

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Can we become friends? Students' cross-racial interaction in post-apartheid South African higher education

Samantha Shapses Wertheim\*

### *Abstract*

This article investigates and documents how undergraduate students in South Africa make meaning of cross-racial interaction on the college campus in the post-apartheid era. Additionally, it explores how students perceive that interactions with diverse peers have shifted since apartheid, and how these interactions are indicative of the larger social dynamic of South Africa. Utilising Jansen's (2009) framework for understanding Afrikaner student perspectives and Critical Race Theory (CRT), this qualitative exploration collected interviews from 10 students at a higher education institution (HEI) in South Africa. Findings identified three overarching themes found among students including contradiction within and across racial groups, Afrikaner white vs. English white and racial segregation on campus. These themes directly correspond with personal and societal aspects that influence meaning making in South Africa, including intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics, historical legacy and institutional structures.

### *Keywords*

*Student affairs, diversity, student housing, application and selection process, social contact theory, higher education.*

### *Introduction*

Twenty years after the end of apartheid, South Africa has embarked upon a new era of higher education, as students who have never experienced apartheid, and who are from different racial origins, interact within the setting of higher education. While these students are certainly familiar with the legacy of oppression, in their lifetime apartheid has never been enforced as law. This changing dynamic gives way to new areas of inquiry regarding how students in South African higher education make meaning of interacting with racially diverse peers in a post-apartheid society. The present qualitative study addresses this societal shift by asking the following questions: How do students make meaning of cross-racial interactions in a post-apartheid society? Furthermore, how do students perceive that interactions with

\* Director of Graduate Student Life, New York University, USA. Email: [samantha.shapses@nyu.edu](mailto:samantha.shapses@nyu.edu)

racially diverse peers have shifted since apartheid, and how are these interactions indicative of the larger social dynamic of South Africa? Exploring this line of inquiry, this study identifies salient issues relating to cross-racial interaction in South Africa, and documents how selected students make sense of interacting across race in a post-apartheid era.

### *Historical framing and literature*

#### **Constructs of language**

To understand the current nature of cross-racial interaction in South African higher education, it is essential to ground it in the historical and socio-political circumstances that shape these institutions. In particular, the topic of language and racial categorisation must be addressed for those unfamiliar with the historical social hierarchy in South Africa, as the co-constructed meaning of race and racial categories is greatly shaped by the socio-political environment in which the topic is being examined (Omi & Winant, 1994). For the purpose of this study race will be defined as a socially constructed system that classifies people based on physical characteristics; it is this classification system that is then utilised to defend the arrangement of power and privilege in society. (Smedley, 2007).

South Africa has a unique history of race, and therefore distinct racial categorisations. Fisk and Ladd (2004) identify government-constructed racial groups in South Africa as the following: English white; Afrikaners (previously the Dutch settlers); Coloured (those with both African and European descendants, as well as Malay, Indonesian, and Indo-China); Indians; and Africans. These are the racial terms that will be used to refer to racial groups in South Africa in the present study. In addition to these groups, there are two other terms that will be utilised. ‘White’ denotes those who are of Afrikaner and English descent. This refers to the group of South Africans who benefited from apartheid’s ruling both willingly and unwillingly by the inherent nature of their whiteness. ‘Black’ encompasses all people of colour including African, Coloured, Indian and Asian. This term was used in part by the African National Congress (ANC) to contradict the deficit perspective that the Nationalist party used when categorising people of colour as ‘non-white’ (Fisk & Ladd, 2004).

#### **South African higher education transformation**

As Metcalfe (1997) states, “[o]ne of the crucial challenges that our new democracy faces is to reconstruct, against all odds, a society and an education system left in ruins by apartheid” (p. 13).

Identifying these obstacles as both changing the structure of the education system, as well as the attitudes and beliefs of its participants, Metcalfe illustrates that prior to the fall of apartheid it was near impossible to imagine students of different races learning together in the same environment. This sentiment indicates the great challenges South Africa would face when considering cross-racial interaction on the college campus.

In 1995, Mandela established the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) to address the redesign of South Africa’s higher education system. The NCHE’s policy paper, entitled *Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education*, served as an outline for the size, structure, governance, funding and overarching

goals of South Africa's new higher education system, providing an opportunity to evolve with the new post-apartheid era (Fiske & Ladd, 2004). Central to this document was the NCHE's focus on the social and cultural development of South Africa's new society, which rested on the transformation of higher education. If South Africa were to create a society in which all races were to be considered equal, then it was essential that this occur within the arena of higher education.

One of the primary concerns of the NCHE was increasing access for black students at the university level. In 1992, white students made up 50% of the enrollment at universities, while being only 12% of the school age population (Fisk & Ladd, 2004). The *White Paper (1997)* sought to address the unequal participation by providing access and opportunities granted to students to different races. An aggressive recruitment of black students began and was supported by means of the National Student Financial Aide Scheme (NSFAS) that provided funding for black students.

These policies and procedures sought to enhance the structural diversity (or racial composition – see Chang, 1999) of South African universities. However, while this goal is of the utmost importance, scholarship on the campus racial climate of the United States have found that structural diversity alone is not enough. Increasing the numbers of diverse students is indeed the first step, yet desirable outcomes are determined by how students engage with diversity on their college campus (Chang, 1999; Gurin, Dey & Hurtado, 2002; Chang, Denson, Saenz & Misa, 2006).

King (2001) addresses this notion when identifying the difference between *numerical inclusion* and *comprehensive inclusion* when discussing the campus climate of South African higher education. Numerical inclusion refers to the students who were previously prohibited access to higher education, while comprehensive inclusion considers not only the increasing numbers of racially diverse students, but also developing a welcoming intellectual and social environment in which they can flourish. As King explains, numbers alone will not secure the success of black students in South African higher education. Rather, a holistic approach to inclusion that addresses not only access, but also considers the social-emotional adjustment of the student, must be employed as well (King, 2001; Austin, 2001).

### **Investigating cross-racial interaction**

Although the United States and South Africa are different in many ways, both countries have struggled to include people of colour in a higher education system after a history of legalised oppression. While the topic of cross-racial interaction in South African higher education is relatively new, King's (2001) notion of comprehensive inclusion has been a part of the academic discourse in the States for the past 20 years. The research on cross-racial interaction within American higher education provides insight into the numerous benefits that South African students may take away from productive interactions across race.

Research finds that there are many positive outcomes resulting from diversity in American higher education. These outcomes include, but are not limited to, gains in diversity competence (such as the ability to get along with others, and awareness of different ways of life); civic engagement; cognitive development; intellectual development

and moral development (Hu & Kuh, 2003; Chang, Denson & Saenz, 2006; Saenz, Nagai & Hurtado, 2007; Mayhew & Engberg, 2010). Gurin and Nagda (2006) suggested that a large portion of these educational benefits attributed to diversity come from interactions with racially diverse peers. Furthermore, it is suggested that productive interactions across race will yield experiences that will in turn lead to positive gains and prepare students to live in a multicultural and racially diverse world, thereby “interrupt[ing] long-standing segregation trends in society” (Harper & Hurtado, 2007, p. 14).

While there is a gap in the extant literature that specifically addresses cross-racial interaction in South African higher education, several articles mention its importance. Walker (2005) conducted a narrative study on how dialogues and conceptions of race have transformed since the end of apartheid, and questions how institutions of higher education can assist in the creation of a positive post-racial society. Walker finds that focusing on the social interactions (casual and intimate) of students allows for insight into their personal identity and that these interactions define how students see themselves in relation to the world they live in. Although not solely focused on cross-racial interaction, this study illustrates the substantial role it plays in the transformation of dialogues surrounding race in post-apartheid South Africa.

Scholarship has also been conducted on institutional factors that influence cross-racial interaction. Perhaps most salient to this study is the role of university language policies. When apartheid was dismantled, Afrikaans-medium universities adopted a dual language policy and classes were taught in both English and Afrikaans (Jansen, 2009). While the intention of this policy was to allow students to learn in the language with which they were most comfortable this policy segregated students who spoke Afrikaans (primarily white Afrikaner students) and English (primarily black students), thereby minimising cross-racial interaction in the classroom (Jansen, 2009). Walker’s (2005) study supports this notion, upon illustrating that language serves as a boundary for student interaction and observing that friendship is limited by both societal structures of socialisation as well as institutional structures.

Greenfield’s (2010) study focuses on the role of language as well, and demonstrates both the anger that black students feel regarding the Afrikaans language and the ambivalence that black students feel towards using English. Greenfield reminds the reader that although it is not often recognised, English is still a colonial language. While some students see English as a language that unites, a common ground for all South Africans, others are taunted for their lack of proficiency in it. Greenfield’s study showcases the complex relationship between language, history and cross-racial interaction in South Africa.

Woods’ (2001) study identifies dorming choices as another institutional aspect affecting cross-racial interaction. Woods (2001) assessed the perception of race relations and racial climate at the University of Witwatersrand (Wits) and references an “everyday racism” (p. 97) that is subtle and systemically entrenched in a university’s culture. Woods (2001) found that “there is an obvious social segregation between the races at Wits and attributes much of this segregation to the living conditions. Woods discovered that while most black students live in the residential dorms, white students generally live at home. Both the

residential environment and language contribute to an unwritten segregation on campus as identified by Pattman (2007). Pattman emphasises the difference between white Afrikaners and white English South Africans (WESAs). All of the findings above were in one way or another reflected in the present exploratory study.

### *Theoretical framework*

Jonathan Jansen's (2009) book *Knowledge in the Blood* provides a comprehensive framework of how Afrikaner students interact with black students that incorporates how the ideology of apartheid had been passed down between generations. Jansen divides Afrikaner beliefs about apartheid into three categories. The first, "Nothing Happened" (p. 38), centres on the notion that apartheid was simply a method of keeping racial order, and that the liberation of blacks was part of natural progression towards civility. The next category, "Something Happened, Now Get Over It" (p. 39), entails the Afrikaners who wish to move forward and forget the past. They acknowledge that apartheid happened, but they do not recognise its legacy. The third category, "Terrible Things Happened" (p. 41), incorporates Afrikaners who were an active part of the anti-apartheid movement as activists. Lastly, Jansen's framework includes the confessionalists who "had a direct and often traumatic encounter with the past; this knowledge remains deeply disturbing" (p. 43). These categories present a lens with which to view the student respondents in this study and provide researchers like myself from outside the South African higher education system with greater insight into how to contextualise the students' thoughts regarding cross-racial interaction.

However, it is important to note that Jansen's (2009) framework applies only to white Afrikaner students. While it proves to be useful for contextualising all of the student data, in order to validate and elucidate the voice of the students of colour, as well as to recognise the role of historical oppression South Africa faced, this study is also guided by the overarching paradigm of Critical Race Theory (CRT). Although created by American scholars, CRT has several tenets that apply to investigating how students make meaning in South Africa. The first is that it recognises that racism and race are omnipresent within society and interact with multiple identities. Secondly, CRT focuses on telling the stories of the oppressed, and challenges the dominant paradigm. Thirdly, CRT focuses on the institutional and structural systems of advantage and disadvantage (Tatum, 1992; Delgado, 2001). Lastly, and perhaps most pertinent to the study of cross-racial interaction in South Africa, is CRT's acknowledgement that systems of oppression and inequality have been created and enforced over time through legal practices. Originating in legal studies, CRT illustrates how the legal enforcement of race and racism currently affects the experience of people of colour. Jansen (2001) illustrates the importance of considering the legacy of apartheid when addressing inequities in South African higher education:

[H]igher education stands at the apex of a schooling system characterised by gross disparities in provision and hence in the preparation of would-be students [...] These include the current absence of a level financial playing field, resulting from the disparities in historically acquired assets across the system in capital, plant and resources. (p.8)

Utilising the CRT lens encourages the researcher constantly to consider how apartheid shaped the experiences of South Africans today in financial, political and social arenas. In essence, CRT provides a framework for identifying, navigating and understanding interactions between diverse peers, as well as how these interactions may or may not differ depending upon the identity of the student and the historical forces upon him or her.

### ***Methods***

The complex and changing dynamic of race relations on the college campus in South Africa naturally gave way to conducting an exploratory study on how South African students make meaning of cross-racial interaction. The present study utilises a qualitative lens because it seeks to capture the human experience, which is an integral aspect of qualitative research (Creswell, 2007, 2009; Merriam, 2002; Willis, 2007). Coined by Kegan (1994) meaning making is defined, as how one understands knowledge and how they retrieve it. As King and Baxter-Magolda (2006) state, in order to

[...] understand meaning-making structures, researchers must learn *how* people made sense of an experience and what constructions of the world, self, and others undergird that interpretation. (p. 495)

That being said, meaning-making is an attractive concept to utilise in the context of South Africa for it consists of both of the things over which one has jurisdiction as well as the societal and institutional forces that influence experience (King & Baxter-Magolda, 2007). While qualitative studies are not generalisable to the population at large, the qualitative exploration of how students make meaning of cross-racial interaction provides specific insight into students' experiences in South African higher education.

### **The learning context and study participants**

Previously an Afrikaner university, the Higher Education Institution (HEI) studied is an ideal location at which to study cross-racial interaction, as its student demographic has undergone a drastic transformation within the past 20 years. Similar to numerous former Afrikaner universities, the HEI was previously an institution that worked to cultivate and enforce the ideology of apartheid through the means of social tradition and academics (Jansen, 2009). Previously providing instruction offered only in Afrikaans, the HEI currently offers course in both English and Afrikaans. The HEI's student racial demographic has transformed significantly since the end of apartheid. The South African Institute of Race Relations' (SAIRR) *South African Survey* showed that degrees granted to black students (which does not include those identified as Coloured) had increased from 8 514 to 36 970 in two decades. The majority of degrees awarded was provided by formerly all-white institutions; HEI was among the top degree-granting institutions, providing more than 10% of all degrees awarded to all black students in South Africa (Dell, 2011).

To gain insight into the campus climate and cross-racial interaction, ten students were interviewed at the HEI as part of this exploratory study. Interviews were collected at two sites – first, the student centre, and second, following a classroom observation. Two students

approached me after the classroom observation. The remaining eight students who were interviewed in the student centre readily agreed to participate after being approached. Interviews ranged in duration from 20 to 45 minutes. The self-identified racial identities of the students consisted of the following: 1 Coloured, 2 Indian, 5 African, 1 English and 1 Afrikaner. While I was not able to collect an equal number of students from each racial identity, I was fortunate to speak with students from a variety of backgrounds and perspectives. All of the interviews were audio-recorded, and pseudonyms were provided at the time of transcription.

It is important to mention that not all of the interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis. In some cases, multiple students were interviewed at the same time. This provided a unique insight into not only how they made meaning of cross-racial interaction, but also how they navigated the subject while in the presence of their peers of differing races. The interviews were semi-structured and asked overarching questions that addressed how the students identified racially; their experiences of coming to college and engaging with students of different races; moments in which they experienced cross-racial interaction; and their thoughts on apartheid's effect on how students presently interact with each other. It is important to note that the focus of the interviews and this study pertained to the phenomenon of cross-racial interaction, and did not include other factors that may shape the way in which students perceive the college campus (such as their relationships with faculty, coursework and materials or even media outlets). The potential inclusion and importance of these topics in subsequent literature is addressed in the discussion.

### **Data analysis**

Following Creswell's (2009) method of qualitative analysis, in the first reading memos were created regarding first impressions of the data. Subsequent readings utilised open coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) to identify areas that pertained to the phenomenon of cross-racial interaction. Codes were compared across case to identify common trends or experiences with the phenomenon of cross-racial interaction. Upon determining the salient codes, they were then revised and categorised into the overarching themes presented in the results. In the last step of qualitative research, Creswell (2009) suggests that the researcher considers his or her own personal disposition, theoretical frames, extant literature on the topic, and understanding of the historical and cultural background of the respondents. For this reason, it is important to address the researcher orientation.

### **Researcher orientation**

Perhaps the most salient aspects of my identity that shape my interpretation of the data are my identification as white and American. Being white means something very different in South Africa than in the United States, and there is no doubt that my understanding of the racial dynamic in South Africa is shaped by my preconceived notions of race founded in an American context. As an American I am familiar with a different racial paradigm from that of the students in South Africa. And while this may provide an outside perspective, I cannot help but compare what I learnt about cross-racial interaction in South Africa to my own studies and experiences in the United States. Furthermore, while CRT is used

as a theoretical framework for this study, I also consider it as a compass for my scholarly explorations and professional practice. Thus, all of my interactions with the respondents are shaped by my desire to promote a socially just and equitable society, and founded on the supposition that a country's history greatly influences current practice and policy.

## ***Results***

Several themes emerged that related to how these students make meaning of cross-racial interaction in a post-apartheid era. As described below, these themes include 1) contradictions in the meaning-making process both within themselves and others; 2) recognising and assigning differences between white English students and white Afrikaner students; and 3) racial segregation on campus. Collectively, these three themes provide a foundation for understanding various aspects that contribute to how they study participants made meaning of interacting with diverse peers.

### **Contradiction within themselves and across racial identities**

Contradiction was a strong aspect of several of the students' meaning-making processes regarding their understanding of cross-racial interaction. Contradiction was found in two forms. The first, was contradiction within. This entailed students who made statements that they directly opposed at a later point in the interview. The second was contradiction found between various racial groups on campus, namely that different races had conflicting perspectives of the campus climate and their interactions with racially diverse peers.

#### *Contradiction within*

Marcus, a student who identified himself as white English, provided a clear example of the conflicting point of views held within him:

“Basically we don't see colour, yeah we notice there is diversity, but for instance when I met him it wasn't like oh man, this guy is Coloured how am I going to interact. It's just like just another human being. Older generations, they are a bit different, for us, for our generation, I don't see colour.”

This statement exemplifies Walker's (2005) notion of new racism in South Africa that includes a colour-blind ideology. Elaborated on as part of an American framework of racism, Bonilla-Silva (2006) defines colour-blind racism, as a method of discrediting the institutional oppression experienced by the group. Furthermore, Marcus's statement illustrated that this is an ideology assigned to a generation rather than a single person. By using the term 'we' rather than 'I', Marco expressed that this sentiment extends beyond his personal experience to the experiences of his peers. Atif, a student who identified as Coloured and was interviewed alongside Marcus, supported this sentiment:

“It's almost like an insult when people ask me what race I am because nowadays we don't pay attention to that at all – especially in South Africa.”



However, when later questioned whether or not they had ever witnessed racism, the contradiction within surfaces, Marcus was quickly able to recall an event that was racially based. As Marcus shared:

“Well I witnessed it the other day, one of my friends she had relations with this black guy and they were just chilling, and this other Afrikaner guy came by and he saw this happening and he was like what the f--k whatever, whatever, and he started hitting this black guy – and I thought to myself what is going on, I thought we were past this?”

This passage illustrates that not only did Marcus see race, but he also identified that there are other students who are not ‘past’ the racial discrimination enforced by apartheid. This illustrates the contradiction within; as Marcus continued to discuss Afrikaners it became clear that he did not believe that a colour-blind ideology has been adopted by his entire generation. It also highlights the deep divide that still exists between Afrikaners, whites and blacks as an aspect of the legacy of apartheid. Moodley and Adam (2000) may describe the situation above as *social racism*, one of ten racial legacies: namely that a “cultural hierarchy of arrogance has frequently replaced cruder forms of contempt and discrimination” (p. 58).

Lisel, a white Afrikaner student, who at first claimed that she never cared about race but later made statements that are contradictory, also illustrates this phenomenon. Lisel reflected on her attitudes towards race as a child: “Ever since I was little have not cared about what colour [he/she] was, just as long as [he/she] was a friend.” Yet, when later commenting on her interactions with black peers in college, she illustrated some of the concerns and assumptions she has about her black peers.

“We had this group work thing, and they gave me a group, well I didn’t have a group and some black girls came to me and said do you want to be in our group. And I was a bit hesitant because well their English proficiency are not so good, and their typing skills are not as good as the white people, and is not that I’m being racist, it’s a fact that they didn’t have the training that we had.”

Lisel determined, based upon colour, that her classmates were not as proficient as herself. The language in this statement reflects that she was speaking with regard to all black students, not just this particular group of students. When directly questioned if this is applicable to all black students, Lisel claimed that it was “few and far between that you find someone who is intellectual.” Lisel was cognisant that this underlying assumption may be translated as racist, and therefore insisted that this was not her bias, but rather a function of various institutions’ inability to provide black students with the necessary skills and education prior to college. Contrary to CRT’s assertion that racism is both structural and institutional (Brainard, 2009), Lisel did not consider inequitable institutions as an aspect of racism. Rather, she falls into Jansen’s (2009) frame of “Something happened, now get over it” (p. 39). It becomes clear throughout Lisel’s interview that these assumptions have deep roots, and have become a part of her narrative for understanding her black peers. As Lisel shared:

“It’s not their fault, it’s not that they were born to not be smart, it is because they did not have the proper training and also cause when they were babies their mothers put the babies on their back with the thing and the baby just stays on the mother’s back all day, with white babies you show them coloured blocks with coloured beads and you stimulate them...”

Lisel’s assumptions of the intellectual ability of her classmates stemmed from a societal narrative and shaped the way she made meaning of cross-racial interaction while in college; these assumptions also directly contradicted the way in which she framed her narrative as open to people of all races.

#### *Contradiction between racial identities*

Contradiction, or conflicting points of view, regarding cross-racial interaction were also found across racial groups. At times, the students’ perspectives on cross-racial interaction were so different, that it was almost as if they were not attending the same university. It appeared that these different perspectives were largely based on their racial identity and how their peers of different races treated them.

Creating friendships across race was one of the areas in which students clearly disagreed and contradicted one another. While Marcus and Atif agreed that it was easy to make friends across race, Kabir, Devide and Tebogo, three students who identified as African, expressed that their experience was quite different. As Tebogo explained,

“It was exciting [to come to the HEI] I thought I was going to make a few friends that were a different race but ah – it’s not that easy. I thought that we could interact and be friends with white people but I don’t know, maybe we just don’t have common ground.”

Statements such as this reveal that the students believed that they had not made friends with white students due to a lack of commonalities. These three students agreed that it was much easier to share friendships with those who had the same cultural heritage. Contradicting Marcus and Atif, who believed that all races are now embraced on the college campus, Devide shared:

“There is still just a little bit of segregation thing within us – this apartheid thing we haven’t broken the boundaries, we haven’t become comfortable with a white guy, or just sitting at a table with white people. There are still boundaries to be broken, but slowly and surely we will get there, we just haven’t gotten there yet.”

Devide specifically drew attention to the role that the apartheid still plays in interactions with his peers, while Marcus and Atif believed they were ‘past’ it. These students’ meaning-making process surrounding cross-racial interaction is often defined by how they perceive the climate of the college campus. This high level of contradiction illustrates the complex and layered nature of cross-racial interaction in a post-apartheid society.

### **White English vs. white Afrikaner**

As documented by Jansen (2009), distinguishing between those who were white English and white Afrikaner was another theme that arose when discussing cross-racial interaction in higher education. In fact, all ten students who were interviewed mentioned this as an aspect of their experience. Several of the participants mentioned that they observed that Afrikaner students have a different ‘mindset’. Below, Kabir discussed his impression of the difference between white Afrikaners and white English students:

“There is a lot, a lot [of difference between Afrikaners and English whites] ... Their mindsets [are different]. Afrikaner, they are still arrogant, they don’t accept a black person as an English man would. Even in the style they dress you can see it.”

When asked how he identifies racially, Marcus, (who is white English) was hesitant to identify as white simply because it can be confused with and Afrikaner white. When discussing racism, Marcus shared:

“It’s not all whites and is not all blacks, its Afrikaner whites. It’s the truth, it’s the Afrikaners that are racist. It’s just that the Afrikaners they really can’t stand blacks. [So you find there is a division within whiteness?] Oh yeah because I look at me, when I’m sitting with my white friends and this white guy comes by with heavy rock music I’m like ‘ugh white people’. Nah, nah I’m not white, I refuse.”

Marcus’s intention to separate himself from what he sees as the racist antics of Afrikaner whites defines how he sees himself in relation to his peers and thereby makes meaning of his interactions with them. Pattman (2007) finds that WESAs identify as “cultureless” and “downplayed the salience of their race” (p. 483) and brings attention to the white students who do not consider themselves a part of apartheid, but still directly benefited from it. By refusing to identify as white, Marcus fails to acknowledge the privileges that have been bestowed upon him due to the colour of his skin. Moodley and Adam (2001) outline this as another aspect of the social racism mentioned above when stating that few English whites attribute their attitudes to the colonialism that preceded apartheid.

### **A segregated campus**

As indicated in the themes above, another aspect is the segregation that exists among racial groups at the HEI. In setting of higher education, black students and English students often interacted with each other, while Afrikaner students were far more segregated (Jansen, 2009). While this is referenced in the Afrikaner vs. English theme above, several of the students interviewed extended this segregation beyond Afrikaner students to all white students. As Kabir shared:

“I just came here to study, I’m not even friends with any white people, not that I don’t like white people, but I never got the chance to become friends – I just interact with them during school hours or something school-related.”

Devide supported this when he said, “We do projects with them, but we aren’t friends with them.” Lisel described the student population as “cliques, the white people are friends with the white people and the black people are friends with the black people and there is cross-pollination, but everyone always goes back to their clique.”

There are several barriers that prevent students from creating meaningful relationships across race. The first, as referenced in the literature is language. Jansen (2009) asserts that by creating a dual language university that utilises both Afrikaans and English, they have found a socially acceptable way of segregating students. Hamsa, an Indian-identified student, enforces this upon stating:

“In a lot of cases there are students who go to Afrikaans schools and they only spend time with Afrikaners and they study in Afrikaans [...] so they never really get to interact with other people, maybe if they were given the chance they would interact with those who are different, but since they weren’t given that chance they stick with what is familiar.”

Hamsa makes meaning of the fact that she does not often interact with Afrikaans students by justifying their separation as never having had the choice to interact with others outside of their race. However, from Lisel’s experience, we know that this is not true. Afrikaner students do have the option of taking classes with other races, but choose to study in their first language. Structurally, this separation is supported by the dual language policy of the school. The fact that academia is still heavily dependent on the Afrikaans language is something that Moodley and Adam (2001) also consider as a legacy of apartheid; they name it *cultural racism*, or the inability to address cultural and national identities equitably.

Dorming choices is one area in which students of colour (black, Indian and African) noted that they did interact with students across race in the residential environment. Nonetheless, they considered the relationships as superficial. Devide stated:

“There were some [whites] on my floor that I would chill with, but you find that we don’t know much about each other, after three years I don’t even know where they are from.”

Khati, a student who identified as Indian, shared that she had, in fact, made friends with students of all different races in her residential living environment, but that this had transpired because she was the only one of her race in her hostel: “You have to get along because you get very lonely. I was the only person in my group so it wasn’t like I could just stick to my own race.” However, when questioned further about her experiences, she mentioned that at times she felt discriminated against because of her race:

“When we are in res [residential living] together you have socials with different hostels, so there was a time that we had a social with a white hostel, I wasn’t going to go because I had to study, but my friends were going – so I said just for interest’s sake, ask what would have happened if you had taken me along? And they told my friend that I couldn’t have come if I wasn’t white.”

While there was a noted separation of races on campus, this is not to say that some students did not form meaningful friendships across race, as illustrated by Marcus and Atif earlier, and as well by Akani, an African student, who shared:

“I was very surprised because I made some friends with white people and stayed at their house for a few nights, and I thought that was amazing because they could even call me friends.”

While, Akani was very pleased with his friendships, he admits that their hospitality came as a surprise to him. All in all, a segregated campus, which is supported structurally by language policies, and individually by students’ attitudes and ideology, shapes the way in which students make meaning of their interactions with racially diverse peers. Furthermore, it showcases the deeply rooted mentality of apartheid, and the students’ challenge in accepting and overcoming it.

### *Discussion*

While the present study was small and exploratory, it has identified some of the mechanisms and institutional structures that shape how students make meaning of race in a post-apartheid era. Each theme represents a different aspect that contributes to the meaning-making process. I have identified these as interpersonal/intrapersonal, historical and institutional factors contributing to how students make meaning of cross-racial interaction.

The first theme, ‘contradiction’, speaks to the intrapersonal and interpersonal development of the student being interviewed. As defined by King and Baxter-Magolda (2005), ‘intrapersonal’ refers to the students’ sense of self, and comprehension of their own identity. Marcus, who made conflicting statements regarding his feelings about race, and his own racial identity, represents a student whose meaning-making process is significantly influenced by where he is located in his development and understanding of self. King and Baxter-Magolda refer to the interpersonal as how the students envision themselves in relation to others. This interpersonal influence is illustrated by the contradicting opinions of the groups with different racial identities. Students such as Kabir, Devide and Tebogo, who candidly shared that they experience Afrikaner students as racist, utilise this perception as a platform for how they make meaning of interactions with these students. Both the intrapersonal and interpersonal influence depends on the particular student. As an example, Akani, who also identified as African, recognised the discord between racial groups, but due to his intrapersonal understanding, he has engaged and created meaningful relationships with white students.

Yet, while the intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects are significant in how these students make meaning of cross-racial interaction, the historical and institutional forces that surround them shape them. The second theme, ‘English vs. Afrikaner’, speaks to the role that the historical legacy of oppression has contributed to how students make meaning of cross-racial interaction. Jansen (2009) refers to this when discussing his theoretical framework of Hoffman’s (2002) *indirect knowledge*, whereby ‘knowledge’ or ‘history’ is transmitted from

generation to generation as truth. Students such as Lisel demonstrated this when discussing why her classmates were not as academically prepared as herself. Her justification is part of a narrative that has been passed down from generation to generation. At one point, Lisel mentioned that her father is racist, but that she does not disagree with his sentiments.

Jansen (2009) uses *indirect knowledge* as a method to understand the Afrikaner student experience, but I argue that the transmission of a history can be extended to numerous racial groups. From the perspective of CRT, this can be considered recognising the historical legacy of racism, or the fact that racism is a normalised aspect of society woven through social, legal and governmental institutions (Delgado, 2001). When asking Akani and Lisel, who were interviewed at the same time, if they believe that apartheid affects people's interactions currently, Lisel shared, "I think it's in the back of people's minds." Akani supported this sentiment when he stated, "I think so as well, because we still have that issue that they did this, they did that, we are still pointing at the other." While these students have never experienced legalised apartheid in their lifetime, they are deeply affected by the society created by it.

The third theme, 'segregation', speaks to the institutional structures that discourage students from forming meaningful relationships across race. As demonstrated in the present study, two current institutional aspects are the language policies and dorming options (i.e. giving the students the option of which type of hostel they would like to reside in). According to the students in this study, structures such as these have created and enforced a campus divided by race.

Considering all three of the aspects –intrapersonal and interpersonal, historical and institutional together – we must recognise that they are all intertwined. For the most part, all three of these themes were employed as students were making meaning of their interactions with racially diverse peers. Like the socio-political climate of South Africa, the students' meaning-making process is layered and complex. This is evident in the large discrepancy between the perceptions of how interactions with racially diverse peers have shifted since the end of apartheid. While some students claimed that they do not see race, others explicitly recognise the residual effects of apartheid. They extend these sentiments beyond their college campus, to their experiences in life in general. As Lisel and Akani explained, one of the most difficult aspects of interacting with racially diverse peers was bringing them home to their family:

L: The biggest barrier is the homing thing, that is the biggest difference because I know that she is from a more poor family and I feel guilty when she sees what I have, and that is always a barrier. And it just makes you feel bad.

[Do you feel the same way?]

A: I do, seriously, I do, because it would be bad if one day if my friends could visit me at home because you look at their living standards, and there is a big difference between white people and black people. You feel bad, you don't want make people feel guilty.

As Lisel and Akani recognise, interactions become even more difficult when taking them outside the university setting. While this indicates that cross-racial interaction outside of the realm of higher education may be far more difficult than that within, it also presents institutions of higher education as a place where students can begin to work together collaboratively across race, and develop a deeper understanding of themselves and their peers.

### *Moving forward*

This investigation has yielded numerous insights, and contributes to the topic of cross-racial interaction in many ways. In addition to contributing to the extant literature on cross-racial interaction in South Africa, it validates the need to study this complicated issue further. Future studies may consider a more structured approach to interviewing students, so as to retain their undivided attention. Namely this would entail interviewing at least five students of each race, in a quiet, private place designated for interviews. Although I was quite impressed with the students' ability to speak about this topic in public, I believe that a more secure space would allow the researcher to delve deeper into the narrative and unearth additional meaning-making processes. I suggest increasing the number of students in the study, both to retrieve multiple perspectives from the same race as well as to reach saturation on topics and themes.

Additionally, it is important to note that this study focused solely on how students were shaped by the interactions with their peers. Future students may consider asking questions that include how the messages that they receive from faculty, classes, course materials and media outlets (TV, radio, newspapers etc.) shape how they make meaning of cross-racial interaction. This being said, it may be helpful to situate the data gleaned above, within the context of the campus racial climate. Hurtado, Alvarez, Guillermo-Wann, Cuellar and Arellano's (2012) model of diverse learning environments (DLE) considers the socio-historical context, policy context, institutional context, community context and external commitments to yield a climate for diversity. Utilising a tool such as this to gauge the racial climate of the campus would allow for a holistic look at the numerous factors affecting cross-racial interaction prior to focusing on the interactions themselves.

In addition to replicating, contextualising and expanding the current study, future research may include quantitative exploration of the campus racial climate and cross-racial interactions. Contrary to the studies on cross-racial interaction in the United States, which are almost exclusively quantitative, all the studies regarding this topic in South Africa are qualitative in nature. While the narrative approach certainly provides a thick description of how students make cross-racial interaction in a post-apartheid era, quantitative data may help to support the policy and structural initiatives suggested earlier. In addition to complementing the qualitative data gathered on this topic, a quantitative study may assist in determining the positive outcomes that result from cross-racial interaction for South Africa, rather than relying on an American framework.

In terms of current practice, institutions may consider structural changes they can impart to encourage cross-racial interaction. This could come in the form of mandatory first-year seminars for all students offered in English (the common denominator language), residential living-learning communities that address topics of social justice and equity,

creating co-curricular groups that engage students across race, and reconsidering and redesigning dual language policies. Many opportunities to engage students in productive cross-racial interaction, but institutions must willingly embrace and support these measures.

### *Implications for student affairs practitioners*

Granted, the structural suggestions above will need the support of student affairs practitioners in South Africa that seek to bridge the gap between university students of different races. This has the potential to force student affairs practitioners not only to engage in these conversations with their students, but also to take a look at their own personal disposition towards interacting with racially diverse peers, and their level of comfort facilitating conversations regarding the topic of cross-racial interaction. This starts with taking stock of their own personal and social memberships, and being reflective about how these interact with their practice and students.

To facilitate these conversations among students, student affairs practitioners may consider utilising the pedagogy of Intergroup Dialogue, a programme created to engage students of varying racial identities (Zuniga, Naagda & Sevig, 2010). Through sustained dialogue, Intergroup Dialogue “provides a forum that fosters honest, thoughtful and significant conversations about difficult or controversial issues across race.” (Zuniga *et al.*, 2010, p.7) As Zuniga *et al.* explain, intergroup dialogue pedagogy relies on understanding systemised oppression, discussing differences and commonalities, building awareness and connecting students of different identities. South African universities would greatly benefit from this approach to cross-racial interaction, but the curriculum is yet to be built. Current student affairs practitioners in South Africa may help to create a curriculum that speaks to the unique history of South Africa, in an effort to build bridges across different racial groups on campus.

In order to reflect purposefully and build initiatives that encourage cross-racial interaction, it is essential that student affairs practitioners engage in professional development that assists them in navigating these complicated conversations. This can include conferences, training or coursework that focus on incorporating social justice pedagogies and an equity mindset throughout their daily practice and professional endeavours.

### *Conclusion*

This exploratory study has illustrated that the new generation of students is not done talking about race. On the contrary, it appears as if many of these students haven't even started. While all of student participants were informative, I was particularly impressed by the conversation held between Lisel and Akani, as it was incredible to witness these two students from such different backgrounds in conversation with each other. They spoke candidly, agreeing on the difficulties of being friends with diverse peers, and disagreeing on topics such as affirmative action. Lisel and Akani engaged in this dialogue without anger, and without blame. They served as model for the fact that South African students can find a way to interact across race. Akani seemed to have a deep sense of self, and had crossed racial borders in an uncharacteristic manner. At the end of our interview he concluded:



“I think it all starts from your mindset. Do you want to let go of the past, and say he is white but the colour doesn’t matter, can we become friends? And I found that if you have such a mindset, then you can have more friendships. Sometimes I look at my white friends and I think to myself, wow, how did I get used to white people, and I think it all starts with your mindset, what you are thinking about when you see white people, and if we have the right mindset, then your transition can then be smooth.”

While there is a great deal of further investigation into the campus racial climate and cross-racial interaction required, and while acknowledging the past may take precedence over letting it go, it might all stem from this simple question, “Can we become friends?”

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