micro-level of everyday contact. Consequently, intergroup relations suffer a subtle threefold burden. First, intergroup relations are burdened by an urgency to transcend the histories of segregation and racism. Second, they are implicitly required to mask the continuing dismal conditions of existence of many black communities who were disadvantaged by segregation. Third, they are expected to 'psychologise away' the identity pathologies of superiority and inferiority complexes. In the final analysis, it seems that there are high hopes that intergroup contact will wipe the slates of history clean and all social groups will begin afresh the business of living as nominally equal human beings (see Reicher, 2007 for a critique of contact as a solution to prejudice and racism).

CONCLUSION

This essay has argued that social psychology has a historically and politically misinformed understanding of segregation that was given to the discipline by its modern forefathers. It has also been argued that this understanding has had implications for the understanding and study of desegregation with the result that desegregation is confined to intergroup contact. If anything, the intention of this essay is to open debate and dialogue specifically in South Africa on the study of desegregation. Psychology in South Africa as elsewhere in the world, played a formidable role as the 'think tank' of oppressive regimes. The discipline should once again be rigorous in research, theory and debate that inform the transformation of institutions of society and the hearts and minds of people. Thomas Pynchon remarks, "If they can get you asking the wrong questions, they don't need to worry about answers" (cited in Reicher, 2007, p. 831). This is not to suggest that an 'invisible hand' has influenced the questions posed by social psychology with regard to desegregation. It is to suggest, nevertheless, that new questions may be worth asking. For instance, what is desegregation? Who and/or what is being desegregated or needs desegregation? How will we see and/or judge a desegregated society or institutions? What is the macro-micro dialectic in intergroup contact? If the social psychological study of desegregation has had a 'contact fetish', it may be time to move beyond this fifty-six year old affair and seek a new affair in the form of a macro-micro dialectic in the study of desegregation.

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