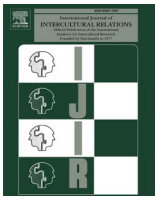
International Journal of Intercultural Relations 98 (2024) 101925

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

International Journal of Intercultural Relations

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijintrel



Intergroup relations among "Born Frees" in a rapidly changing South Africa: A qualitative study

Elirea Bornman [a,*], Jaqueline Harvey [b], Herman Janse van Vuuren [b], Boitumelo Kekana [b], Mokgadi F. Matuludi [b], Mbongiseni Mdakane [b], Lesego Ramphele [b]

[a] Department of Communication Science, University of South Africa (Unisa), South Africa
[b] Department of Psychology, University of South Africa, South Africa

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Intergroup anxiety
Intergroup contact
Social categorization
Social identity
South Africa
Qualitative research

ABSTRACT

The present qualitative study investigates intergroup relations in post-apartheid South Africa. Six focus groups were conducted with participants from the city of Pretoria. Participants were between the ages of 18–35 years old and were thus all Born Frees who came politically of age after the political transition. The findings reveal that the apartheid legacy was seen as a warning not to repeat past atrocities as well as a facade to condone stereotyping of Whites. Social categorization and social identification remain important and it appears that ingroups provide security in the highly heterogeneous society. Socio-economic differences represented both realistic and symbolic threats hindering intergroup contact and intergroup friendships. Intergroup anxiety and cultural differences furthermore kept groups apart. Instances of de-categorization and personalization leading to deeply personal positive cross-race relations were nevertheless reported. It is concluded that superfluous intergroup contact is often insufficient to change intergroup attitudes. Opportunities should be created for prolonged and intimate interaction between members of different racial groups to promote differentiation and personalization which could, in turn, foster intergroup friendships and improve relations.

Introduction

During apartheid, South Africa was often characterized as a "non-contact" society due to the wide-ranging segregationist policies of the time (Finchilescu & Tredoux, 2008, p. 4). Resistance to discriminatory and segregationist policies led to years of intergroup conflict and political violence (Finchilescu & Tredoux, 2010). Due to the combined forces of external and internal pressure, the apartheid government was compelled to engage in interracial negotiations. The so-called "new" democratic South Africa dawned in April 1994. The social and political landscapes changed radically as all forms of legal discrimination and segregation were removed from statute books. People of all racial and ethnic groups gained access to places of work, residential areas, schools and universities. It was hoped that increased intergroup contact and interaction would diminish intergroup prejudice and improve intergroup relations (Finchilescu & Tredoux, 2008). Concerted efforts have furthermore been made to unite the complexly plural society and to create a common national identity (Mattes, 2017). Despite wide-ranging efforts at reconciliation, De la Sablonnière, Auger, Taylor, Crush, and

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: elireabornman@gmail.com (E. Bornman).

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2023.101925
Received 13 July 2023; Received in revised form 23 November 2023; Accepted 5 December 2023
Available online 28 December 2023
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McDonald (2013) nevertheless conclude that intergroup relations in South Africa remain a fundamental struggle.

Given the country's history of racial tension and strife, intergroup attitudes have been a major research focus (Finchilescu & Tredoux, 2010). Most South African studies on intergroup attitudes have been quantitative in nature and have focused on White attitudes. Dixon, Durrheim, and Tredoux (2005) voice the need for studies employing alternative methodologies and focusing on both majorities and minorities. Social scientists are furthermore increasingly interested in attitudes of the so-called "Born Frees" – according to Mattes (2012) youth who has come politically of age after 1996, that is in the years after the disruptions of the 1994 political transition subsided. The importance of this group flows firstly from the fact that, in 2019, youth between the ages of 18–34 years constituted almost one third of the population (StatsSA, n.d.). This generation – in contrast to older generations who either supported or struggled against apartheid – have had little or no first-hand experience of the trauma associated with apartheid. Despite coming of age in a stable democracy, the advantages of political freedom in the post-apartheid dispensation are however often diminished by frustrating political encounters, corrupt officials and enduring unemployment and poverty (Malila & Garman, 2016). Youth discontent and protest actions have furthermore become key factors in recent social unrest (Malila & Garman, 2016), whereas research indicates that some Born Frees are alienated from the current democratic culture (Bornman et al., 2021) and that Black youth tend to be more negative towards Whites (Bornman, Mynhardt, & Van Zyl, 2023).

In the present qualitative study, we investigate the intergroup attitudes of youth from the two groups mostly juxtaposed in discourses on South African society, namely Blacks and Whites. Results are interpreted within the frameworks of social categorization and social identity theories (Tajfel, 1981; Brown, Turner, Turner, & Giles, 1981); the contextual theory of interethnic communication (Kim, 2017) and the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

Social categorization and social identity theories

Social categorization and social identity theories focus on the role of group membership in attitudes and behavior (Tajfel, 1981). Categorization theory holds that people make sense of complex social and physical environments by creating social categories into which they group people or things together based on similarity or proximity (Turner et al., 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). According to social identity theory, people classify themselves as belonging to a particular category (and not to others) and start identifying with this category as their ingroup. Ingroup identities are furthermore integrated into individuals' self-concepts as they fulfil in important human needs such as the needs for inclusion, security and belongingness and the need for differentiation from other individuals and groups (Brewer, 1999, 2007). Social behavior is influenced by an ingroup/outgroup orientation where people tend to favor ingroup members, whereas behavior towards outgroups is often characterized by depersonalization – tendencies to regard outgroup members as undifferentiated items in a single social category (Brown & Turner, 1981).

Brewer (1999) emphasizes however that ingroup attachment is not a necessary precursor of negative outgroup attitudes. Research evidence suggest that, although people are willing to differentially benefit the ingroup above relevant outgroups, they are reluctant to harm outgroups directly. Outgroup discrimination thus represents a matter of relative favoritism towards the ingroup and the absence of similar favoritism towards outgroups. People furthermore generally believe that "we" are more trustworthy and dependable than "they". They prefer the familiar above the unfamiliar. Ingroup interactions are furthermore better understood and regarded as more predictable than interactions with outgroups. Brewer (2007) believes that outgroup hostility flows from perceptions that outgroups represent a threat to the ingroup. According to Stephan, Stephan, Demetrakis, Yamada, & Clason (2000), realistic threats entail endangerment of the existence, power, lives and/or material well-being of the ingroup. Conversely, symbolic threats are subjective in nature and pertain to threats to the ingroup's culture, standards, values, morals and/or worldview. Intergroup anxiety is associated with fear or discomfort experienced during or in anticipation of intergroup interaction. It often results from negative stereotypes that insinuate negative interactions with outgroups. Brewer (1999) nevertheless warns that the very factors that make ingroup attachment important to people, provide a fertile ground for outgroup distrust and antagonism. The sense of moral superiority to others, sensitivity to threat, social comparison processes and power politics within democracies can all contribute towards connecting ingroup identification with disdain of and even overt hostility towards outgroups.

Contextual theory of interethnic communication

Kim (2017) integrates the wide array of potential forms of intergroup behavior into an associative versus dissociative continuum. At the dissociative pole, behavior relaters to social categorization and social identification and concomitant depersonalization and includes behavior such as ingroup bias, accentuation of ingroup-outgroup differences, competition, stereotyping and inaccurate attributions. Conversely, behavior at the associative pole involves self-disclosure, person-centred attributions, verbal and nonverbal behavior fostering synchrony, joint activities and interactive alignment. Such behavior signifies cohesion, mutuality and members of various groups coming together.

Kim (2017) identifies eight theorems regarding factors influencing intergroup behavior. According to these theorems, associative/dissociative intergroup behavior correlates with more inclusive/exclusive identity orientations; more secure/insecure identity orientations; greater/less cultural proximity between the self and others; greater/less shared goal structures within interaction situations; more/less integrated network structures; greater/less institutional inequity; the relative strength of the ingroup; and the extent of intergroup competition within the social context.

Some of the most intractable conflicts in recent history have been related to processes of social categorization and identification where groups share the same territorial space and political structures (David et al., 2017). To address these challenges, social scientists have developed various interventions, of which intergroup contact has received the widest application and scholarly attention.

Intergroup contact as intervention for improving intergroup relations

The contact hypothesis, first formulated by Allport (1954), holds that regular interaction between members of different groups reduces intergroup prejudice, promotes more positive intergroup attitudes which in the end should result in more associative behavior (Kim, 2017). It does not, however, propose that superficial contact is sufficient to improve relations (Dixon, 2001). Allport stipulates various facilitating conditions to enhance the "acquaintance potential" of contact situations. In accordance with Kim (2017), status equity, intergroup co-operation and common goals, but also support by authority figures are emphasized.

A meta-analytic study by Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) provides overwhelming support for the contact hypothesis. Pettigrew and Tropp furthermore found that, although intergroup contact had greater effects when optimal conditions were met, it has positive effects even in the absence of these conditions. Pettigrew and Tropp ascribe these effects to the two-pronged effects of the principle that "familiarity breeds liking" and the reduction of intergroup anxiety due to regular intergroup interaction. Brewer and Miller (1996) distinguish two processes which play a role. Differentiation entails that people learn others' personal information, thereby enabling them to perceive outgroup members as individuals and not merely as members of a group. Personalization involves responses flowing from personal and direct relationships between individuals that bridge group boundaries. Hewstone and Brown (1986) argue that contact is more successful when people acknowledge people's group membership and celebrate rather than ignore group differences. Conversely, Dovidio, Gaertner, and Saguy (2009) propose that contact situations should promote a common ingroup identity where members of different groups perceive one another as members of one overarching social category.

The meta-analyses reported by Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) have, however, indicated that even when contact situations meet optimal conditions, attitude change was less among minority than among majority members. Insight into possible reasons for this asymmetry is, however, limited because minorities are mostly perceived as objects of discrimination and negative attitudes (Hopkins & Kahani-Hopkins, 2006). Little attention is consequently given to how minority members interpret and experience contact situations. Dixon (2001) believes contact situations can be experienced differently by different groups. It could also be difficult to achieve status equity as group status is not only determined by "objective" factors such as position and socio-economic class, but often also by "hidden" factors within socio-cultural environments. Jackson and Sherriff (2013) hold that social scientists often assume which groups have power and which groups do not, but often ignore the fact that power can be fluid and can shift over time and from situation to situation. Dixon (2001) furthermore believes that social categorization and outgroup stereotyping are not merely cognitive processes, but are embedded within complex contextual spatial, organizational and power relations.

Høy-Petersen (2022) furthermore hold that there is often a lack of congruence between research findings and people's real-life experiences. Social surveys in Europe indicate, for example, that people are becoming more tolerant towards immigrants. However, ethnic and immigrant minorities report increases in experiences of discrimination and racism, while support for populist right-wing parties is growing. Høy-Petersen believes that the survey results and contradictory evidence are all probably true, because incongruent perceptions and behavior can exist within the same individual, on the same day and even at the same moment. Human perceptions, attitudes and behavior are often "messy". They are not only determined by cognitive reasoning, but also by heuristic thinking and feelings often prompted within a specific context.

Contradictory and often conflicting evidence have led to a re-evaluation of the dominant positivist methods traditionally employed in intergroup research (Jackson & Sherriff, 2013). Survey and experimental research often fail to expose the underlying complexities of intergroup relations in real-life situations (Dixon et al., 2005; Jackson & Sherriff, 2013). Dixon et al. (2005) propose that researchers should pay attention to participants' own interpretations of contact situations. They should therefore go further than merely using methodologies involving top-down generic interpretative frameworks and consider methodologies that allow for bottom-up analyses of participants' own frameworks of meaning. This decade has indeed seen changes in methodological approaches in studying intergroup relations (Høy-Petersen, 2022). Qualitative methodologies are being proposed to explore emotions and visceral and heuristic levels of consciousness influencing intergroup attitudes and behavior. Similar than the European experience, conflicting results have also characterized South African research on intergroup relations. Also in this country, alternative methodologies can offer deeper insight into the dynamics underlying conflicting tendencies.

Intergroup relations in South Africa

Most social scientists agree that South African society is deeply segmented and complexly plural (Gordon, 2021). During apartheid, South Africans were officially categorized into four racial groups: Blacks, Coloreds, Indians and Whites. Within these broad racial categories, linguistic and other subnational identities exist. Black South Africans comprise of nine traditional cultural groups distinguished by language (Adams et al., 2012). These languages are Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu. Within the White community, two ethno-cultural groups are distinguished: Afrikaans-speaking and English-speaking Whites. South African society is furthermore rigidly stratified as racial, ethnic, linguistic, cultural and/or religious differences overlap and are complexly interwoven within class and power divides.

Although segregationist policies restricted intergroup contact during apartheid, that does not mean that there was no interracial contact (Finchilescu & Tredoux, 2008). Intergroup contact was, however, largely of a hierarchical and/or bureaucratic nature. Opportunities for contact research were limited and the results of available studies are mixed and unclear. Within a military context, almost a quarter of White respondents became more positive and more negative (quoted in Mynhardt & Du Toit, 1991). In integrated schools, White respondents who had classroom contact with Blacks became more negative (Mynhardt, 1982), whereas studies in neighborhoods (Russel, 1961) and work situations (Spangenberg & Nel, 1983) indicate positive attitude change.

Nation-building has been regarded as vital to healing the divisions of apartheid and fostering social cohesion (Bornman et. al,

2021). Ramutsindela (1997) points however to the fact that the rainbow nation ideology reflects only one side of nation-building efforts. The other side represents so-called affirmative action measures aimed at redressing race-related socio-economic inequalities. Post-apartheid studies suggest that a common South African identity have nevertheless developed rather quickly (Mattes, 2017). However, South Africans also continue to identify strongly with their ethnic and racial groups (Bornman, 2010).

Post-apartheid surveys indicate that more intergroup contact has indeed resulted in positive attitude change (Gibson, 2006; Finchilescu, Tredoux, Muianga, Mynhardt, & Pillay, 2006). Positive attitude change was, for example, found in integrated schools and universities (Swart, Hewstone, Christ, & Voci, 2010; Swart, Hewstone, Christ, & Voci, 2011; Holtman, Louw, Tredoux, & Carney, 2005; Mohololа, & Finchilescu, 2006). However, research indicates that the scrapping of segregation does not necessarily imply that intergroup interaction does occur in integrated settings. A series of observational studies conducted in various contexts which have become racially integrated after apartheid, provide overwhelming evidence of tendencies of race groups to structure themselves spatially to achieve segregation and, in doing so, to avoid intergroup contact (see Finchilescu & Tredoux, 2008). These contexts include beaches, university classrooms and refectories, open outdoor spaces and nightclubs. As a result, intergroup friendships are limited even in fully integrated settings such as university hostels (see Schrieff, 2005; Woods et al., 2001). Finchilescu and Tredoux (2008) conclude that interracial contact is still limited in post-apartheid South Africa. Widespread patterns of self-segregation hinder interaction with an acquaintance potential which could, in turn, foster intergroup friendships and positive intergroup relations.

The status variable has furthermore become fluid (De la Sablonnière et al., 2013; Dixon et al., 2005). Whereas Whites lost the privileged political status they enjoyed during apartheid, many have benefited economically from market-related reforms. Segments have however fallen into poverty due to preferential treatment for Blacks (South African Stories, 2009). Blacks have, on the other hand, gained majority status within the political realm, but could feel that their socio-economic aspirations have not been met (De la Sablonnière et al., 2013).

Given the conflicting results of survey and observational studies, the current qualitative study investigated intergroup perceptions and experiences of both Black and White youth who can be regarded as Born Frees (Mattes, 2012). The following research questions guided the study:

(1) How do Born Free South Africans view their relations with other South African groups?
(2) Which factors do Born Free South Africans feel promote or hinder their friendships with members of other groups?

Methodology

A qualitative methodology – focus group research – was employed. Focus groups offer opportunities to explore the lived experiences of individuals within a group context where the dynamic interaction between participants contributes towards insight into research questions (Millward, 1995). According to Millward, focus groups have great potential in studying social phenomena such as intergroup relations as not only individual perceptions and experiences can be explored, but also the interplay between the personal and the social.

Ethical clearance was provided by the Research Ethics Review Committee of the Department of Communication Science of the University of South Africa (Reference number 2015_CHS_Staff.CommSt_005). Six focus groups were conducted over a period of five years. Six students who did structured MA degrees in Research Consultation each conducted a group under the auspices of the principal researcher during their research internship. An independent research assistant employed non-probability convenience sampling to recruit different participants for each group. We purposefully strove towards recruiting respondents not directly involved with the university. Some participants were students at neighboring universities; others already worked and other were unemployed. Although at least ten participants – in some cases a few more to ensure sufficient attendance – were recruited for each group discussion, not all recruited participants turned up for the discussions. The group sizes consequently varied between six and twelve.

All participants resided in Pretoria and were between 18 and 34 years old and can therefore be typified as Born Frees (see Table 1; Mattes, 2012). Separate focus groups were conducted for Black and White participants. This was done as research indicates that

Table 1
Demographic information of focus group participants.

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5	Group 6
Gender						
Male	6	2	7	2	6	7
Female	6	8	3	4	4	2
Age range (in years)	18–26	21–24	19–25	23–25	18–26	18–35
Language						
Afrikaans		6		6	3	
English		1	2		7	
Afrikaans and English		1				
African language	12		8			8
Other		2				1
Total group size	12	10	10	6	10	9

especially Whites are hesitant to voice their opinions in the presence of other groups (Durrheim, Tredoux, Foster, & Dixon, 2011). Three groups were conducted with White participants and three groups with Black participants. Similar interview guides were used for all groups, but some adaptations were made for noteworthy events at the time when a particular group was conducted such as for the general elections which found place shortly before the first two groups were conducted. The interview guide consisted only of broad questions which served to encourage stimulus structured but response free discussions (Millward, 1995). The moderators were trained to follow a low content control-high process control approach. They consequently facilitated interaction and strove towards productive and focused discussions of the topic, but control over the contents was minimal. The experiences of individual participants as well as the group dynamics consequently determined which specific issues were raised in each group.

The proceedings of group discussions were recorded electronically and thereafter transcribed. After each focus group, the principal researcher and student moderator discussed the proceedings and identified potential themes (Creswell, 2007). Deductive thematic coding was used in the further data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The principal researcher firstly became familiarized with the entire data set by reading and re-reading all the transcriptions. Within the framework of the post-group analyses and relevant social theories, significant statements and clusters of meaning which capture important information related to the research questions were noted. Initial codes were allocated and themes developed. The analyses involved constantly moving reflectively back and forward through the data. The importance of a theme in providing insight into intergroup dynamics – rather than its prevalence – served as yardsticks for selection. Vivid, compelling excerpts were selected to enlighten the themes, whilst narrative discussions offer interpretation of the themes and excerpts (Kvale, 1996). The final analyses were circulated for confirmation and discussion among all the student co-researchers before the article was finalized.

Excerpts are quoted to demonstrate the credibility and trustworthiness of identified themes and conclusions drawn (Elo, Kääriäinen, Kanste, Pölkki, Utriainen, & Kyngäs, 2014). The validity of the study is also enhanced by peer review, that is by the process through which the various student co-researchers checked the correctness of the analyses of the principal researcher in terms of the contents of their own as well as the groups conducted by other co-researchers (Creswell, 2007). Excerpts in Afrikaans were translated by the principal researcher into English. Translations are indicated by the word "translated" in brackets. The data are available at osf.io/r67de.

Findings

Viewpoints on intergroup relations in South Africa

Ambivalence regarding the apartheid legacy

Although all participants were Born Frees, the apartheid history was often raised when they were prompted to discuss race relations. Almost 30 years after the end of apartheid, Black participants voiced ambivalent feelings about this tumultuous period. For some it was important to honor the suffering and sacrifices of former generations, and to be grateful for the freedom that they enjoyed in the new dispensation:

> G3 (B): You know, there's a saying in almost every language and every culture, that you don't know where you're going until you know where you come from. I was not personally shot with a rubber bullet, but my dad was. And we grew up in communities where people's houses went up in flames.

> G3 (B): There are certain areas where we couldn't enter or couldn't be, were not allowed, and back in the day if you were White they had an advantage, because if you were White, it doesn't matter whether you had matric or not, if you apply for a job, you would get that job. And then us Black people we were taught only to be White people's slaves.

Other participants felt that it was important to keep talking about apartheid so that it would never happen again. Black participants felt that they should be aware of the apartheid atrocities so that they could remind the current (Black) government not to become guilty of similar abuses.

> G1 (B): We can talk about apartheid, but it is not trying to repeat it; and when we view ourselves as well, you try and prevent your government from doing the same thing, to you and to other people.

Other Black participants felt that they should refrain from blaming a particular group, namely Afrikaners, and rather focus on systems and policies of racial segregation and oppression which simply did not work:

> G3 (B): So, when we talk of apartheid, can we look at it as a system that did not work. Not an issue of Afrikaners … It's a system that introduced racial policies, that introduced segregation. So, when we talk about it … that we look at systems for what they are, and when they don't work, and they oppress whoever it is, then they are not suitable.

A White participant acknowledged that apartheid left a legacy of emotional pain which will take long to heal. It was also important to resolve the negative racial attitudes that characterized apartheid so that the "hate" was not carried over from generation to generation.

> G5 (W): It is a fresh wound. It's only been one generation since it happened … but trying to get the complete unbiased version of it to the next generation is probably the most important thing so that you don't get people carrying on that hate.

In contrast, some Black participants removed themselves psychologically from the apartheid history. It appears that they resented

being constantly reminded of it:

> G3 (B): And then my last problem is… this is going to sound [like] weakness, but we did not live in apartheid. Why are we on that train?

> G3 (B): If I become the minister of education … I am going to ban every school from teaching about apartheid, I swear. Until everyone is in matric and they can think for themselves … then I will be like oh … this is what happened 50 years ago.

It could be that at least some Black youth had become psychologically weary of the apartheid discourse and the fact that they were constantly reminded to be thankful to previous generations for the privileges they currently enjoyed. They might also associate the anti-apartheid struggle with older generations of Black political leaders for whom some had little respect (see Bornman et al., 2021).

On the other hand, some White participants resented that they were still constantly blamed for apartheid.

> G2 (W): But I also feel like we're not fighting the apartheid battle anymore … it's sort of pressed down our throats by the Black people. … I don't know whether this is like a personal thing, but I'm not a racist and I can't like throw apartheid away, so I feel like Black people bringing it towards me, and the more I just want freedom, peace and stuff, they are just like throwing it in my face … like you are being racist, you are being this, you are being that …

> G5 (W): Okay, so apartheid was caused by the Afrikaans people from the average person's point of view. So, therefore, if you're Afrikaans, you are then racist … that doesn't mean that all Afrikaans people are now like that generation. [translated]

White participants apparently felt that the apartheid discourse was used as an excuse for perpetuating stereotyping of Whites as being racist. They furthermore experienced apartheid as an albatross around their necks, of which they could never get rid despite their best efforts to strive towards peace and harmony with other groups. These feelings were most acutely felt by Afrikaans-speaking participants.

Perceived White advantage

Both Black and White participants voiced perceptions that Whites were advantaged and/or enjoyed access to more resources than Blacks just because they were White. Perceptions of White advantage and a legacy of inequality represented symbolic threats that hindered relations even in contexts where (realistically) status equity could be assumed.

> G3 (B): That's what they teach you, the generation that's like our age. They think oh I am better, because you see my ancestors were better … so they still think they're better …

> G3 (B): It's not that now we're just going to come in and say … I am Black, I am going to get a job, but it's just that … White people have had money forever, and we don't.

The symbolic nature of White advantage was confirmed by a White participant, who voiced the opinion that White "wealth" resided in their social and cultural capital.

> G5 (W): I don't come from a particularly comfortable wealthy family at all or in an economic sense. I feel previously advantaged. I think the way I was brought up … the motivation and the discipline my parents taught me … that culture makes me more advantaged than some of my fellow South Africans.

It appears to be difficult to achieve status equity in the minds of people engaging in interracial interaction. Even in situations where racial equality was the norm, perceptions of White advantage influenced attitudes and behavior. One White participant pointed out that these attitudes made her feel that she could never achieve anything on her own merit. Black counterparts expected her to do better as she was White and, by implication, regarded her achievements as unfair and gave her the feeling of being ashamed of being White.

> G2 (W): I had a lot of Black friends … but it always came out that they always thought that we had a bit of the upper hand, but then you'd have some of the other Black girls that were so much smarter than us and like really going so much further, but they still only saw that…. no I have more opportunities. But I really didn't and it …. really upset me because we were on equal terms. We were in the same school, same class, we passed the same things, you know, it was completely equal and then they always felt like no because you're White, you're going to do better – its' a given. But it's really not, so I always felt … a little bit ashamed of being White, because I feel … I can't actually earn anything because people feel like it's just given to me.

Fixation on race and color

Despite increased contact and interaction between racial groups, both White and Black participants acknowledged that South African society was still characterized by extreme racial categorization in which skin color forms one of the most important bases for defining people as in- or outgroup members.

> G3 (B): Us Blacks are so fixated on color. The Whites will build a whole new country which will thrive whilst we are still looking at the fact that we want a Black pope or something like that.

> G2 (B): You go to all these big places; you see the CEO is Black. It's beautiful. But … who is next to his office? The White guy. That's okay, as long as I can still see the CEO is Black. That's bad … That's me not being free. As long as I know that you are White…. you are not free…. even if the whole company is White, it shouldn't affect me … you should never see color.

Participants felt that this fixation on race curtailed their newly found freedom in the new dispensation and hindered the country to grow and flourish.

> G5 (W) Ja, I think tradition is important and where we come from … but I think before we don't stop making the difference between Black and White the whole time, then the country isn't going to go anywhere … if something happens, some will usually ask was it a Black girl or a White guy. It doesn't make a difference to anything, it happens. So I think people should stop looking at Black and White and just be [translated].

Race-based social categorization was furthermore often at the root of dissociative behavior such as intergroup aggression, especially on university campuses. Although participants acknowledged that a person's race or skin color should not play any role when making judgments and/or evaluations, both Black and White participants admitted that race-based categorization hinders harmonious relations and peaceful co-existence.

> G5 (W): I don't care if you're green, yellow, black, purple but … something needs to be done … that's kind of you know, you're a White person targeted by a Black people and I've spoken to people on campus, they're Black, they've being targeted by White people, so everyone is just being attacked and everyone's so hurt that you can't really come together as a group and try and talk about things. [translated]

> G5 (W): There [had] been an incident where someone [said] …, " You're White, I hate you" … but it's shocking because you've got a room full of White people that all say that and then you're gonna get a room full of Black students and they will say the exact same, so if like everybody just attacking everybody else is not gonna get any kind of …. solution about stuff. [translated]

Factors influencing intergroup relations

Socio-economic differences

Inequality was not only a symbolic factor characterizing intergroup relations. Real socio-economic differences also played a role. In Group 6, various Black participants voiced acute awareness of socio-economic differences between racial groups. Although equal status relations were promoted in, for example, integrated schools, socio-economic differences on other levels such as in home environments caused intergroup friendships to remain superfluous and not to extend beyond immediate contact settings.

> G6 (B): I realized firstly that … with the different types of people and the different races and everything, the different problems which kind of make it hard for us to … synchronize or have friendships … Let's say a White person, the problem is the fact that my mom doesn't want to allow me … to drive her car, or my mom doesn't want to allow me to [go to] my uncle to New York… The problem is [not] that she doesn't want to buy me this …. but you know she can't afford [to do it].

> G6 (B): The only problems we had growing up, the only wall between the friendship was the way we did things. I had an Indian friend … he'd come to my house for sleepovers and I'd go to his house. And when he came to my house … there would be this barrier between us, because you know how Indians do things. Back then we didn't have a flushing toilet in my house, it was a long drop [pit latrine]. So, you know, that causes a major problem in the friendship. Now he can't come to your house for a sleepover. It's an obstacle, it's a minor obstacle, but an obstacle, it's there and it causes problems in the friendship or relationship because now he expects you to come to his house for a sleepover, and you go. You go; the next week we take turns, he has to come to my house. He'll come with some lame excuse …

Socio-economic differences were, in fact, depicted as alternative forms of apartheid that serve to keep people apart:

> G6 (B): It creates a problem … we can't mix, we can't. That's how deep the apartheid was with, with sort of dividing people. It didn't divide them just with the skin color and where you come from, but with the money that your parents make.

Due to socio-economic differences, intergroup trust was undermined and intergroup friendships remained superfluous. Common experiences of economic hardship among ingroup members served on the other hand to cement ingroup friendships and fostered ingroup solidarity.

> G6 (B): So … with people who are more well off, the friendships are in a sense a bit shallow. And then the people who've suffered together … they're a bit deeper. And then it can be the opposite whereby the friendships this side when they are poor, are really shallow because you can't trust anyone.

There were, however, Black participants who held more nuanced viewpoints of socio-economic realities in South Africa and acknowledged that some Whites could also experience socio-economic difficulties. They acknowledged that Blacks tend to see Whites merely as undifferentiated items in a racial category and not as human beings. Many Blacks consequently had little empathy for Whites who could experience similar (economic) hardships than Black people.

> G3 (B): I read an article, where this one guy wrote in the *Sunday Times* [a South African newspaper] … he wrote about how he's trying to get a bursary for his daughter because he can't afford to take her to university, but all the bursaries they apply for will say "from a disadvantaged background". And he's like, I am from a disadvantaged background; I might be White, but it doesn't mean I have tons of money …. But no-one cares because you're White.

G3 (B): We think White people are superior to us or we think that we are inferior to [them]… People do not steal cars from Black people or Coloreds… they only steal cars from White people … because … we think that White people are just there, they do not have emotions like us and problems you see?

Affirmative action

In contrast to perceptions of White advantage, White participants felt that they were disadvantaged by policies such as affirmative action and/or Black Economic Empowerment (BEE). They believed, for example, that it had become difficult for Whites to access certain jobs and/or positions even when they worked hard and excelled in what they are doing:

G5 (W): I understand previously disadvantaged people and that …, but where it sometimes gets really difficult … I know of a lot of people who are … almost overqualified for certain positions – White people – and they just can't get the job and …[they] would be an asset to the country but they just can't find a job here. A friend of the family – a top medical student at Wits … top of his class, brilliant doctor … wanted to specialize as a cardiologist, and then no, his position is filled with Black people. I mean he's better qualified than anyone and he has to go overseas [translated].

They emphasized that affirmative action should be applied in such a way that it did not create new levels of inequality:

G5 (W): If anything, you should just make sure that everyone is equally privileged, not take away the privilege of others and give it to someone else. That doesn't make sense, you're just [re-]distributing … [translated]

Some Black respondents also voiced ambivalence on the feasibility of affirmative action measures. Some believed that these measures should be evaluated continuously to ensure that they did not create new forms of discrimination and inequality. They nevertheless felt that it would take longer than 20 years to eliminate the long years of racial discrimination which had started long before apartheid.

G3 (B): However, with BEE and things like those, they need to continuously go under review and see if they are now not afflicting pain on people who are undeserving of it. But at the end of the day, Black people are the majority. If they have the qualifications, they have the know-how, they must get in as equally as other races, as Indians who were also segregated to some level, not like us… So, at some point, we need to find equal ground. But 20 years is too short a time to reverse a 200- or 400-year issue.

Other Black participants pointed out that they were no longer disadvantaged; it was therefore unfair that they were privileged by affirmative action. These measures punished White youth for the sins of their fathers. The following conversation took place in Group 3 after one participant mentioned the example of a White girl who had been unable to get a bursary even though her parents were also disadvantaged (see previous section):

P1: But I am not from a disadvantaged background.

P2: No, I am not saying you [are], but I am … saying that.

P1: So why should I stand a better chance [of getting a bursary]?

P2: No, no, I am not disadvantaged either, but I am just saying that your parents or your grandparents did not know a better life before the …. [end of apartheid].

P1: But you see that's why the White girl is paying for her parents now?

Cultural and lifestyle differences

It was however not only socio-economic inequalities, but also cultural and lifestyle differences which presented stumbling blocks to intergroup friendships. Even in spaces such as integrated schools, where it could be assumed that status equity was the norm, it appears that friendships across cultural fault lines were often shallow and superfluous.

G1 (B): No, I don't [have White friends] … I've tried to make friends … I've been to school with them and I've had the same problem … I've shared things with them and realized that … these people are too different from me, from the way I am … so I wouldn't regard them as my friends.

G1 (B): How I treat my Black friends and how I treat the White people that live with [me] is different … How I relate with them and how they relate with me there's … always that division in the way … [We are] friends to a certain level but … we have different lifestyles according to me, you know.

G6 (B): Because in your head, you can never remove the fact that this person is a White person, or this person is a Black type of person … You then understand … we're different, so we can't be friends, you understand?

Different cultures are not only characterized by different lifestyles, but also by different relationship structures and family responsibilities. Participants felt that other groups had little empathy for differences related to cultural lifestyles.

G1 (B): I can't talk about certain things because I feel that they don't understand what I'm going through with my family, you know.

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Cultural differences were also regarded as a threat. The lack of understanding of the values and lifestyles of others is perceived to lie at the root of interracial distrust and poor relations.

G4 (W): We do not understand one another's cultures. So, you feel threatened by somebody else, because you do not understand from where he comes. And that is the big problem in our country.

Language presented as an important cultural barrier to intercultural friendships. It was not only knowledge of Afrikaans and/or English that presented a hindrance, but also the linguistic and other differences between Black ethnic groups.

G6 (B): And then there's this language barrier.

G6 (B): Which goes back to that point where we would say the reason why there's a social divide amongst the races is because if someone comes to you and tells you, I think the way you talk, is because of the fact that they come from a different … type of family. Let's say it's a Zulu person and you're Setswana, or it's a Setswana person and you're Zulu …. It's … uncomfortable. And then it creates a problem whereby we can't really be friends and lock together … So, you decide … I'm going to join people who look like me. Some people are not about trying new things.

Another Black participant felt that culture was not such a big hindrance; it was just more comfortable to be friends with people from your ingroup.

G1 (B): There's not a hindrance … I just prefer to have … the Blacks as friends.

Contributors to harmonious intergroup relationships

Although many factors influencing intergroup relations negatively were raised, some participants did mention instances where they had formed deep and meaningful relations with outgroup members These examples are evidence that intergroup contact could have extensive and intensive acquaintance potential for deep friendship relations to develop.

A White participant said that living in a university residence gave her the opportunity to meet Black fellow students with whom she had common interests and with whom she could form both an intellectual relationship and deep friendship bonds. She contrasted these relationships with those with some White counterparts whom she experienced as intellectually shallow.

G5 (W): There's a lot of ignorant White people that I really don't want to be associated with, but then there's intelligent Black people that I have deep, meaningful conversations with for hours, and whether it's about something that was a common interest, or just about how [any topic], [I have] friendships with people living in [the university] residence with me …

Another participant mentioned that he was one of only two Whites living in a predominantly Black commune (a residence, usually a private house, inhabited by a small number of students who share facilities). He was able to overcome intergroup anxiety by learning to know his Black housemates personally. Members of the community were de-categorized and personalized as he learned their names, learned about their interests and opinions, and engaged in conversation on topics of common interest. It is noteworthy that he acculturated within this community and came to celebrate cultural differences.

G5 (W): I live … in the student commune where we are [only] two White people in the commune … I go to the local mall to watch movies and we're the only White people sitting there, and I do not for once feel unsafe. I've come to embrace the culture over there. It was very scary at first, honestly … and when I heard that that's where I was gonna be staying … there was a lot of fear because of this unknown … just a sense of the Black community I moved into … but I've come to know them. They've got names, and they've got opinions … some of the people are really talking about interesting things, like educated conversations …

A Black participant was surprised and exhilarated to discover that his younger sister did not distinguish between her friends from different racial groups. It appears that complete de-categorization happened within this group of young friends in an integrated school. They no longer noticed racial differences. For this participant, the lack of racial awareness among the girls was a symbol of modernity and being citizens of a new dispensation.

G3 (B): We're 2000 kids, man. My little sister will say come pick up my friends, she will … [give] three names. She will never tell me anything in between. I am going to pick her up with a bunch of girls: one is White, one is Colored, one is Chinese …. It's so beautiful to me to say she never said to me, come pick me up with my Chinese friend … and when I get there it will be "Hi, this is who, and this is who" and these kids will be so happy to see me.

Another Black participant denied that racial awareness still existed in South Africa. He emphasized not only the ethnic diversity of South African society, but also the unity within this diversity. This unity made him proud to be a South African.

G1 (B): I'm proud of being a South African … In this one country, there are 11 official languages … there's this unity between the different ethnic groups … there isn't that thing where you are Black I'm White.

Discussion

Despite increased opportunities for interracial contact in post-apartheid South Africa, it nevertheless appears that the Born Frees in the present study still struggled with many intergroup issues that had plagued previous generations (De la Sablonnière et al., 2013; Finchilescu & Tredoux, 2010).

Almost 30 years after the advent of democracy, the apartheid legacy still throws a shadow over intergroup relations. Widely divergent opinions were voiced. Some Black participants felt that it was important to remember the sacrifices of previous generations, while both Black and White participants mentioned that it was crucial to remember apartheid to ensure that similar atrocities would never happen in South Africa again. A White participant acknowledged the deep pain caused by apartheid – wounds which could not be healed within a single generation. However, some Black youth rebelled against being constantly reminded of apartheid which could be a sign of rebellion against previous generations and opposition to the current Black leadership (Bornman et al., 2021). Resentment of the apartheid legacy could also be an indication that Born Frees wish to claim their own identity in opposition to the struggle generation. Conversely, some White participants felt that apartheid was used as a façade for constantly branding Whites as racist despite their best efforts to strive for peace and harmony with other groups. They experienced the apartheid legacy as shackles of the past from which they could never be freed. Apartheid thus appeared to be a double-edged sword for this generation. It was a finger pointing to past atrocities and reminding them not to repeat these, but it also instigated rebellion and served to condone new forms of oppression.

Although survey results point to the formation of a strong overarching national identity (Mattes, 2017), this superordinate identity had apparently not succeeded in decreasing identification with racial and ethnic groups and/or to improve relations (Bornman, 2010, 2021; Dovidio et al., 2009). Only one participant mentioned the unity of the South African nation amid its diversity. It furthermore appears that cultural and physical attributes associated with racial groups still serve to cultivate stark racial categorization which are difficult to bridge in contact situations (Turner et al., 1979; Turner et al., 1987). Strong racial awareness was furthermore associated with dissociative depersonalization (Kim, 2017). White respondents pointed for example to the tendency to stereotype all Whites as racist (Brown & Turner, 1981).

It furthermore appears that social categorization tend to keep groups apart even in fully integrated settings. It appears that identity-related factors – rather than factors directly related to a particular context – influenced interaction patterns. In accordance with the tendencies towards self-segregation recorded in observational studies (Finchilescu & Tredoux, 2008), especially Black participants voiced preferences to remain within the realms of the ingroup. Intergroup anxiety was an important threat hindering intergroup interaction and the formation of intergroup friendships (Stephan et al., 2000). Fears of being ridiculed due to affluence differences played an important role. Conversely, ingroups appeared to fulfil in the needs for warmth, security and acceptance (Brewer, 1999, 2007). It should, however, be noted that one participant mentioned intergroup aggression and hate on a university campus that appeared to have no other reason than the mere presence of two groups – Black and White. It appears that the mere presence of different groups could under some circumstances lead to experiences of threat and lead to dissociative tension and/or conflict (Brewer, 1999; Kim, 2017).

Socio-economic inequalities presented both realistic and symbolic threats (Stephan et al., 2000). Socio-economic differences in home environments counteracted the equality created in school, university and other contexts, and hindered associative behavior (Kim, 2017). It was not only real differences that had an effect. Socio-economic differences also represented a symbolic threat (Stephan et al., 2000). On a symbolic level, beliefs about White advantage and a legacy of intergroup inequality also influenced relations (Stephan et al., 2000). A White participant was devastated because she felt that she could never accomplish anything on her own merit. Her achievements were always attributed to her Whiteness – not to personal efforts – and therefore regarded as unfair and figurative of a legacy of racial inequality.

Although Stephan et al. (2000) mention culture as a potential symbolic threat and Kim (2017) regards cultural proximity as an important factor influencing associative/dissociative behavior, culture is seldom mentioned in discourses on the contact hypothesis. The results point however to the importance of culture in cultivating dissociative self-segregation. Cultural differences enhanced intergroup anxiety and fostered withdrawal within the ingroup where people understand the interaction rules (Brewer, 1999, 2007). The stark differences between African and Western cultures probably play a role. Language was furthermore mentioned as an important element influencing intergroup interaction – or the lack thereof. Although English is the lingua franca in public spaces, participants probably preferred speaking their ethnic languages in informal and/or intimate spaces. Language could consequently be an important reason for the self-segregation patterns reported in observational studies (Finchilescu & Tredoux, 2008).

Black participants focused predominantly on racial awareness, perceptions of White advantage and socio-economic inequalities. Conversely, White participants voiced feelings of alienation due to experiencing continuous stereotyping as racist, the fact that their achievements were regarded as unfair because they were White and discrimination due to affirmative action. It consequently appears that both groups perceived themselves as victims and thus as “minority” groups. Blacks seemed to believe that little had changed; Whites still had the upper hand economically and some felt that affirmative action measures could therefore be justified. Whites felt that they were not accepted as individuals based on individual efforts and abilities, and that they were branded as being racist merely because of their skin color. The fact that they strived for peace and harmony with other groups was also not accepted and appreciated.

There were nevertheless signs that racial cleavages were not intractable. Although complete de-categorization was scarce, associative differentiation and personalization did occur (Brown & Turner, 1981; Kim, 2017). Softening of intergroup attitudes were observed when participants started seeing outgroup members as human beings who also experienced economic and other problems, but also learnt to know them as stimulating and attractive individuals who could enrich their own lives. It was however disconcerting that it was mentioned that Blacks seldom see Whites as human beings who can also experience hardship. Instances of personalization

were associated with members of different races learning to know one another in intimate living quarters over an extended time periods. An instance of complete de-categorization was also mentioned, namely the participant who said that his little sister did not seem to recognize that her friends were from different racial groups. More research is needed to investigate whether de-categorization and/or personalization is more prevalent among young children and whether the effects of such processes at a very young age will continue into adulthood.

The results of this study have far-reaching methodological, theoretical and practical implications. Firstly, the value of alternative qualitative methods to obtain a better understanding of underlying reasons for patterns of intergroup attitudes and behavior is illustrated (Dixon et al., 2005; Jackson & Sherriff, 2013; Hopkins & Kahani-Hopkins, 2006). It gives among others insight into reasons for the tendencies towards self-segregation recorded in observational studies as well the limited cross-race friendships found in integrated university settings. It also illustrates that intergroup relations are often messy and not solely determined by rational processes (Høy-Peterson, 2022). Theoretically, the study confirms the far-reaching effects of social categorization and social identification and the important role of ingroups in providing warmth and security in a divided society (Brewer, 1999, 2007; Tajfel, 1981; Turner et al., 1979; Turner et al., 1987). It furthermore points to the fact that superfluous intergroup contact in integrated contexts such as on university campuses is often insufficient to overcome social categorization and social identification processes (Dixon, 2001). Whereas both Allport (1954) and Kim (2015) emphasize factors related to the structure of relations in a particular context such as status equity and co-operation versus competition, the study shows that "hidden factors" often lie at the root of self-segregation tendencies (Dixon, 2001). The historical legacy of relations, symbolic threats, subjective and often irrational perceptions, as well as inequality on other levels and experiences of intergroup anxiety are some of the extra-contextual factors which can lead to dissociative behavior (Stephan et al., 2000; Kim, 2017). Above all, it becomes evident how difficult it is to achieve status equity in a society characterized by deep socio-economic differences (Dixon, 2001). The important role of culture – and language specifically – is furthermore emphasized. On a practical level, the study confirms that intergroup relations remain a contested and complex terrain in post-apartheid South Africa (De la Sablonnière et al., 2013). It can furthermore not be assumed that societal desegregation will be sufficient to promote social harmony (Dixon, 2001; Turner et al., 1987). Special measures need to be taken to promote intergroup interaction with acquaintance potential to foster associative intergroup behavior (Kim, 2017). Blind fixation on race should furthermore be overcome as it hinders growth and prosperity from which all South Africans can benefit.

The study nevertheless offers some signals of hope. Prolonged intimate contact in smaller integrated contexts contributed to instances where South Africans learned to know one another as fellow human beings and not merely as group members and formed deep and meaningful relationships across group boundaries. The reported instances of differentiation and personalization point to the need to create more opportunities for prolonged intergroup contact of an intimate nature in community, university and work settings. Smaller work or study groups, such as tutorials, where members of different groups can work together in striving towards common goals could play a role. Voluntary intergroup socializing in special interest groups such as music groups or sport teams are further examples of settings where withdrawal into ingroup realms could be counteracted. Whereas socio-economic affluence appears to be a primary value dominating intergroup perceptions and attitudes, values such as community service, integrity, empathy and kindness should be emphasized in evaluating individual and groups. As is the case in many other diverse societies, attendance of diversity workshops should be encouraged in integrated settings such as universities and places of work. Such workshops could offer safe settings where members of different groups can talk about their fears and anxieties when interacting with other groups and where respect for cultural differences can be cultivated.

More qualitative studies are however needed on how other South African groups such as Coloreds and Indians view and experience intergroup relations and how these groups influence the intergroup dynamics in South Africa. Intensive research – both quantitative and qualitative – should furthermore be done in smaller contact settings to establish whether and how intergroup interaction contributes towards differentiation and personalization and in the end to associative intergroup behavior.

Author Note

The research was supported by the Women-in-Research Fund of the University of South Africa (Unisa).

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